Chapter XIII

ePortfolios for Knowledge and Learning

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, we talk of knowledge as the new currency, and knowledge building as the work to be done in learning organizations. While knowledge building is activity directed outward towards the creation of knowledge itself, learning is a personal consequence of this process, the aspect that is directed to enhancing individual abilities and dispositions. This chapter considers how ePortfolios can support four aspects of lifelong learning in the knowledge economy: engagement with technology, representations of identity, developing critical multiliteracies, and global and local mobility. It argues that the focus should be on lifelong learners’ capacity to create and communicate with digital technologies, rather than on rigid frameworks that reduce ePortfolio development to a series of pre-packaged choices.

LIVING IN THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

In the knowledge economy—where knowledge is capital—new ways of working have arisen, often promoted by business and government to ensure a more flexible labour market. These include part-time employment for women and men, short-term contracts rather than lifetime security, and industrial legislation that encourages individual, rather than collective, approaches. People are told that they must take charge of their own career, be their own small business, create their own work (Bridges, 1997). Reflecting on these trends, Handy (1989) predicted the rise of portfolio workers: people who know what they offer and build up a portfolio of work rather than a regular job. However, not everyone who finds themselves in the position of portfolio worker has the self-knowledge or
access to the tools required to present what they offer to the employment market (Hargreaves, 2004). Portfolio workers must be flexible and mobile, and they must be lifelong learners. It makes sense to argue that these portfolio workers need ePortfolios to chart their history and communicate their offerings.

Essentially, ePortfolios are containers for a selection of artefacts in the form of digital files—whether they be in audio, visual, or textual form, or a combination of these—with a focus on purpose: employment, family history, assessment, for example. This selection should not be confused with the archive: the collection from which the selection is made (Hartnell-Young & Morriss, 1999a). Love, McKean, and Gathercoal (2004) make a distinction between ‘ePortfolios’ and ‘Webfolios’, suggesting that the former are stored on transportable media such as CD-ROM and not accessible from the Web, but in this chapter the term ePortfolio includes all digital forms of representation.

Well-constructed ePortfolios could be expected to support portfolio workers’ claims of employability, by providing an inventory of acquired knowledge and skills. They should, however, have a richer purpose: they should facilitate lifelong learning. Lifelong learners are said to be reflective and self-directed, active investigators and problem solvers, and effective communicators, among other things. ePortfolios have the potential to meet these needs too: they should encourage reflection on life and learning, suggest opportunities for action, raise problems to solve, and offer flexibility of presentation to communicate to a range of audiences. The absolute essentials of ePortfolios are purpose, reflection, and communication.

Lifelong learners, suggests Hargreaves (2004), know what they know, what they have to learn, and what they can do for an employer. This self-knowledge comes from spending some time in reflection on one’s beliefs, values, and achievements: situating oneself in society. While Hargreaves notes that lifelong learning is sometimes thought of as referring only to post-compulsory schooling, the term clearly has the potential to be inclusive of all from the cradle to the grave. There is increasing evidence that lifelong learning does not start after schooling ends. Like the concept of mobile learning, it is a mindset that we carry with us from birth, as we explore our environment and learn from it and the people around us at every moment.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING IN A KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY

Dewey (1910) regarded knowledge as a product constructed by people and containing the meaning of objects and events. Learning is the process by which knowledge is created. Knowledge itself is in the form of objects (including principles and theories) to be considered, criticized, and improved by the learners (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1998). Knowledge building is activity directed outward towards the creation of knowledge itself, while learning is a personal consequence of this process, the aspect that is directed to enhancing one’s own abilities and dispositions. As Scardamalia and Bereiter (1999) put it, knowledge itself must be in the world, rather than in the mind. ePortfolios have the potential to present the collective store of knowledge of a group or organization to a wider audience, and to support corporate memory in times of change.

In a constructivist learning relationship, teachers require students to take responsibility for making their own meaning, rather than accepting prefabricated meanings of information or instruction. It is therefore seen as substantially different from a relationship where teachers as experts transfer knowledge to students. Attributes of constructivism are said to include student initiative, higher-level thinking,