

ePortfolios across the Disciplines: Introduction

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Why ePortfolios and WAC/WID?

Readers of *Across the Disciplines* are likely familiar with the institutional and scholarly discourse surrounding high-impact practices (HIPs), of which writing-intensive courses and ePortfolios are two (AAC&U, 2023). Compared with WAC's fifty-year history as an educational movement, ePortfolios are a relative newcomer, only having been designated as an "official" HIP in 2016 (Watson et al., 2016), late enough that Beth Bouquet and Neal Lerner (2016) did not list them in their special issue of this journal on WAC and HIPs that same year. ePortfolios utilize the affordances of electronic, multimodal composition and can be created by using website-building tools, hyperlinked PDFs and presentation slide decks, or vendor-supported platforms that integrate with institutional learning management systems. However, ePortfolios are more than a technology. Effective implementation in classrooms, programs, and institutions requires a multi-layered understanding of ePortfolio as

- A platform that supports the development of a professional online presence,
- A product, that is, a curated, digital collection of artifacts
- A multimodal creation space for individual and team composing
- An assessment method that centers students' authentic work and voice, and
- A process-oriented pedagogy that prompts integration and synthesis via reflection and leads to more impactful and meaningful learning (Eynon & Gambino, 2017; Penny Light et al., 2011).

The integrative learning achieved through ePortfolios can happen through the curation of artifacts, through visual design and website layout, and, crucially, through reflective writing. As Kathleen Blake Yancey demonstrates in her contribution to this issue (and in many prior publications on ePortfolios), intentionally designed reflective writing activities allow students to name and connect the knowledge, skills, and abilities they gain across specific curricular and co-curricular experiences. Because of their electronic nature, ePortfolios enable students to co-locate diverse learning artifacts, including:

- Traditional, discipline-specific writing, such as historical narratives or undergraduate research publications
- Multimodal artifacts, such as scientific posters or infographics
- Public-facing artifacts, such as social media posts or public service announcements

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- Experiential artifacts, including evidence of participation in other HIPs, such as study abroad or community-engaged projects—hence why Susan Kahn and Susan Scott (2014) call ePortfolios a “meta-HIP.”

Across all these types of artifacts, students can use reflective writing to make explicit connections for themselves and other audiences and unite those connections under a coherent ePortfolio creator identity. They can craft an evidence-based picture of themselves as emerging experts, whether they are aspiring accountants, nurses, biologists, or criminologists. For this reason, and as contributions to this special issue demonstrate, ePortfolios can underwrite disciplinary learning as much as the staple WAC pedagogies of writing-to-learn, writing-to-engage, and writing-to-communicate (Palmquist, 2020).

Special Issue Contributions

This special issue’s unique contribution to both WAC and ePortfolio scholarship illustrates specific implementations of ePortfolios within unique disciplinary and professional configurations. Our contributors’ research extends our understanding of the potential for ePortfolio curriculum and pedagogy to support disciplinary learning, enrich students’ professional identities and personal wellbeing, and practice meaningful assessment. In all cases, the articles in this issue provide theoretical justification and empirical verification of the unique affordances and limitations of discipline-specific ePortfolio implementations. They also give us insight into ePortfolio practices happening across disciplinary and local contexts and identify the joys and challenges of sustaining an ePortfolio program long-term.

This collection of essays also brings awareness to ePortfolios as a field and a community of practice from the disciplinary perspectives of students, faculty, researchers, and administrators. The first two contributions describe evolutions in understanding the reflective, integrative, and metacognitive potential of ePortfolios in specific institutional and programmatic contexts. The abilities and traits that are honed through ePortfolio composition are documented in Louisiana State University’s Distinguished Communicator Medal program by Annemarie Galeucia, Boz Bowles, Jennifer Baumgartner, and Rebecca Burdett. These habits of mind developed within a culture of folio thinking are similarly recognized in the interviews with students at Florida State University conducted by Yancey, who reiterates the importance of the skills of reflection, integrative learning, and synthesis that are generalizable beyond the discipline. In so doing, they illustrate ways ePortfolios can empower students to tell their stories of disciplinary learning.

The next two studies occurred in specific disciplinary contexts associated with health sciences. Mark Urtel, Stephen M. Fallowfield, Lisa Angermeier, and Rachel Swinford detail how reflective and integrative ePortfolio mindsets are valuable for teachers and administrators in specific fields via their study of ePortfolio pedagogy and implementation in the kinesiology program at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis. Jennifer Gennaco and Debra Kramlich highlight the affordances of ePortfolio pedagogies in disciplinary contexts via the University of New England’s undergraduate Nursing programs, in which evidence-based changes to prompt design and navigational design improved their implementation.

The final contributions draw our attention to interdisciplinary impacts of ePortfolios. Bre Garrett, Kylie Pugh, and Amanda B. Wallace narrate their approach to refocusing ePortfolio practice on wellbeing at the University of West Florida, thus expanding the potential impact of ePortfolios beyond just academic success. Theresa Conefrey and Davida S. Smyth demonstrate the opportunities for ePortfolios to increase equity and professional development across STEM. Christine Alfano, Emily Polk, and Jennifer Stonaker from Stanford University highlight the value of evidence-based approaches in science communication and how they contribute to ePortfolio practices and

scholarship. Finally, with integrative learning as a foundational framework, Morgan Gresham, Megan Mize, and Sarah Zurhellen address the critical issues and questions facing ePortfolio educators, administrators, and staff about the ethical considerations of digital tools in relation to identity and positionality. Thus, the special issue authors respond to the challenges and especially the opportunities of ePortfolio implementation through their strategies, experiments, enthusiasm, and innovation.

Conclusion

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue emphasize the role ePortfolios play in supporting students as writers and communicators in and across their disciplines. As well, the issue calls attention to the strong collaborative relationship WAC/WID professionals can have with the field of ePortfolio research and practice. While some WAC/WID professionals are aware of ePortfolios, they may not have opportunities to collaborate with ePortfolio researchers. Likewise, ePortfolio researchers, while aware of the importance of reflective writing, can benefit from situating ePortfolio practice within the scope of writing in the disciplines. We hope this special issue encourages those valuable communities to meet on the page. But, why is it so vital that these two groups continue these conversations now, at this moment?

As we noted above, ePortfolios can support student voices and validate different student identities and experiences while also serving as an authentic assessment. Because they integrate learning with experiences and identities, ePortfolios can show us cumulative learning greater than any single artifact or traditional exam and help us leverage assessment to validate our students as whole people and learners. Also, as concerns about generative artificial intelligence and large language models, like ChatGPT, continue to impact how faculty feel about using writing in their courses, ePortfolios provide a learner-centered response that encourages students to reflect on how their experiences and assignments forward their cumulative experience as learners, professionals, and disciplinary practitioners.

Finally, a global interest in ePortfolios in higher education has resulted in a corresponding growth in communities of researchers and practitioners. Indeed, an international field of ePortfolio practice is emerging, and that field contains a diverse population of faculty, staff, and administrators. Gresham, Mize, and Zurhellen further elaborate on the role these “third space” professionals play in supporting ePortfolio research and practice in their contribution to this special issue as representatives of the Association for Authentic, Experiential, and Evidence-Based Learning’s (AAEEBL) Digital Ethics Task Force. Organizations such as the American Association of Colleges and Universities and AAEEBL regularly convene faculty, staff, and students and often partner with colleagues in the Southern Hemisphere (ePortfolios Australia), Europe, and the U.K. (ePortfolio Ireland). The simultaneous establishment of the Association for Writing Across the Curriculum and the growth of the WAC Clearinghouse as a hub for writing research with an international reach suggests an emerging, global, scholarly consciousness for these kindred HIPs. We hope this special issue spurs professional engagement and scholarly interchange about the intersection of portfolios and WAC/WID.

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