



## Editorial: ePortfolio practice for emerging, connecting, and sustaining pedagogies

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### Abstract

With ePortfolio practice now being well over 20 years old and, to a great extent, mainstreamed within the Australasian higher education sector (indeed globally), it is timely to reflect on current pedagogical trends within this practice. The focus of each of the articles in this special edition does just that, but with a special focus on emerging practices, connecting students to their future professions, whilst looking to sustain consistent institutional practices. The 10 articles within this edition do not try and justify the use of ePortfolio, as that case has well and truly been prosecuted and won over the years. Rather, now that it is established, this frees us to look at more nuanced issues, such as student well-being, the application of different pedagogical theories, different educational design processes, and supporting users through different communities of practice within the sector. Notwithstanding, with the advent of generative AI over the last two years and a renewed focus on the use of ePortfolio to enhance the opportunity for program-wide assessment, we top and tail this edition by putting the student at the centre of this practice. More particularly, through the notion of well-being and the pedagogy of care, how these concepts can lead to a more satisfying outcome for all concerned.

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## Introduction

With ePortfolio practice now being well over 20 years old within the sector and, to a great extent, mainstreamed within Australasian higher education, this special issue takes a timely look at many of the current pedagogical trends within contemporary ePortfolio practice. This issue begins by sharing some features of ePortfolio practice that can assist with student well-being in higher education. Part of this involves the notion of connections between the student, teacher and other students and establishing an environment that promotes trust, relationships and expertise. Having established this base, we go on to investigate, through scholarly examination, how this may enhance flexible assessment practices through the creative use of Portfolios. Inevitably this leads us as practitioners to consider how we are using our ePortfolios to promote professional pathways for our students, particularly for those from different backgrounds. As such, we provide a case study of international students' use of ePortfolio in the Australian higher education sector.

This special issue then shifts its focus somewhat to consider ethical ePortfolio practices and how these can be sustained over time. It does this by looking at the work of an AAEEBL Task Force. AAEEBL is the Association for Authentic, Experiential and Evidence-based Learning and for the last four years they have had a Task Force investigating Digital Ethics in ePortfolios use. AAEEBL is a large Community of Practice, mostly based in the United States, but has strong links into other regions. Another active Community of Practice is based in Southeast Asia. So, this special issue then turns its attention to this important region, to consider the role of ePortfolio-based professional development for educators.

This issue then brings the reader back to consider some of the many pedagogical approaches to using ePortfolio, namely looking at reflective practice and how we can effectively develop and engage with this feedback and understanding (the literacy of) how this happens within an ePortfolio context. Another pedagogical lens we then look through is that of practice-based approaches to ePortfolio and the role that activity theory plays in this. Aligned with this notion of activity, ePortfolio lends itself strongly to the multimodal presentations of ideas and notions of 'self', so we take a special look at using different media, such as how photo(video) voice collaboration can provide certain affordances. To do this the authors used an autoethnographic approach to study students' ePortfolio creation.

After 20+ years of practice in our institutions, we have evolved to have some well-established ePortfolio traditions and systems to assist us in this important work. Having said that, the evolution continues, and some traditions we have established may be ready to be broken (or morphed), potentially with new ones being established. This issue thus takes a positive look at what is happening within the Australasian sector in relation to institutional approaches to supporting ePortfolio practice.

We close out this special issue by reinforcing the initial premise that, in all this, we want to position ePortfolio as a practice one can engage with to ready oneself for a productive future. To do this we position the last article looking at a 'Pedagogy of Care' and ePortfolios as a scholarly activity,

which can provide us an opportunity to visibly present our achievements in higher education in a humanising way.

### **Emerging, connecting and sustaining pedagogies**

The first study in this edition, by McCarthy, Mitchell and McNally is titled, 'ePortfolio practice for student well-being in higher education: A scoping review'. In this paper, they provide a meta-analysis of some 23 papers and cluster the findings under the following six key themes associated with student well-being: ePortfolios for achieving human potential, ePortfolios leading to self-awareness, ePortfolios enhancing identity formation, ePortfolios supporting connectedness, ePortfolios fostering self-regulation, ePortfolios as stressors. Essentially, they propose that subjective well-being is based on the eudaemonic approach, which includes meaning, life purpose, self-realisation, a sense of autonomy, mastery and connectedness to people, with the aim of helping one flourish as a fully functioning person (Ryan and Deci, 2001; Whiting et al., 2018). They make important points linking the relationship between well-being, academic achievement, and retention in higher education (Baik et al., 2019; Hartl et al., 2022) and that psychological well-being, academic engagement, and success rates are found to be correlated (Davis & Hadwin, 2021).

The significant place of ePortfolios in developing collaborative, safe and supportive environments is emphasised by the authors, posing ePortfolio pedagogy as a space through which to support students' own knowledge construction; making visible aspects of the learning process, and positioning this as a place of agency for students, thereby increasing their intrinsic motivation to learn (University of Waterloo, 2023). They demonstrate that, by extension, ePortfolio practice promotes a student-centred pedagogy that may be an enabler of student wellbeing. Having said that, it is the interactions that occur between the student and the teacher that are the key to facilitating these well-being outcomes, yet further aspect of the relational nature of teaching.

The authors sound a cautionary note also, highlighting the fact that digital education can also lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, thus impacting well-being negatively when not handled sensitively (Trespacios et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). It is therefore important not to consider the affordances of the ePortfolio in isolation; rather, it is in their relationship to other tools, technologies, pedagogies and practices. And importantly, how the purposeful design of teaching and assessment can lead to well-being in addition to academic outcomes. That design, as the authors point out, needs to embrace certain human qualities and behaviours, such as care, kindness and compassion, so that the learning environment (created by the teacher) can reach its potential (Riva et al., 2020).

The second paper by D'Souza, Sapsed, and Volcic, extends on these thoughts, looking at the convergence of the pedagogical outworkings of trust, relationships & expertise. They pose these as being essential elements in the process of emerging, connecting and sustaining ePortfolios through an ongoing community of practice, within the learning lifecycle. An approach that has become, "...business as usual".

They use a case study approach to this paper, drawing on the Monash University Bachelor of Media Communication (BMC) degree in the School of Media, Film and Journalism, which had over nine hundred enrolments in 2023. A key component of this degree is an ePortfolio, through

which students demonstrate their analytical, technical, and professional skills, developed through a core program of professional communication units and specialist study options in one of four streams. This culminates in a final year media project or industry-related experience, where students evidence their learning through their ePortfolio, allowing them to showcase their work towards future employment opportunities.

They suggest that for media students at the beginning of their careers, an ePortfolio encourages them to think of each assignment as part (sub-set) of the whole, in which they are creating a holistic picture of themselves over time. Not surprisingly, the multimodal approach that the discipline promotes allows them to express their ideas in multiple formats: images, text, videos, infographics, and embedded media, all to illustrate their journey and tell their story.

The authors share the following three key lessons (a precis) from this work that emphasise the importance of true collaborative relationships at each point in the journey:

1. Implementing an ePortfolio profoundly changes a student. It becomes a fulcrum around which they engage with ideas, it directs their learning and helps them develop new skills. This allows the student's voice to be heard.
2. It promotes a consideration of the appropriate allocation of resources to effectively manage relationships within the vast ecosystem (of becoming a professional) over an extended period of time.
3. Advocacy for the importance of trust-based relationships between academics, professional staff and the student (all in this together).

Moving on we look at enhancing flexible assessment through ePortfolios, with Kashmira Dave and Kate Mitchell. In their paper, they make the case that flexible assessment has become an essential element in contemporary education, allowing for a fuller accommodation of the increased diversity in today's student cohorts (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). This, in part, can also help to address the fundamental shift that needs to occur in assessment in the light of generative AI, a reform seen as 'critical' when designing assessments to stimulate a 'rich portrayal' of student learning (Lodge et al., 2023).

They define flexible assessment as providing students with the freedom to express their understanding and skills authentically and creatively, encouraging multiple means of engagement, action and expression (CAST, 2018). In doing so, they invoke Boud's concept of 'sustainable assessment', which transcends traditional evaluation methods, emphasising a more integrated lived experience, aligned more with a lifelong learning process (Boud & Soler, 2016). They go on to provide examples of some of these strategies that are supported by the thematic principles of flexible assessment with ePortfolios. By adopting such a multifaceted approach to assessment, they contend that ePortfolios provide an opportunity for educators to engage in more authentic assessment, involving reflection, self-assessment, collaboration, feedback, and multimodal expression. As these different facets converge, it provides the opportunity for a profoundly meaningful and engaging experience for our students; a journey that becomes more than just a series of assignments. Rather, it becomes, in their words, a personal odyssey characterised by motivation and a deep sense of ownership.

Of course, ePortfolio is not just an undergraduate thing, as Hsieh reminds us in discussing how it is being used in a postgraduate context, in Applied Linguistics and TESOL courses at the University of Queensland. Traditionally, these programs have lacked practical experiences that lead to employment pathways. Rather, in establishing an ePortfolio, it has been seen that students can become more independent thinkers, develop greater self-regulation, and display more purpose-driven behaviours during the construction of their portfolios.

For international students, building an ePortfolio can be a new concept and so this research sought to identify the different supports required by these students to create their ePortfolios. This included more focused training on how to structure their ePortfolios and, more broadly, how to link these with employability skills in the Australian context. A fundamental part of this was providing international students with professional pathways through work-integrated learning and work placements. But in doing so, also supporting them to gain new skills in being self-critical and in reflecting on these workplace experiences (Billett, 2011; Jackson, 2017).

In doing so, the ePortfolio was seen to provide a way to foster intercultural learning and understanding, both for international students and their English-speaking peers. From this experience/research, three major lessons are shared:

1. International students require more specific instruction, guidance, and exemplars to help them structure their ePortfolio. They also required more timely feedback on their ePortfolio to give them an opportunity to revise them where necessary before finalisation.
2. Students need assistance in selecting the best learning artefacts to include in their ePortfolio.
3. Students would like the ePortfolio course to provide them with a greater focus on employment, and to help them see how it might assist them in their future. This requires more explicit training in employability/soft skills to be developed for international students.

However, the researcher points out that this training should be undertaken over the period of the degree program, not as an add-on during a course, in that it becomes part of the program's pedagogy. For as Harring & Luo (2016) suggest, an ePortfolio pedagogy is just as important, if not more important, than the tool used. Thus, as training is provided and ePortfolio is embedded into courses, together with employment-related opportunities, international (and domestic) students have a greater chance of being work-ready graduates (Mainga et al., 2022).

The focus of the edition now shifts slightly, as Slade, Zurhellen and Conefrey take us on a journey of sustaining ethical ePortfolio practices. In their paper, they reflect on the development of a comprehensive resource from the Association for Authentic, Experiential and Evidence-based Learning (AAEEBL), as guided by a 'Task Force'. This becomes particularly poignant with the advent of Generative AI. The Task Force was assigned to draft, refine, and publish a suite of digital ethics principles, strategies, scenarios, and resources, to be available as open source, exploring the intersections between principles and generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Initially, the group undertook the ePortfolio Mapping Project to understand the labour dynamics within ePortfolio practice across North America; this was then expanded with data later collected from across Australia and New Zealand. The paper shares the preliminary research findings and

offers valuable insights into how to promote ethical ePortfolio usage for teaching, learning and assessment.

The authors rightly point out that, although in its simplest form, an ePortfolio can be a repository to store online artefacts, it can also be a sophisticated and integrated learning experience designed to meet a range of pedagogical objectives. Thus, in part, the appeal of ePortfolio practice comes from its flexibility to scaffold learning, with elements such as reflections, formative feedback, sharing of experiences and authentic summative assessment tasks designed to engage students in real-life scenarios. And behind this lies many rich and complex pedagogical processes. It is these processes that are the focus of increasing attention since the process of learning can be as important as the end product. But with all such digital advances there also comes a disruption of the status quo that requires an intentionality in its implementation (Joyes et al., 2010).

The work of the Task Force has been serendipitously very well timed for the sector, with the advent of generative AI, which has caused educational institutions to find new approaches to assessment, particularly, but also to assure the learning of students. This has caused both staff and students to consider new approaches in online engagement involving emerging notions of advanced digital citizenship linked with new levels of literacy being demanded (Slade & Brown Wilson 2022). However, there is no textbook telling the sector how to do this, which means new forms of guidance and support need to be researched and co-designed, and as with any new field, this includes understanding the ethical implications and development of literacies for this. And in this case, how this effects and can lead to the responsible use of ePortfolio. Thus, the authors share that the work of the Task Force has culminated in providing the sector with a comprehensive set of principles, strategies, scenarios and supporting resources, designed to support the sector to become more ethically literate.

The sixth article in this edition by Taptamat, Slade, Bowker and Wilson, looks at the role of ePortfolio-in educator professional development, drawing on insights gained from an ePortfolio-based professional learning initiative within a Southeast Asian online community of practice (CoP). In this, CoP members created ePortfolios for themselves to gain a first-hand experience of the complexities involved. In so doing, it is reported that members felt more able to then design scaffolded learning experiences for their students. Not only did they learn about the complexities involved, but also engaged in an iterative seeking, receiving, and responding to feedback process when developing their ePortfolios, lessons which were then shared with other CoP members. This led to members developing deeper insight into different approaches to ePortfolios.

The authors note that ePortfolios are not commonly used in Southeast Asian classrooms; despite this, participants actively examined the practices and principles of using ePortfolios for teaching and learning, particularly targeting the development of educators' competencies. Some 541 educators from various Southeast Asian countries were involved in this activity (course), which focused on diverse aspects of ePortfolio use and highlighted the effectiveness of combining asynchronous and synchronous learning modalities in professional development with the aid of ePortfolios. The CoP also encouraged reflection on experiences as an integral part of the journey, and members in reviewing their experiences were able to articulate how they could use these to make improvements in similar situations in the future (Kolb 1984).

The authors acknowledge, as do Goldsmith, Doerr and Lewis (2014), that teacher learning 'tends to occur incrementally and iteratively' (p.20), and in this case several characteristics of highly effective professional development, including an emphasis on learning experience; quality reflective inquiry of pedagogy; concentration on teacher development of content knowledge and pedagogy grounded in practices; and involvement of external experts and practical application of ePortfolio pedagogies; are demonstrated but needs to be reinforced through future activities. One way to do this is through the support of an ongoing CoP, that brings educators together across borders to continue to learn from each other.

Moving the University of New South Wales (UNSW) toward a hybrid form of ePortfolio pedagogy is the bold task described by Polly, Salopek, Mo, Mount, Neal, Ryan and Yoshioka in the next paper. This project is one (of a number) that has been taken on under the auspices of the UNSW Education Focussed (EF) Fellowship program involving all faculties and driven through cross-faculty collaboration. The EF Fellows, got together to generate a set of recommendations for a 'roadmap' towards developing a hybrid ePortfolio pedagogy and practice system. They came to this point based on a perception that, for some students, the connection between learning experiences and what they value may be perceived as disconnected in their coursework, or not able to be presented when just using a learning management system (Conefrey & Smyth 2020).

As a result, the EF Fellows suggested that an ePortfolio pedagogy and an innovative approach to practice be developed offering a 'mechanism' to address this 'gap' for students (Watty & McKay, 2015). The project demonstrated that ePortfolios was a coherent way to enrich how students visualise their learning and thus surface or unpack their skills and graduate attributes throughout their studies. An important aspect of this was also how to facilitate a student's ability to reflect on how they have achieved certain skills through their studies, and how to make these visible beyond this and into their future endeavours (Polly et al., 2017; Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018; Thibodeaux et al., 2020).

This is an ongoing work being carried out by the EF Fellow team, and the findings from this ePortfolio project are informing this future work at UNSW, particularly around the key elements of curriculum mapping that are designed to address skills, graduate capabilities and attribute development, once coupled with reflective practice, feedback and visualisation.

The eighth paper in this special issue focuses on adoption of ePortfolio in a dual-sector university (offering higher education and vocational training programs), revealing ePortfolio does not change; in fact, it may prove just as valuable to the VET sector as in higher education (Idrus et al., 2024). Pingo, Sison, Dianati and Laudari, discuss ePortfolio's value to one dual-sector institution in their article 'Practice-Based Approach Through the Lens of Activity Theory'. They employ activity theory as it provides a great analytical framework to unpack the complexities of ePortfolio implementation in a tertiary environment that faces multi-faceted hurdles when establishing a 'new' narrative around ePortfolio use. This study navigates these complexities by harnessing the use of an ePortfolio system and describing the practices that supported its implementation in a dual-sector institution. This is primarily done through the lens of the Learning Designers charged with supporting this implementation and their reflections on this activity.

This article illuminates that there is untapped potential and hurdles encountered during the broad implementation of an ePortfolio system that needs to be fully understood and shared for the

benefit of others wishing to also go down a similar track. To assist with this, the authors employed an activity theory-based approach to structure an inquiry around this implementation. In doing so, they identified two primary research questions to guide their data collection: 1) the nature of opportunities and barriers impacting ePortfolio implementation and 2) strategies for their successful integration in support of teaching and learning.

Not surprisingly, implementing a new system at an institution, such as ePortfolio, introduces a new (mostly additional) workload to university staff. In doing so, the reason for doing this needs to be made clear to these staff, particularly in how it can be used in the context of the institution's virtual learning environment and in articulating how this might affect each role involved in making this change. Although it is clear to those experienced in ePortfolio practice, building a bridge for those less experienced is vital. Essentially, it is a bridge between theory and real-world applications that is being built, one around the concepts that might enable students to reflect on and present their growth and achievements. The authors contend that this is due to employers requiring graduates to be able to articulate various practical skills, not the least of which are now an awareness of academic integrity issues, and the rising use of artificial intelligence, among others.

In designing ePortfolio practices, the article offers insights as to the opportunities to scaffold and evidence learning, by moving staff from more traditional (notionally now less authentic) ways of assessing learning. Also, not surprisingly, the move to ePortfolios can be linked to an increased call to a more Work-Integrated Learning model, to help bridge the disconnect between theory and practice, as students demonstrate knowledge and skills development towards employability (Mitchell et al., 2021).

The authors contend that for the successful implementation and integration of ePortfolio practice, irrespective of whether it may be a bottom-up, top-down or bi-directional approach there is a need to have clarity in the planning, roll-out and ongoing support and to help inform this they offer the following six suggestion to fellow learning designers:

1. Acknowledge the added workload ePortfolios may introduce and collaborate with faculties to manage responsibilities effectively to achieve the intended outcomes of successful integration into the teaching and learning practices.
2. Prioritise comprehensive training in ePortfolio workflow and troubleshooting to ensure educators can support students effectively.
3. Align technological deployment with clear pedagogical objectives.
4. Recognise the multi-faceted impact on the stakeholders' workload and providing adequate support systems.
5. Addressing the requisite for comprehensive training tailored to the varied needs of users across the institution.
6. Foster a community of practice that encourages sharing ideas and collaborative problem-solving.

The tone of the edition takes a slight turn at this point to reflect on the ePortfolio traditions that have been established by institutions over the last 20 years and that may be ready to be



challenged or at least morphed to allow for the entrance of new approaches. Sankey contends that this is largely due to the plethora of online platforms that are now available to institutions that can provide a very user-friendly experience for students and staff by 1) providing an appropriate platform, but also 2) providing well-supported resources that scaffold its use. The paper reports on the current state of play in ePortfolio platforms used by institutions in Australasia, highlighting a divergence in practice. That is, what was once seen as the responsibility of an institution to provide a dedicated ePortfolio platform for their students (and resources) has started to fracture and many institutions are now opting to mediate third-party and/or discipline-relevant options for their students. And whether these are as well supported by the institutions is yet to be seen.

This has something to do with the maturity of an institution's understanding of the place of ePortfolio, but it also reflects that ePortfolio practice has not yet been fully realised by many institutions (Ciesielkiewicz et al., 2024). This is despite more than 20 years of practice in the sector. But to be fair, it also reflects that the options and systems that students and staff now have access to, to represent their professional experiences have increased significantly over this time. Thus, institutional practices are becoming even more eclectic, potentially adopting multiple platforms to achieve the professional goals of our students and staff. To support this, this paper reports on the ePortfolio platforms that are provided by some 49 Universities in Australasia and the changes experienced in this practice between 2017 and 2023. It highlights that there is a divergence in, and opinions around, what constitutes contemporary good ePortfolio practice in the sector.

One thing is clear though, as the sector continues to experience the shift in education experiences brought about by the advent of tools such as generative AI, the role of ePortfolio practice and the platforms that house this practice are in no way diminished, rather we see only new opportunities for their use in the student learning journey. This is linked with institutions now opting to mediate other third-party and/or discipline-relevant platforms for their students, many of which are incorporating their own AI features, providing exciting new opportunities. Thus the paper reflects on this with one eye to the future, with a specific focus on some of the more recent affordances ePortfolio practice can now offer in the light of Generative AI and the, not to be ignored, associated challenges to academic integrity.

With all this change at play and with the options and workload issues discussed above, it is fitting that in closing out this edition we return to the concept of care for our users. More particularly, Fisher and Wheeler articulate passionately for a re-imagining of a Pedagogy of Care. In practice, this suggests that ePortfolio tasks that students undertake should not only focus on instruction and activities that connect to real-world learning but should also humanize the learning experience. This is done through constructing an environment and teaching approach (mindset) that builds trust, respect and resilience, that can result in enhanced achievement for students (Henriksen et al., 2022). To help us with this, Fisher and Wheeler explore some practical strategies as to how to humanise the curriculum when designing ePortfolio tasks. They link this to aspects of Mezirow's transformative learning theory (2018) and to an Activity-Centred Analysis and Design (ACAD) framework (Goodyear et al., 2021).

Nestled comfortably within these frameworks/theories, the article clearly articulates the process for adopting a Pedagogy of Care approach (Noddings, 1988), one aimed at humanising the learning experience. They also seek to extend this model by suggesting an addition to it, which

we will leave you to discover in reading the article. Notwithstanding, it is proposed that an empathetic lecturer (a disposition they would recommend be taken by all involved), will facilitate learning by ensuring a safe sharing of practice within the virtual space. This implies that there is an explicit assurance of confidentiality from one's peers and teaching staff and that the provision of feedback (when provided) is in the form of clarifying questions rather than judgment.

The aim that is clearly stated in this paper is one of strengthening staff confidence, well-being, and comfort, as co-travellers in the challenging context of higher education, we together "...intentionally design for care, to ensure that our learners as people do not get lost along the way." (Henriksen et al., 2022, p. 89)

## **Conclusion**

In this editorial, we have tried to provide you with a taster for the banquet that awaits as you unpack the golden nuggets (not chicken nuggets) before you. As mentioned throughout, ePortfolio practice within the Australasian higher education sector is now well over 20 years old (indeed globally), and thus, it is timely to reflect on current pedagogical trends within this practice but also consider the best ways forward from here. The focus of each of the articles you will engage with in this special edition focuses on emerging practices, connecting students to their future professions whilst looking to sustain consistent institutional practices. Within these articles, we do not justify the use of ePortfolio, as this is now well and truly established; we look at the progress of this practice by learning from those who have done the hard miles and looked intently into and celebrate its use. This article touches on the issues discussed more fully in this edition: student well-being, the application of different pedagogical theories, different educational design processes, and supporting users through different communities of practice within the sector. In doing so, it also reflects on how this practice might be used with a sector still coming to terms with the emergence of generative AI. But it does so with hope, hope that the use of ePortfolio can enhance our practice through aspects such as program-wide assessment. We have deliberately topped and tailed this edition by putting the student at the centre of this practice, with the dual notions of well-being and the pedagogy of care, as we believe that together these concepts can lead to a more satisfying outcome for all concerned.

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