

The ‘Why’ and the ‘What’ of the ePortfolio Process

Why should we want learners to engage in the ePortfolio process?

To answer this we need to have an understanding of what an ePortfolio is and the process or stages that the learner must go through to compile and use an ePortfolio.

Although there are many different definitions for an “ePortfolio”, there appear to be some common elements. These include something about digital evidence owned by a learner, structured and stored in some way that enables the evidence to be found, presented and shared with others (teachers, parents, peers, potential employers/HE/Training providers). The digital evidence being stored is likely to include a learner’s plans, achievements, aspirations, reflections and thinking.

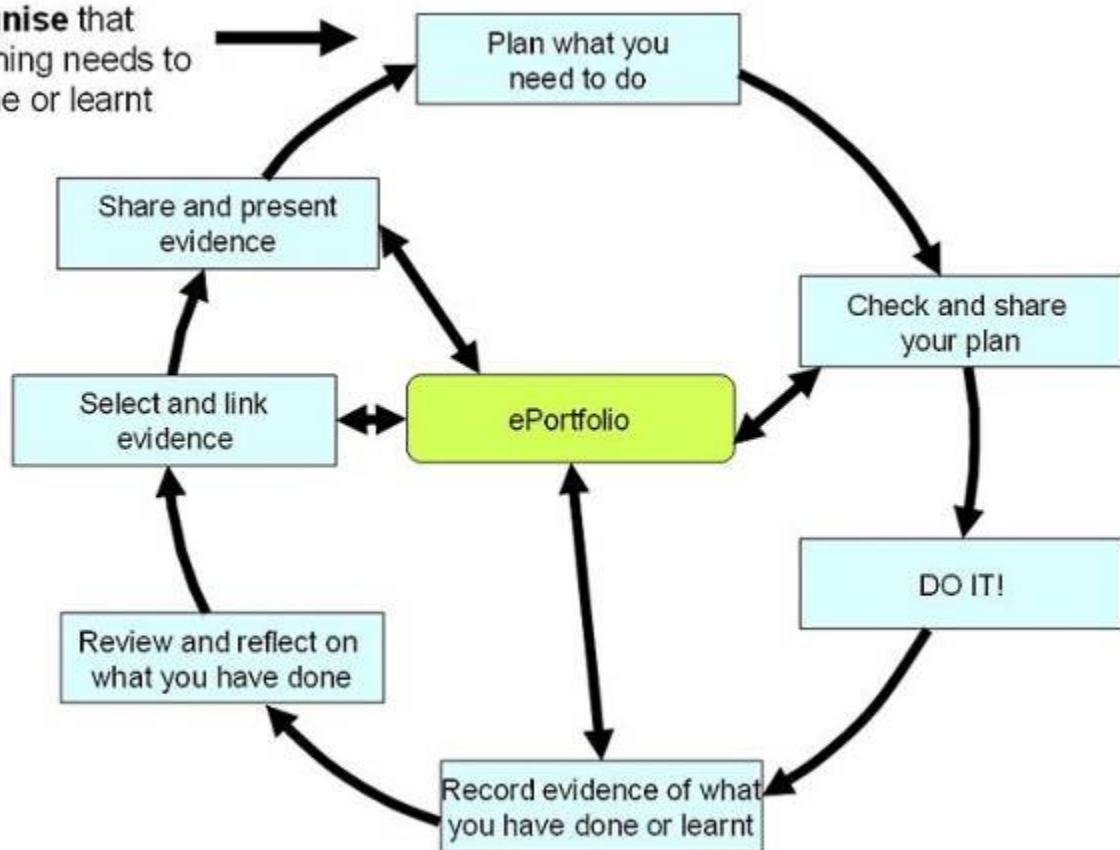
Where and how learners’ ePortfolios are stored is attracting the attention of many people. The efforts of the teaching profession should be focused on the potential of the ePortfolio process to support learning and, assuming that we agree that the process has value, on the development of strategies that can be used to encourage, support and engage the learner.

The ePortfolio process is, essentially, not really anything new. The learner builds a portfolio of evidence, as vocational learners have done for many years, but now the evidence is stored and linked using ICT systems and tools.

Learners follow a process where they

- Recognise that something needs to be done/learnt
- Plan how they might do it or learn it - they share it with their teacher or others
- Do whatever it was that they planned to do
- Record evidence of what they have done or learnt
- Review and reflect on what has been done or learnt - they record and share their reflections

Recognise that something needs to be done or learnt



As teachers, we might want our learners to employ this process because we hope that it will:

- Support reflective learning and encourage them to take a more active part in their own learning;
- Provide an attractive record of a learner's thinking and achievements that will promote and encourage dialogue and discussion;
- Support the move towards a personalised learning environment that firmly places them, the learner, at the centre of their own learning;
- Increase their engagement, motivation and self esteem;
- Provide opportunities for them to develop a portfolio of evidence that they can use to support their development and progression;
- Allow them to use the tools and technology that they feel comfortable with to support their learning, development and collaboration;
- Encourage learners to recognise their informal and non-accredited achievements;
- Provide an appropriate structure where they can store, find and present evidence of their learning, achievements and thinking;
- Encourage them to consider and take care with their digital identity.

To provide students with opportunities to use the process we need to provide them with access to the tools and resources that they need and must train them how use them. We must then integrate opportunities and expectations into their learning programmes.

The ‘How’ of the ePortfolio?

Harnessing the potential of the ePortfolio Process is a major curriculum development for any school; it will need resource, commitment and management.

The ‘How’ has two parts, how to implement ePortfolios, the technical and organisational bit, and how to engage the learner, the teaching and learning focus. I will concentrate here on the learner, their characteristics, their expectations and how we might engage them in the ePortfolio process.

I recognise that schools will be unable to move forward until all teachers understand both the role that the ePortfolio Process can play in supporting both learning and the learner, and what they must do to support their learners as they work with ePortfolios. Other presentations and papers presented here today will address this critical training need. Simply, before we can move forward we will need, somehow, to train teachers so that they are able to support their learners as they develop and use their ePortfolios. The MOSEP Train the Trainers Tutorials have been developed to help us to meet this need.

Where are we now? – *our learners*

We are working with learners, who have throughout their life had access to the internet and ICT and multimedia tools and resources. They use them ‘naturally’ both inside and outside of school. They have no experience of life without information and communications tools. The rate at which the technology has developed means that our learners generally have more confidence and experience with the technology that their parents or teachers. They have access to the same information as their teachers and parents. They have high expectations of the technology and expect to be able to use it when they need or want to. They expect to be able to use the technology and tools to communicate and collaborate with others. They demand instant access to information and enjoy interactive games interfaces.

Our learners have access to and use, in their everyday lives, the digital technology and tools that they need to capture, store, access and share ePortfolio evidence. Our learners have the skills that they will need to maintain a multimedia ePortfolio.

Where are we now? – *our teachers*

Teachers are making increasing use of ICT tools and resources and are developing personal ICT/multimedia skills. They are beginning to recognise the potential of ICT to support learning with some beginning to recognise the potential of social software and social networking tools. Generally, teachers have had little experience of using ePortfolios and do not recognise the potential of the process neither are they as confident with the tools as are their learners.

Our teachers need access to ePortfolio training if they are to work successfully with learners who are using ePortfolios.

Where are we now? – the tools and technology

Although a range of tools exist that enable learners to maintain an ePortfolio, there still appears to be a lot of development work going on focusing on the development of ‘better’ tools. In some ways the development resource is being directed towards the more easily developed technology and tools rather than the teaching and learning challenges. However, as the only certainty is that the technology will continue to change, there will never be a good time to buy-in. There is a case, if the ePortfolio process is indeed valuable, to get on and introduce the process now rather than wait for the perfect tool.

Where do we want to be? – *a teacher’s perspective*

We want to provide a personalised learning environment for our learners, which will support them as they develop as independent and reflective learners. We want to harness the best of the available technology and tools to support their learning; in short we want the ‘best’ for our learners!

If we start by investigating our aspiration to create independent and reflective learners, such learners will need to take a large degree of responsibility for their learning. We want them to understand what it is they need to do; to have planned how they will do it; to have done it and recorded evidence that shows what and how they have done it; to have reflected on their learning and achievements and made decisions about they might tackle similar problems in the future; they will be able to retrieve and present evidence to their teachers, parents, employers, assessors and peers.

If we couple this with a desire to harness the best of the available technology we would be looking at an environment where students have access to digital resources and are able to store, access and share the digital evidence that they create. They would also need to be able to structure and control who can access their evidence.

The learner’s evidence will, in the 21st century, be stored somewhere in a digital format. We would want learners to have a digital record of their plans, learning and achievements. We want learners to survive and thrive in their Personalised Learning Environment.

Are we there yet? – *Well, not quite, but how will we know when we are?*

How will we know when we have got to where we want to be? When we have harnessed the ePortfolio Process for the benefit of our learners?

We will know if we have successfully integrated ePortfolio processes into everyday practice if our learners say:

Supporting my personal development and progression

- *I find that I can easily record my plans, my thoughts about my learning, my development and my achievements;*
- *I can use my ePortfolio to store evidence of my Personal Learning and Thinking Skills;*
- *I can use my ePortfolio to store evidence of what I can do outside of school and of things that I have achieved, but have not got a certificate for;*
- *It provides me with a structure that I can use to store multimedia evidence - audio, video and photographic formats, in addition to written evidence;*
- *It makes it easy for me to search for my evidence, and lets me present it in an interesting format;*
- *I think that other people will understand me better when they can see how I think and reflect on what I have done, learnt or achieved;*
- *It has provided me with a digital record/story that shows how I have developed, like a timeline of my studies;*
- *Using my ePortfolio helped me to prepare for interview/review meetings;*
- *I can keep my ePortfolio when I move on to college/university or get a job;.*
- *My ePortfolio impressed the potential employers that I showed it to, as it helped them recognise the positive attitude that I have towards my work, helping me to stand out from the competition;*
- *I believe that my ePortfolio helped me when I was searching for a job, as my employers were impressed by the depth and breadth of my work;*
- *When I wanted to start my own business, my ePortfolio helped me show to funding organisations that I have the right attitude and skills and it helped me get their initial backing and help;*
- *It shows me at my best and has helped me to become more confident.*

Developing personal communication skills

- *I find it easier to capture multimedia evidence using digital devices than it is to write down what I have planned, done or achieved;*
- *It has helped me to become a better writer, and to get my ideas across to others by using varying forms of media;*
- *I find it helps me to remember and explain what I have done when I have to talk to my teacher or other students;*
- *By having to give feedback to other learners I have developed communications skills;*
- *It helps me to show people what I'm really good at.*

Collaborating and Working with others

- *It means that my teachers and mentors take more interest in me as an individual and I feel comfortable knowing that they are following my progress, offering advice, support and guidance when they think I need it;*
- *I find it easy to access my web-based portfolio at home and can let the people I have allowed see the evidence that I decide that I want them to see;*

- *Collaboration is a good thing. I can think about the opinions others have about my work and then build upon their ideas to improve my own work;*
- *I find it useful to store my portfolio evidence that my teachers need to assess in my ePortfolio;*
- *I have enjoyed sharing evidence of what I have done, achieved, or created with others;*
- *We all were expected to look at each others ePortfolio, this helped me to find out more about others and helped them to find out more about me.*

Enjoyment and creativity

- *I enjoy using my camera phone, computer and social software to help me to develop my ePortfolio;*
- *My ePortfolio helps me to be creative;*
- *I enjoyed showing my ePortfolio to my parents and tutor during my review meeting and they were pleased with what I had produced;*
- *I have enjoyed customising and working on the organisation of my ePortfolio as it helps people who look at it to get to know something about me, my character and style;*
- *I am proud of my ePortfolio because it is something that I feel that I own;*
- *It provided me with an opportunity and a reason to experiment with, and to be creative with multimedia tools;*
- *At home, my parents take more notice of my schoolwork when I show them my ePortfolio. When I show them I also teach my parents something about ICT and social software.*

Supporting my learning

- *By thinking about or reflecting on what I have learnt, what I have found difficult, what I have done well, I think that I understand a little more about myself and what I can do, and by thinking about my abilities, experiences, qualities and skills I can see how I have progressed and what I have achieved, so I can plan what I need to do to improve;*
- *When I have new evidence to store in my ePortfolio I have to look at the evidence that I already have in it and decide where my new evidence should be stored and how it should be linked in, which helps me understand a little more about myself and how I have learnt and developed;*
- *I think that my teacher now spends more time talking to me about my learning, achievements and planning which has helped me and made me think more about what I have done and what I should do;*
- *I need only store a piece of evidence once but I can use it for different purposes and subject based assessments;*

Skills Development

- *My ePortfolio helps me to plan how to improve;*
- *My ePortfolio helps me judge whether I have improved over time;*
- *When I reflect upon my work, I can decide which items are still relevant or no longer needed;*
- *By working on my ePortfolio, I have practised and developed ICT and multimedia skills which I can now use in other subject areas too;*
- *I can work on my ePortfolio when and wherever I want to;*

- *I find the ePortfolio tools easy and intuitive use, as I did not need a lot of help or teaching before I found that I could use it.*

So when our learners tell us this we have got there!

Why are we NOT there yet?

When talking to teachers about why they are not encouraging learners to maintain an ePortfolio, they often cite the following reasons:

- *Universities and employers do not understand or value them;*
- *An ePortfolio is just this week's initiative, it will go away if we ignore it;*
- *Technology always lets you down;*
- *It will cost the school too much money;*
- *There are many different ideas of what an ePortfolio is, it would be wrong to encourage learners to use something for which there is no accepted standard (lifelong/life-wide expectation creating issues of portability and interoperability) ;*
- *It is too much trouble, we will need to change the way we work;*
- *Learners do not have the ICT/multimedia skills;*
- *It is not the right time - tomorrow will be a better time after all of the problems have been resolved.*

There are many reasons being expressed that might justify doing nothing but wait until 'somebody' sorts out the technology, agrees standards and somehow creates the national/international expectation that every learner will have an ePortfolio.

The tools and technology are available; learners can, and want to use them, if the ePortfolio process does in fact have the potential to support learning should we not be doing something, now?

What have we got to do to get there? *'walk the walk' – How do we convert the 'lip-service' into action? I suggest that we have five major challenges to address.*

Challenge 1 - To confirm that the ePortfolio process can support learning - will learners become better learners by adopting the ePortfolio process?

- Will the ePortfolio process motivate the learner?
- Will the ePortfolio process engage the learner?
- Will the ePortfolio process raise learner self esteem?
- Is the ePortfolio process compatible with existing good practice eg Assessment for Learning, action planning etc?

Challenge 2 - To confirm that the ePortfolio Process can support the learner.

- Can the ePortfolio process support learner progression?
- Support in review meetings
- Support in interviews employment/HE etc
- Preparation for progression
- Is an ePortfolio an appropriate 'instrument' to Record learner achievement
- Is an ePortfolio an appropriate 'instrument' to evidence non-accredited learning
- Can an ePortfolio function as an effective Assessment portfolio
- Will the ePortfolio process raise learner aspirations?
- Will the ePortfolio process encourage learners to develop independent learning skills?

Challenge 3 - To find out if the ePortfolio process can be integrated into curriculum practice

- Will Curriculum Areas/Departments value and 'buy-in' to the ePortfolio process?
- EPortfolio opportunities Written-in to schemes of learning
- EPortfolio usage Integrated into activities
- Departmental policies reference ePortfolio usage
- Departmental procedures include/value the ePortfolio process
- Will students be prepared to engage in the level of self-reflection that the ePortfolio process requires?
- Will learners have the ICT/multimedia skills that they will need to compile and maintain an ePortfolio
- Are training courses/materials available? MOSEP
- Will teachers be able to find the time they need to spend with individual students as they use their ePortfolios to share their reflections, plans and achievements?

Challenge 4 – to find out whether the ePortfolio process will raise learner achievement

- Will students who use ePortfolios achieve more than those who do not?

Challenge 5 - to design marketing materials that will raise the profile of a student ePortfolio – i.e. to create the ePortfolio 'Pull' - *the reason that learners need to convince them that they should have an ePortfolio*

- students
- parents
- employers
- Universities and Training Providers
- Teachers and trainers

The ePortfolio process requires a shift from teaching to learning with a resulting change in routines and practices. As control of the learning moves towards the learner, the shift will have little impact on learning unless the learner themselves embrace and employ ePortfolio processes.

A learner's first question with anything that requires effort is likely to be *what is in it for me?* We will not be able engage them in the process unless we are able to convince them that there is something in it for them; convince them that they should have an ePortfolio; convince them that it is the natural thing for them to 'do'.

Without commitment from the teaching profession the transformational potential of the ePortfolio Process will never be realised – *we have an opportunity do we have the will to move forward?*