

# **Considering Dissemination: Maximising the potential of the e-portfolio**

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## **Abstract**

The use of e-portfolio is becoming more widespread as an established practice in higher education with a growing body of research supporting the inherent deep learning benefits. It is espoused as an ideal pedagogical tool, conducive to student-centred learning where engagement and investment in the learning process are key. The recognition of learning beyond the classroom and appreciation of diverse, personalised approaches to learning are fundamental to this medium, and as such, the very basic premise of an e-portfolio functioning as a place to host information has been surpassed significantly.

This case study reflects on the use of e-portfolio as a multifunctional tool for the music degree programme at Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT). While the primary purpose was the use of e-portfolio to create a collaborative yearbook for final year students, ultimately this expanded into the areas of marketing, recruitment, and staff professional development as a direct result of dissemination pathways. While the promotion of e-portfolio as a valuable pedagogical tool remains a priority, the specific possibilities for maximising the potential of the e-portfolio beyond the purposes of student-centred learning that emerged in this case gave rise to future creative applications. This case study addresses the efficacy of a collaborative project to promote student success and the potential for e-portfolio to support additional functions.

## **Introduction**

E-portfolio has been identified as an effective tool in supporting practice-based educational programmes (Nettleton, Lowe, & Dorahy, 2008). In this case, the versatility afforded by the medium was ideally suited to the creative nature of the music discipline where the outputs are predominantly performance or practice based. The reference by Hubert et al. (2015) to the e-portfolio being “composed” is particularly fitting in this context, and although this was a reference to the art of writing in a broader sense, the point remains that this is a high impact practice (HIP) which supports creativity and expressions of individuality (Kuh, 2008; Hubert, Pickavance, & Hyberger, 2015; Watson et al., 2016). While e-portfolio practice may be a relatively recent addition to what is considered a deep learning experience, Hubert et al. (2015) clearly lay out the parameters of HIPs and contend that e-portfolios not only meet the criteria, but potentially play a more significant role in providing the ‘scaffolding’ for, or ‘unifying’ HIP for learners.

As a performance art, the music discipline naturally has the showcasing of work at its core and students engage in this activity from the early stages of their studies. Opportunities to have a platform to display and disseminate work are readily embraced and therefore the creation of an e-portfolio was ideal. In this pilot project, the group responded well to the suggestion of developing a yearbook which would incorporate individual and collaborative entries to showcase their work and capture reflections on their learning experience. The yearbook falls into Coppola's Type 2 e-portfolio classification (Batson, 2007; Nettleton, Lowe, & Dorahy, 2008) as it incorporates achievements beyond one subject and also extends into professional experience, thereby establishing the basis for a professional portfolio that could be developed further with a view to employment or career progression. This was an attractive prospect for participants and the potential for further development is particularly pronounced in this instance due to the collaborative nature of the yearbook and the fact that the students had a limited amount of individual space. This may be viewed as a micro approach as one e-portfolio was produced between the group, however the inherent deep learning benefits arising from peer learning and collaborative practices, in addition to opportunities for individualised input, were ever present (Tosh, Light, Fleming, & Haywood, 2005).

The group discussion on ethical considerations resulted in the decision that participation in the yearbook project would be voluntary as no marks were being assigned. It was agreed that only the best quality work and materials they were willing to share publicly should be included as the yearbook was to be disseminated through the institute website and on related social media platforms. This was viewed primarily as an opportunity to showcase work to a broad audience, but also as a collaborative learning experience that presented the potential for further development in providing the foundation for a professional portfolio – a necessity for any performing arts student.

The significance of dissemination in this case, and specifically the fact that the yearbook served multiple purposes, may warrant the use of the descriptive term 'hybrid' (Jones & Leverenz, 2017). Batson (2007) presents another perspective in referring to the e-portfolio being "hijacked" when it is diverted for purposes other than student-centred learning. Although his point is directly related to assessment management systems, there is a broad acknowledgement that e-portfolios can serve many purposes (Scully, O'Leary & Brown, 2018). Batson's (2016) identification of the e-portfolio as an effective "instrument" in supporting positive change in higher education teaching and learning practices is a perspective shared by many. Furthermore, Cambridge (2010) refers to the potential for the institution to benefit from e-portfolio practices. This case study supports this suggestion as e-portfolio practice with the yearbook has given rise to additional applications relating to marketing, recruitment, and staff professional development.

## **Process**

The pilot e-portfolio yearbook project was deemed most beneficial to the Year 4 student group from the BA (Hons) Music programme. As final year students, they were looking towards career options and further study pathways, while also reflecting on their achievements and personal development over the course of their undergraduate studies. The showcasing of work was a primary driver, however the group was also ideally positioned to provide insight into the student experience from a programme and institute perspective as they prepared to transition onwards from third level education.

Book Creator was selected as an accessible e-portfolio tool that supported a broad range of multimedia options and offered flexibility in the context of individualised stylistic preferences. This clearly supports the e-portfolio ideal of the practice being “a student-centred activity – one in which the student is free to choose what artifacts are included and is free to reflect on the process of their learning – they foster engagement and motivation” (Tosh, Penny Light, Fleming, & Haywood, 2005). The publishing of the final product on this public platform was regarded as a positive by the student group in relation to disseminating their best work to a broad audience. Following the provision of training in the use of Book Creator and discussion on the general layout and parameters of the yearbook, responsibility for the project was passed to the student group with the knowledge that the final editing in the context of quality would be in the hands of the lecturer. The book was divided into collaborative pages for group decision-making and one page for each student to create their own individualised entry. The understanding that the final product would be disseminated beyond the class group was considered a motivational factor, as was the personal benefit inherent in the creation of a yearbook that would potentially serve as a nostalgic reminder of their college experience in years to come.

Upon completion, the yearbook was initially shared at programme level as a celebration of the achievements of the year group at the end of their undergraduate journey. With the agreement of the participants, it was then disseminated widely in collaboration with the institute’s marketing team. Career guidance and Leaving Certificate music teachers were targeted to provide future applicants with a unique insight into the music degree programme from the perspective of final year students. The WIT website and social media platforms were used to reach a broader audience. The yearbook was also circulated to all staff in the institute and presented at a Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning (CTEL) community of practice event to promote the use of e-portfolio as a HIP and a flexible multifunctional tool. There is a growing e-portfolio community within the institute supported by pilot projects and this initiative fit well with others such as selected programmes incorporating Mahara into Moodle and a new student engagement group in the School of Humanities currently focusing on the documentation and promotion of e-portfolio practice across a wide range of disciplines.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The potential of the e-portfolio to bridge the gap between educational, professional and personal life experiences (Clarke & Eynon, 2009) emerged in this case, with the ethos of the yearbook undoubtedly contributing to this actuality. Given the voluntary nature of the project, there was a high level of participation, with only students who had joined the group at a later stage (repeat learners) choosing not to engage. This could be attributed to the fact that they had not integrated into the group as effectively as if they had journeyed through their full programme of study together and therefore the ethos of the yearbook concept may not have appealed to them. The content of yearbook revealed a strong focus on final year specialisations with all contributors showcasing videos of their performances, audio samples of music technology and composition repertoire, or presentations of research projects. Personal achievements and samples of professional work were also documented. In addition to showcasing work, valuable data was recorded in terms of personal insights into the student experience of the music programme, viable pathways for future study, and career progression options.

The selection of Book Creator as a user-friendly platform was significant in that the accessibility of e-portfolio platforms has been highlighted as an important factor in ensuring student engagement (Clarke & Eynon, 2009). The wide range of formatting and stylistic choices, complemented by the variety of media supported by the platform, ensured the opportunity for individual expressions of identity. Aesthetically, the style and content of each entry provided insight into the personality of the individual. Cambridge (2010) emphasises the potential for such articulations of identity to contribute to the transition of the learner into a professional space, with self-awareness being integral to the process (Cambridge, Cambridge, & Yancey, 2009). In keeping with the nature of the yearbook concept, an underlying theme of sentimentality emerged as the importance of friendship, relationships, and community spirit was reflected in the collaborative materials presented by the participants, such as the group photos and recollections of shared experiences.

The value of disseminating e-portfolios beyond the class group has been recognised as enhancing the learning process and stimulating an increased investment in producing higher quality work (Jones & Leverenz, 2017; Hubert, Pickavance, & Hyberger, 2015). In this instance, the yearbook was strategically disseminated to target different audiences for specific purposes. From a student perspective, the internal dissemination of the yearbook at programme and institute level served to celebrate the achievements of the group and the high quality of their final year work, whereas the wider circulation on social media and the WIT website provided a platform for this work to enter the public domain with the possibility of generating professional interest.

Students of the music degree programme are actively involved in outreach initiatives and social media campaigns throughout their years of study at the institute. As performing artists, opportunities for self-promotion or exposure are readily embraced and this was viewed as another such opportunity. From an institute perspective, the dissemination of the yearbook on social media and through the website served as a marketing tool for the music programme with the voice of the student being integral to the process. This was enhanced by an additional email campaign including the link to the yearbook targeting the second level sector with recruitment as a main driver. In consultation with the marketing team, the focus on the student experience reinforced by samples of final year work was considered more impactful than circulating standard programme information materials. Hubert, Pickavance, and Hyberger (2015) comment on the potential for the students' work to be viewed as a reflection of the quality of teaching at the institute, and the broad dissemination pathways in this case clearly reflect the confidence of the faculty in their teaching as evidenced by the work showcased in the yearbook.

The presentation of the yearbook in the context of professional development through CTEL was intended to stimulate interest in e-portfolio practice in the institute. This may be viewed as contributing to a cultural shift towards the use of e-portfolios in Higher Education as advocated by Batson (2016). Although a robust institutional infrastructure would be ideal to generate real impact in the adoption of e-portfolios as HIP (Watson et al., 2016), accessible demonstrations of practical examples can have a compelling motivational effect. In this case, this was evidenced by colleagues from other discipline areas subsequently incorporating e-portfolios into their pedagogies with focus on reflective practice, assessment, and the showcasing of work. This has become more pronounced within the remote learning context where the necessity to engage with alternative assessment approaches emerged. There is currently a project underway to capture e-portfolio practice in the three diverse areas of languages, tourism and leisure, and music. It is hoped that further e-portfolio projects will

emerge from this and that practice-based research such as this will motivate others to challenge their own student engagement approaches.

## **Moving Forward**

The yearbook project has now become embedded in the music programme as an annual project for final year students. Next semester will see the third iteration. The intrinsic differences in the culture of the student groups is beginning to emerge in relation to the collaborative approach and content of the shared pages. The second iteration, for instance, contained more collaborative content than the first, with emphasis on the positive group dynamic and shared moments. This group took more ownership of the project with strong internal leadership emerging, in contrast with the first group who relied more heavily on the guidance of the lecturer. This will undoubtedly form the basis for future research.

The use of e-portfolios has now been extended to the Year 1 group of the music programme for reflective practice and assessment of their music research methodologies module. The establishment of good practice in active, student-led learning at an early stage in the undergraduate cycle was the main motivating factor. This was also an attempt to support the learners in the transition from second to third level, where independent learning is frequently a challenge. While a programmatic approach would be ideal, the realities of academia in terms of individual staff priorities, career stage, varying levels of motivation and so on, need to be acknowledged. The current approach involves leading by example and sharing samples of positive student experiences in the hope of stimulating further interest in e-portfolio practice.

The introduction of e-portfolios as an alternative to the current music audition process is also under consideration. In the context of the global pandemic, applicants cannot travel to the campus to complete their performance audition and interview, resulting in an emergency contingency plan being implemented. This took the form of a choice of video submission or Zoom audition however it proved difficult to get a sense of the individual and their suitability to the programme. The implementation of an e-portfolio approach would potentially give applicants a greater opportunity to express themselves and provide faculty with a deeper insight into the individuals and their capabilities.

In the broader context, we are in the early stages of capturing the extent of e-portfolio practice in the institute with particular focus on the diverse applications across many different disciplines. This research is being led by a newly established student engagement group with the first year dedicated to e-portfolio practice. The aim is to consolidate a strong culture of e-portfolio use, through the dissemination of practice-based research in the field, highlighting examples of good practice and identifying further opportunities to employ creative approaches to the discipline.

## **Conclusion**

The affordances of e-portfolio practice to enhance the learning experience are grounded in literature (Tosh, Penny Light, Fleming, & Haywood, 2005; Hubert, Pickavance, & Hyberger, 2015; Watson, Kuh et al., 2016; Thibodeaux, Cummings, & Harapnuik, 2017). Melissa Peet,

founder of The Generative Knowledge Institute, positions e-portfolios as the future of learning (Clarke & Eynon, 2009). The growing body of research is testament to the significance of this flexible pedagogical tool which has the potential to support the transition beyond the classroom and into the professional space. In this case, the value of implementing a collaborative e-portfolio initiative to support student success clearly emerged. It motivated the student group to take ownership of the project and showcase their best work while also encouraging creative and individualised inputs. The high level of engagement in this voluntary project further evidences the significance of group work among the participants, although this may also be attributed to the desire to showcase and document the work that represented the climax of their undergraduate journey. Ultimately, the group created a yearbook that captured some of the proudest and most memorable moments of their college experience, thereby forming a valuable record to reminisce on in years to come and to potentially launch their careers from.

The potential for e-portfolio practice to support multiple functions is very apparent in this case. The exploration of dissemination pathways gave rise to further possibilities that benefitted both the student group and the institute. The presentation of this practice-based research to colleagues led to the motivation of others to embrace the medium and stimulated discussion on strategies to advance e-portfolio use and reinforce the positive learning culture of the institute. In addition to the inherent benefits for the students, the identification of others with a shared interest in the medium and the establishment of a student engagement group dedicating the first year to the research and promotion of e-portfolio practice, are undoubtedly the most encouraging outcomes of this case study.

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