Preface

The concept for this book started in the early days of the ePortConsortium, when the consortium members were working on the development of the Electronic Portfolio White Paper (2003). Based on the positive, supportive reaction to that white paper, Catherine Kaufman, the longtime coordinator of ePortConsortium, and I decided to investigate the massive research being done worldwide on the subject of electronic portfolios, or ePortfolios. We invited all national and international members of the ePortConsortium, EPAC, and other ePortfolio groups and individual professionals to submit proposals for authoring chapters on one of three categories: ePortfolio thinking, ePortfolio technology, and ePortfolio case studies. As the proposal submission deadline approached, we received a tremendous response from experts around the world to our call for chapters. After we notified the publisher that we would likely not be able to accept some excellent and authoritative chapters due to our page limitation, the publisher suggested changing the book format to that of a handbook so that we could be more comprehensive in our publication. As a result, this book has developed to become the very first handbook on the subject of research on ePortfolios.

Other matters influenced the decision to develop this book. First, it was the obligation we felt as the director and the coordinator of the ePortConsortium to provide a service: to improve the global knowledge and understanding of the use of ePortfolios, and in doing so, to offer a better understanding of the concepts, technology, and standards surrounding the new ePortfolio paradigm and its future. We thought the development of a complete collection of current knowledge and examples of ePortfolio uses could benefit the entire ePortfolio community, from the conceptual thinkers to technologists to the end users. Second, in order to be able to better define the ePortfolio and to itemize its expected requirements and functionalities, we needed to survey international experts about the growing knowledge and existing examples of ePortfolios. I believed a review of the information and data ultimately presented as chapters within this book would assist us in defining the ePortfolio and painting its bigger picture as perceived by the various stakeholders.

ePORTFOLIO OPPORTUNITES AND CHALLENGES IN 2005

Although 2005 is almost a decade since the concept and technology of ePortfolio was introduced, the ePortfolio still faces two major challenges that should be addressed, and resolving those challenges would result in opportunities to conduct research and investigations and thus develop better conceptual and technical environments which make the ePortfolio a more accepted and integrated application into our learning, teaching, and professional practices. Before discussing the challenges, however, I should mention that this is only my personal perspective as to these issues, not necessarily the analysis of any of those authors who contributed chapters in this book.

I believe 2005 was yet another year where the advancement of the idea of ePortfolio among potential end users ended with limited success. Although some reports suggest that a large percentage of some communities are seriously using ePortfolio services or programs, according to my observation, as well as the
much more systematic and documented research by Jo Paoletti of the University of Maryland (Paoletti, 2006), the picture is not as rosy as many would like the world to believe. Student “use” of ePortfolio in some of these reports simply means that students have created ePortfolio accounts, as requested or required by an instructor or administrator, yet those students are not necessarily updating those accounts after creation, much less maintaining, developing, improving, or sharing them. In some other cases, the data suggests that the majority of students who participated in a trial offering or beta testing simply abandoned the application. The important data to investigate and report is how many of the end users continued to use and maintain their portfolios after the trial period ended—for instance, after the mandate for using the ePortfolio to fulfill the requirement of a course ended. This suggests one of the two primary challenges that the ePortfolio is still facing in 2005: the current ePortfolio solutions and systems are not “sticky” to the end users—that is, the ePortfolio does not draw the end user back time and again, and thus has not become integrated into the lives of end users. I believe this is a very important element and one of the major expectations that many academic officers have.

The lack of stickiness being experienced with the ePortfolio has not been a challenge in some of the other new technologies introduced in academia; for example, the course management system (CMS). Once a faculty member used a course management system to complement a course, he most likely wanted to continue using it over and over, and in fact, many times faculty suggested ways to make it a better system and asked for more support. Students demonstrated this same high level of interest in CMS quickly after initial exposure to the system. It did not take more than two years before CMS was accepted as a sticky, useful tool, as compared to the ePortfolio which is experiencing a much longer time before acceptance, much less full implementation.

The stickiness problem of the current ePortfolio packages should not be seen as a long-term problem, though, nor should we allow it to cause us to question the usefulness and importance of ePortfolios in learning and beyond. In fact, this is an opportunity for us to continue our progress toward inventing a total solution package that “works” with sticky effect (Jafari, 2004). The “working” requirement has been our second challenge. An ePortfolio solution must offer all expected functional and technical requirements in a transparent and user-friendly environment. It must be able to integrate with other technology systems (such as CMS, SIS, and Campus Portals) in order to offer an interoperable “working” environment. For example, in order for an ePortfolio system to certify the authenticity of a learning artifact such as a student term paper, the ePortfolio system must be able to interoperate with a CMS system through which a student is presenting his term paper to the course instructor. We must recognize that the technology of the ePortfolio and the incorporated software code are only components of the whole package. We should further consider the incentives and support we must offer students and faculty to encourage use, as well as evaluate the internal academic policies and community role requirements that need to be satisfied to endorse official implementation. In addition, we have to substantiate the software costs and maintenance expenses so that administrators are persuaded of the efficacy of the ePortfolio. Finally, most notably, we must address the human aspects of the system to stimulate personal interest so that all have an understanding of how lifelong use and sharing of ePortfolios can both create and promote wide-ranging future opportunities.

THE KILLER APPLICATION

In 1995, Pierre Omdyar, the creator of eBay, came up with the idea of using the Internet as a totally new concept or a new paradigm of electronic trade, selling and buying “stuff” online. Here I see a similarity between eBay and the ePortfolio. Around the same time that Omdyar conceptualized eBay, some provosts and academic leaders thought of using technology or the Internet to present portfolio “stuff” online, called ePortfolio. What Omdyar invented, however, was a total package, an environment, the eBay system, not just the concept of eCommerce or lines of computer codes. Although many people have acknowledged his main invention as a software environment or the computer codes that run the eBay engine, in reality the invention
was a total system package. He created a new market, the eCommerce paradigm, one that was not already in place. He invented a new method that can be used to establish trust among sellers and buyers using the feedback notion, something that was not needed or used in a traditional trade. Once an eBay user conducts a bad transaction, the entire community becomes aware of negative feedback in the matter of one click, and therefore that user has less chance of conducting any more business within that community. Omdyar built incentives into his model for eBay users to follow the rules that he developed, and the eBay community automatically rejects those who do not follow the rules. Omdyar’s system is carefully designed around the human aspects, with a full understanding of people’s expectations for usability, for trust, for communication, and finally, and I would argue most importantly, for stickiness. You will hardly find a person that uses eBay once or twice and does not stick to it to continue the use. This level of stickiness is almost here for CMS. But is it here for ePortfolios?

Although there are many good ePortfolio systems and packages available today, I believe the field of ePortfolio is still waiting for another Pierre Omdyar to invent a “sticky” ePortfolio package solution that “works.” I see more and more commercial systems coming to the commercial or open source market, either as a stand-alone ePortfolio management system or as an add-on component to existing CMS software; however, I do not believe any of the current packages and solutions today are as sticky as the CMS was in the late nineties. In fact, I am one of those who have been trying to invent an ePortfolio solution for the last five years. Since late 2000, I have been using all of my CyberLab resources and all of my passion and R&D capacity to invent an ePortfolio solution called Epsilen Environment (www.epsilen.com, 2005). However, I am not yet sure if I have come up with that total solution package needed today. Currently, we are working on the third version of the Epsilen Environment, the third system, with some integrated eBay and even Amazon conceptual functionality, with the hope that it will turn on the light and offer that “sticky” solution that we badly need to make our ePortfolio dreams come to reality, to make the ePortfolio “work.”

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Practice what you preach. If you are reading this book, you most likely know about the ePortfolio and should appreciate its usefulness and applications in learning, teaching, and other aspects of your life. If you believe the ePortfolio has potential, use it and create your own ePortfolio site now. This is the best way to better understand the ePortfolio potential and to advance its concepts and usefulness to others. I continue seeing ePortfolio enthusiasts, developers, and researchers at various conferences making conference presentations on ePortfolios, or even selling ePortfolio software at tradeshows—but who have not even created an ePortfolio site for themselves! An observer might ask, “If you believe the ePortfolio is useful, why don’t you use it yourself?”

I have been using my personal ePortfolio site for several years and find it to be very effective as a primary tool for my collaboration, teaching, research, and professional networking. This has given me two advantages: first, it is a very useful tool that makes my day-to-day job easier and more enjoyable; second, I continue to discover new applications and uses for the ePortfolio as I use it more often and more seriously. Many of the features presented in the Epsilen Environment ePortfolio I discovered as the result of my own ePortfolio use. I like it and use it so much that I have placed the Web address of my ePortfolio in my e-mail signature block. When people ask me for a look at this paper, that conference presentation, this project, that course, I simply give them the Web address of my ePortfolio. In some cases, I give them an access code to gain access to materials that I do not want the public or other groups to see.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book consists of two primary sections. Section I includes a number of chapters focusing on the conceptual aspects of ePortfolio, written by conceptual thinkers, academic administrators, and researchers,
as well as a limited number of chapters which address the technical aspects of ePortfolios. Creative thinkers such as those who authored chapters in this section should be considered as the inventors of the ePortfolio. Their vision, combined with their subject matter expertise and their administrative responsibilities, have given birth to this new technology environment called ePortfolio. Few authors tackled the issue of program technology, but we expect that in the future, as more technology systems, solutions, and standards are developed, commercialized, and implemented, more experts will produce manuscripts that concentrate on those topics.

Section II consists of a series of ePortfolio case studies reporting on various ePortfolio initiatives and projects being explored, tested, and implemented in a range of educational institutions across the world. We have divided Section II into three subsections, with the initial chapters focusing on ePortfolio initiatives, exploring projects such as campus initiatives or committee work to understand and study the feasibility of ePortfolio implementation, followed by the second subsection of case studies reporting on a test or trial of an ePortfolio system for limited members or groups within an institution, and finally the third subsection examining case studies of full implementation of an ePortfolio project.

Each case study offers lessons learned, those caused by good or bad decisions, along with the perceptions of end users. A close examination of these case studies will certainly assist those inventing, researching, or participating in new ePortfolio projects by offering guidelines and suggestions for building a more successful ePortfolio project.

Our hope is that the readers of this book will come to realize the opportunities and challenges presented by the ePortfolio, and that by reviewing the discussions and case studies of international experts, they will advance their own awareness, development, or implementation of what we believe will soon be acknowledged by all as the next most valuable lifelong tool for individuals and institutions worldwide.

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REFERENCES


ADDITIONAL SOURCES