Preface

INTRODUCTION: THE FLAT WORLD OF GLOBAL EPORTFOLIOS

In *The Geography of Thought*, Richard Nisbett draws on philosophy, cultural psychology, and his own laboratory research to argue that people of European and of East Asian origins differ not only culturally but cognitively. They enact distinctively different ways of understanding the world. For example, central to the Western worldview are the agency of the individual and the discrete categorization of reality. In contrast, the Eastern worldview values harmony and elevates context as the key understanding. Although these are familiar generalizations, they seem to have sufficient scholarly grounding to take seriously. From this body of research, Nisbett and others suggest that thriving in globalized society means that people need to become familiar with, and be able to make use of, the multiple ways of making sense offered by regional cultures.

This book offers a snapshot of the diffusion of eportfolios—an innovation in learning technology originating in the United States—in higher education across several global regions during the period from about 2008 to 2010. When I assumed the editor’s role for this book from the first editor who was unable to complete the project he had originated, most chapters were already written, including some from countries with which I had no previous direct experience. I expected to see in the manuscripts the kinds of differences in thinking and valuing Nisbett and others have documented. I expected to find that the eportfolio concept was being transformed through these global lenses.

However, what emerged is much more a story of adaptation than transformation. Similar concerns and priorities appear throughout these pages. Implementing eportfolios across an academic program involves similar essential governance challenges whether one is in Baltimore or Zagreb. Helping students become reflective practitioners requires careful curricular integration whether it is happening in Freiburg or Vancouver. Professors across Africa struggle with the same challenge of balancing the use of eportfolios for learning and assessment that faculty members in Portland and staff members in Sydney confront. Given the parallels that abound, my predecessor was right in using the word *diffusion* in this volume’s title. This book is more a record of the spread of North American educational practices across several global regions and of significant enrichments of those practices as they are integrated into national and local educational systems than it is of a syncretic reimagining of the eportfolio tradition.

Of the multiple possible explanations for this relative global homogeneity, I here highlight three. First, an obvious limitation of this collection is the overrepresentation of countries that were once European colonies. Neither the previous editor nor I successfully solicited chapters from countries such as Japan or Russia where the influence of the larger Western models of higher education, in contrast to the specific
innovation of eportfolios, might be less evident. With more examples from such countries, greater differences might have presented themselves. Second, because the eportfolio has been recently introduced in most countries, homogenous diffusion may be a first stage in its global development. As learners and scholars around the world move beyond the surface issues of implementation and gain in-depth experience, the limits of the received models in their contexts may come into focus, and practitioners and researchers may undertake a more fundamental reconceptualization attuned to them.

A third possibility is that eportfolio practices may move across national and regional boundaries relatively intact because of their internal heterogeneity and protean nature. At international events focused on eportfolios in which I have participated over the last ten years, the emphasis of the eportfolio genre on individualization is a common concern. Is promoting a means for abstracting and categorizing individual experience and expertise a form of cultural domination? Is celebrating agency and difference an imposition of a value system and way of understanding the world that many people do not and should not be compelled to share? The individualizing strand of eportfolio practice is undeniable, and so not unproblematic. However, as I have argued elsewhere at length, the strongest eportfolio models foreground the establishment of what I have termed integrity, the integration of multiple dimensions of identity and experience through a rich representation of context (Cambridge, 2010). The ability to place reasoned, categorical analysis of individual agency within a rich representation of social context that acknowledges complexity and dependency may turn out to be the key reason that eportfolios have such a global appeal.

OVERVIEW OF THE COLLECTION

This book is organized into three sections: Europe, the Developing World, and Australasia. Each section consists of one or more chapters of each of three types: overview chapters, which survey the use of eportfolios at the time of their writing in a region or country; case chapters, which focus on practice or research at a particular institution; and North American companion chapters, which focus on themes important in one or more of the cases.

Europe

The Europe section begins with Chapter 1, an overview of eportfolio use in the United Kingdom as of 2008 and its relationship to work on the European continent, a piece written by researchers at the International Centre for ePortfolio Development at the University of Nottingham. The authors explain how policy drivers such as the Bologna Process, the Widening Participation agenda, and the Higher Education Achievement report, linked to funding from the Joint Information Systems Committee, have led to widespread use of eportfolios that emphasizes their role in personal development planning, the development of employability skills, and e-assessment, particularly through emphasizing reflection. At the time of the writing of Chapter 1, there was growing interest in using eportfolios for continuing professional development, work based learning, and supporting transitions between different levels of education and education and the workplace.

Chapter 2 shifts focus to the European continent, deepening the focus on reflection to examine theoretical and practical issues involved in supporting the development of reflective practice in both
students and professionals within German universities, with a particular emphasis on writing instruction. Particularly notable are the multiple “discourses” of reflective practice that come into play, organized along a continuum from private to public, challenging the assumption that reflection is done primarily in social isolation. Chapter 3 offers a North American perspective on the role of reflection in learning, examining through both constructivist learning theory and observation of educational practice how introducing critical reflection activities through an eportfolio into a biology course at the University of British Columbia deepens students’ scientific understanding, leading to “deep structure learning.” Information Processing Sheets are one structured form of reflection that instructors and students found particularly powerful for achieving this deeper knowledge.

Chapter 4 introduces the theme of implementation. It returns to Europe, detailing the process of implementing eportfolios in an organization and informatics program at the University of Zagreb in Croatia. Considering technology, pedagogy, and assessment, the authors offer evidence based on course outcomes that students who chose to complete optional eportfolio assignments are more likely to gain credit for courses based on their class work rather than on an exam. Chapter 5 presents a complementary North American perspective on eportfolio implementation, advocating that colleges and universities develop “eporticulture,” that is, the custom of supporting student learning and assessment with eportfolios so that a healthy diversity of teaching and learning practices is well supported. Examples of programs at San Francisco State University illustrate this approach. Chapter 6 presents another North American implementation model, detailing the process through which the University of Maryland Baltimore County’s School of Education, implemented eportfolios not only for teacher education but for supporting the professional development of graduates as they move into the classroom, enabling both alignment with standards and cultivation of 21st century learning. “Five-R” processes guided the implementation: re-envisioning, re-organization, re-engineering, realization, and renewal.

**The Developing World**

The Developing World section begins with Chapter 7, an initial effort to survey eportfolio use throughout Africa. The author provides a range of examples of individual eportfolios and faculty projects and outlines four cases, one from Tunisia, two from South Africa, and one joint project of a French agency and the University of Montreal involving faculty from universities in a range of sub-Saharan countries. These examples illustrate the wide range of applications of eportfolios of interest to African teachers and scholars, encompassing both assessment and support of learning. Chapter 8 provides a North American perspective on how assessment and learning applications of eportfolios can be balanced, drawing on the mature eportfolio processes in place at Portland State University in the United States. The authors outline principles that have guided successful use of eportfolios in their first-year general education program, including such practices as scaffolding the experience, integrating collaborative learning experiences, using rubrics, and compensating faculty evaluation of eportfolios for programmatic assessment independent of the contexts in which the portfolios were created.

Chapter 9 focuses on one of many uses of eportfolios in the developing world, supporting employability. The author describes the use of portfolios at Instituto Experimental de la Asunción in Guatemala in conjunction with job shadowing, achieved through working closely with mentors in the workplace. Eportfolios are intended to help secondary school girls explore their capabilities, sharpen their career interests, and increase their self-esteem. Chapter 10 explores the use of eportfolios for employability in
a North American context. It offers detailed guidance to creators of career portfolios, arguing that such advice is relevant not just to students but also to people already in the professional workforce. Eportfolios can play an important role in performance appraisal and may help workers demonstrate their indispensability in the face of downsizing.

**Australasia**

The Australasia section begins with Chapter 11, an overview of eportfolio use in the higher education and vocational education and training sectors in Australia, drawing on surveys conducted as part of a national study in 2007 and follow up work in 2010. The authors examine the policy context, considering alignment with the Bologna Process in support of student mobility; an imperative to strengthen employability that suggests the need for stronger connections between higher and vocation education and a renewed commitment to lifelong learning; and an increased emphasis on the development and assessment of “generic skills.” The surveys suggest a range of understandings and uses of eportfolios across Australian universities, with responsibility for eportfolio work becoming more distributed across organizational units from 2007 to 2010. The cases, of the Queensland University of Technology and of Curtin University, illustrate how the national patterns map onto local practice.

Chapter 12 presents the state of eportfolio practice in Hong Kong, focusing particularly on the dynamics of eportfolio adoption at the City University of Hong Kong. Universities are examining the potential role of eportfolios as they expand their undergraduate degree programs from three to four years to integrate new general education courses, which create the imperative to define and assess associated graduate attributes. Universities seeking to implement eportfolios face challenges related to perception, motivation, pedagogy, technology, and, perhaps most crucially, funding. Their experiences suggest that substantive and sustained support from institutional leaders and funders is essential to successful implementation at scale. Chapter 13 presents North American research that sheds light on the challenges of perception and motivation introduced in the previous chapter. As part of the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research, researchers at Washington State University surveyed faculty about their teaching beliefs. Faculty held views that were teaching-centered, learner-centered, or learning-centered, with many instructors holding views that intersected with two of the three categories. Teaching beliefs correlated with perceptions of eportfolios. For example, teaching-centered beliefs inversely correlated with a perception that eportfolios could be valuable for documenting growth over time, while learner-centered beliefs strongly correlated with that perception. Learning-centered beliefs also positively correlated with growth over time, but also correlated with the perception that eportfolios could be useful in building community, to which the other two belief categories were less strongly related. Chapter 14 also presents results of North American research, in this case focused on the potential role of eportfolios in documenting teaching as part of the tenure and promotion process. Experience with such a process could powerfully shape faculty members’ perceptions and use of eportfolios in their teaching.

The book concludes with Chapter 15, which examines an eportfolio system created to support language learning at the National Yunlin University of Science and Technology in Taiwan. Unlike many eportfolio systems, this language learning platform combines domain-specific learning tools that adapt based on student performance to allow for personalized learning, thereby reducing cognitive load, with tools for both individual reflection on learning and social reflection on student work. Particularly notable are self-assessment tools that allow students to examine specific aspects of their language learning in the
service of self-reflection. Perhaps more than any other contribution to this collection, this chapter begins to show hints of the influence of a non-Western worldview. In focusing on the integration of individual learners into an externally structured, social process of learning while deemphasizing their articulation of distinctiveness or exercise of independent agency, it may be an early contribution to a next phase in the global evolution of eportfolio practice.

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**REFERENCES**
