The thing about virtual workplaces of any kind is that, thus far, they are always new—or at least, that is my experience.

Twenty years ago, as part of a pilot to determine the efficacy of connecting homes, schools, and retailers, GTE offered all households in West Lafayette, Indiana, a computer and intranet access. I had never used a computer. I had never even heard of an intranet (which to me sounded like something out of outer space, really). And in fact, I didn’t know much about the pilot. So I did the perhaps not-predictable thing: I said yes.

I said yes because I like connections, and at bottom or across the horizon, this project was about connections. I would not pursue computer-aided anything for my own purposes, but I would to do so to connect with my child’s school. I wasn’t planning on any more shopping, but I was not opposed to learning more about what was available or making shopping easier. And I knew that I would learn something in both processes.

Fast forward 7 years: I am a member of Portnet, a group of 10 faculty members from around the U.S. who share an interest in researching the effects of writing portfolios on students. From that project came many presentations, several publications, and at least some of what we know about print portfolios. Interestingly, when we began, we mailed student portfolios to each other, and we seemed more like a collection of individuals than a group. But that changed once we created our own listserv: Portnet as group and site and research project was born. Because the electronic environment was new, we had to learn new ways of behaving, and because we did not know everyone in the group, initially, we had to be particularly sensitive to that which we could not see. When the project concluded—and like many collaborative and virtual projects, it had a lifespan—we had learned more than about portfolios, as important as that research was. We also understood something about how to make such work “work”—the structures that supported it, the rhythms we established and the ways those influenced how our project progressed, the verbal signals we sent each other, and the ways that those were interpreted. It was a learning experience in many ways.

Fast forward 7 years and I’m working with Barbara Cambridge on a book on electronic portfolios. The book, published in 2001, marked not the end of interest in the topic, but rather an incentive for more information, it seemed, in part because as a concept, electronic portfolios are both robust and flexible. And what we learned, too, is that they are used world-wide. To support and develop this interest, particularly in terms of e-portfolio effects, we created the National Coalition on Electronic Portfolio Research, which has become the Inter/National Coalition on Electronic Portfolio Research. Teams from over 40 institutions in several countries have joined the Coalition and work in parallel and in concert on diverse research projects, all of which is being documented in various media and communicated in various channels. Collectively, we are learning how to work across different kinds of projects, across different time zones, across different cultures, and across different spaces—through blogs and f2f meetings, chats and Web meetings, print reports and listservs. In the work, we are widening our understanding of portfolio—and of ourselves.
All of which is to say that on a much larger scale and in much more detail, this volume provides the help I might have used back in 1987 when I was just learning about virtuality, and the help I need now in my current e-portfolio project, when I am often virtual—because if there is one lesson when it comes to virtual learning, it is that we are all learners.

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