Chapter XVIII
Electronic Portfolio Initiatives:
A Flashlight Guide to Planning and Formative Evaluation

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ABSTRACT
The goal of this chapter is to help the reader learn to use research and evaluative data to select which activities improve an ePortfolio initiative; accelerate the pace at which people within an institution begin to use ePortfolios for those activities; and limit the cost, stress, and risk associated with carrying out those activities, including the ePortfolio infrastructure that supports them.

DEFINITIONS
An electronic portfolio (ePortfolio) is a collection of digital work, often accompanied by reflective commentary that one person creates (sometimes in order to learn) and then makes available to others for some purpose or purposes. Note that this is a definition of function, not of software; a word processor can be used to create files that are then posted on a Web site. And ePortfolio software can be used for purposes other than these.

Formative evaluation is defined here as any and all studies that can show how to improve a program, including studies designed to show how to reduce the effort or cost involved in carrying out the program. (In contrast, summative evaluation is any study designed to indicate whether a program has succeeded or failed.)

The Flashlight Program 1 is part of the non-profit Teaching, Learning, and Technology Group. 2 Flashlight works on issues of scholarship of teaching, evaluation, assessment, accreditation, and other uses of data to improve learning. This chapter has been adapted and abridged from the second edition of the Flashlight Evaluation Handbook, a resource nor-
mally available only to institutions subscribing to TLT Group services.

**PROLOGUE: BEWARE OF “RAPTURE OF THE TECHNOLOGY”**

Several years ago I was buttonholed by a faculty member who complained bitterly about the pressure he had gotten from his president to use technology. “I don’t know how many hours I’ve spent putting all my lecture notes into PowerPoint, word for word. I doubt if it’s helped my students one bit! I think technology is worthless!”

Of course he was right to be skeptical. Educational research and common sense agree: normally if you use new technology to do old things in old ways, you will usually get the same results (sometimes at greater expense). New technology usually achieves its power when it is used to support either a major improvement in a traditional activity or an activity that was not feasible before.

What this faculty member was complaining about was “rapture of the technology”: the mindless assumption that the technology itself would lead to improved outcomes. Rapture of the technology has resulted in enormous waste over the past several decades: the easiest way to frustrate or destroy technology-enabled educational improvements is to pay too much attention to the technology. (For more on ‘rapture of the technology,’ and how to avoid it in order to improve learning, see Ehrmann, 2002.)

**Moral of the Story:** Like PowerPoint, ePortfolios will be worth the effort if and only if we use them to improve important activities in academic life. To put it another way, we need to shift our focus from the ePortfolio software itself—its features, its reliability, and so on—to the activities and outcomes for which that software is to be used: activities influenced by many other factors in addition to the software. If you want to improve outcomes, do not let the software dominate your planning. The purpose of this chapter is to suggest how to use evaluative studies to accomplish that.

**FOCUS ON SOFTWARE VS. FOCUS ON ACTIVITIES**

Table 1 suggests the difference between these two ways of thinking about what you are doing: software focused vs. activity focused.

Row #4 of Table 1 is of special importance: many of the factors that can frustrate investments in software are not themselves technological. For example, imagine a fictional institution that adopts ePortfolios for only one reason: to make student work accessible to outside experts who would then provide special kinds of feedback. So software is acquired and hundreds of student projects are put into the ePortfolios. Then people get an unpleasant surprise. The first term, only a few outside experts are used. Next term, the number increases only slightly, and the semester after that, the number of outside experts begins to decline! What went wrong? The failure may well be due to factors other than the software’s features. Perhaps the institution did not have a strategy for helping faculty and students find such experts. Perhaps the people doing the assessment did not feel appreciated or rewarded, and decided not to do it again. Note that:

- It does not matter if, afterwards, people discover what went wrong. It is still a failure.
- It does not matter if the champions of the technology then say, “It wasn’t our fault. The technology we provided was great. The rest should have been taken care of by someone else.” It is still a failure.
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