Chapter XIV

ePortfolio Decisions and Dilemmas

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ABSTRACT

This chapter combines existing ideas and metaphors from recent portfolio literature into a new framework for thinking about the decisions and dilemmas of ePortfolios. It argues that since the definition of “ePortfolio” covers a spectrum of approaches to the challenge of documenting and assessing student knowledge and skills, the wide array of differing audiences and purposes of assessment leads to many decisions about a portfolio system's mix of content and message ownership, review and validation processes, and expectations about media. In addition, the unique role of technology in the mediation of action and learning adds to the dilemmas inherent in decision making about the system’s artifacts. It is hoped that the framework offers a new analytical perspective and a set of questions to guide people in building more effective ePortfolio systems.

INTRODUCTION

Electronic portfolios are increasingly seen as an important activity in education settings such as courses, schools, colleges, and employment interviews. The process of creating them is thought to be valuable for reflection and building records of achievement (Barrett, 2002; Diez, 1994). Their wide varieties of organizational possibilities provide a seemingly endless number of ways of recording and representing knowledge (Bruce & Levin, 1997). For example, their artifacts or works provide evidence for making reasoned judgments about what someone knows and can do (Pellegrino, Chudowsky, & Glaser, 2001; Almond, Steinberg, & Mislevy, 2002).

However, the word “portfolio” itself is used in a bewilderingly diverse number of ways, to represent a collection of work, a performance
assessment, a learning and assessment management system, an archive of achievement, a personal or cultural story, an institutional requirement, a large-scale assessment. What exactly do we mean by “electronic portfolios?” How, with so many viewpoints, can we think about the decisions and dilemmas inherent in the processes, artifacts, and organizational options of ePortfolios?

DEFINING THE DECISIONS AND DELEMMAS OF “ePORTFOLIOS”

Portfolios—both electronic and paper based—mean different things depending upon one’s point of view. This is part of their charm, but it is also a source of confusion and misunderstanding. For example, consider the purposes and expectations of a portfolio’s audience. One audience is the individual. Another is a trusted advisor or teacher who is helping the individual learn. A third audience for a portfolio might be a future employer or a reviewer. These audiences are not all looking for the same things in a “portfolio.” The individual might be looking for an accurate reflection of a personal message. A teacher might be looking for evidence of knowledge; an employer, for a record of experience and education.

In addition to being simply different from one another, the meanings of “portfolio” for different audiences are sometimes in conflict, which gives rise to dilemmas. For example, in a private working portfolio, an individual might want to reveal a weakness in order to receive help from a trusted advisor. But that same person might not want to not mention that weakness to a future employer through a showcase portfolio. Joanne Carney (2002) calls this the “personal revelation dilemma.” A trusted advisor wants to see the course of development of ideas over time, but a program reviewer needs to see a summation of the end results. Even within a single category of audience, such as “future employers,” there can be different and sometimes conflicting purposes. For example, one employer might want to see artifacts that demonstrate that the individual can write well, while another might want to see documentation of passing certain core courses, or of an ability to reflect on one’s learning, and so on. Portfolios of interest to one audience that fulfill one purpose can thus be irrelevant to another, because the purposes change along with as well as among various audiences. Carney refers to this as the “multipurpose dilemma.” How can educators who want to use ePortfolios decide what to do about this situation? How can we better understand the dilemmas inherent in preparing portfolios with a variety of media options for various purposes and audiences?

To address these questions, this chapter provides a framework for thinking about the decisions and dilemmas inherent in the options available for making and using ePortfolios. The framework will hopefully offer a way of clarifying the definition of portfolios and their contents for different kinds of audiences, for different kinds of purposes, under a variety of decision conditions concerning the artifact collection. The framework should also help clarify what “ePortfolio” means as both a starting point for reflection as well as an archive for communicating about our knowledge, abilities, and self-expressions.

In what follows, a review of the decisions and dilemmas inherent in creating and utilizing ePortfolios will lead to a discussion of a new feature of the “e” in ePortfolio, as a special kind of assessment artifact with both affordances and limitations. Gibson and Barrett (2003) dealt briefly with the primary added value of ePortfolios over traditional portfolios, outlining a range of options in setting up ePortfolio