

**NOTE TO READER: This is a draft paper, presented by the author to the JISC Netskills workshop on the Effective Use of ePortfolios on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2010 in London**

## **Introduction**

Technological capability marches on. We are seeing improvements in speed, reliability, the cases that hold it and the refinement of what it can all do. All this backed by the Internet. In the last two years we believe the biggest change has come from the pedagogical consequences of technology for the many to technology for the one. We now have technology to support not only the learning enterprise in social form but technology to support the enterprise of learning in personal space and it is the combination of the two that is so immensely challenging, powerful and opportunistic. We have in effect all been collecting on-line personal space. In the education world it is called personal learning space. Personal in that it is owned by and aimed at the individual. Learning, because it is for the development of self around a purpose of education and space in that it sits in the Internet cloud and brings to the owner of benefits and properties of cloud computing. This paper explains our journey at Thanet College as we have explored personal learning space and how the new 'technologies for the one' has opened opportunities and created fresh challenges for both teachers and students.

Thanet College is situated in east Kent in the United Kingdom. It is a general Further Education college of around 4000 students from the age of 16 through to adult education. The College prepares students for the world of work and higher education. It has a large vocational training expertise in the college began experimenting with personal learning space two years ago using reflective portfolios for each member of staff. These portfolios have been trialled with students. A year ago mapping portfolios for NVQ candidates were introduced and this year a collaborative portfolio and an achievement portfolio are being introduced in pilot for the remainder of our students, meaning that the college will be using four types of personal learning space. Based on our experiences so far, including our mistakes, this Paper aims to inform others wishing to develop learners capable of managing personal learning space in readiness for the world of work and Higher Education.

## **Characteristics of e-portfolios**

E-portfolios have six characteristics or properties that relate to aspects of *ownership* and *content*.

### **Ownership**

1. The subject matter is always the author
2. It is owned by the author
3. Access is controlled to some degree, if not wholly, by the owner

### **Content**

4. They allow the collection of assets, artefacts and incidents of sufficient value to the author to warrant their collection in any electronic form.
5. They allow the sharing of these assets with trusted others in order to improve the richness, depth and accuracy of the asset.
6. They allow the publication of a pitch, application, proposition or report based on the marshalling and attachment of the assets to support the purpose of publication.

## **Part 2 - Conceptual challenge of the portfolios**

Ownership and control by the owner allows for a high level of privacy and the selective publication of content. Notwithstanding the advantages of this approach this means that teachers and others will only see the content of a portfolio that the owner chooses to share. It is also viewed only in a manner in which the owner wishes it to be seen, (although there are degrees of control depending on the type of portfolio used.)

The issue of ownership, control and rights of publication is fundamentally a different behaviour on behalf of students and it challenges the college's culture in the following ways:

The first problem, is that what evidence learners accrue and the quality and quantity added to the portfolio, is only seen by others as a published result. Consequently colleges take it on trust that evidence of sufficient quality and quantity is added in order to support the publication when it is due. Educational orthodoxy states that it is preferable to see and monitor any work produced by students as it happens, rather than relying on students to publish and results, so that progress can be monitored. This can be a big cultural challenge.

Secondly, students cannot be passive in the management of their learning when using any portfolio. Many students resent this, believing that they attend a class in order to learn from a tutor who carries the responsibility for pace, challenge and timely achievement. It is based on the belief that everyone in the class is undertaking an identical journey with the same start and finish points.

Thirdly, this approach asks tutors and their colleges to share with students the responsibility for the management of teaching the student. Asking a student to use a portfolio reduces the degree of supervision the tutor has in how teaching is consumed, leaving it to the student to ultimately turn teaching into learning and then into understanding for themselves.

Fourthly, how can successful course completion be controlled to allow for institutional accountability? Clearly there is still a role of the VLE and PErsonal LEarning Plans to co-exist (see diagram). Any degree of infiltrating or influencing the reflective thinking and writing that lies at the heart of a reflective portfolio at least leads to a loss of honesty and ownership. It may also dilute the ability to capture the rich date of personal development that follows on from learning and understanding.

Finally, teachers must have a very clear idea where the boundaries of the portfolio are set relative to the VLE and PLP so that students involved in the activities of learning are clear where to find their learning plans, activities of classwork, interaction with the teacher, posting of assignments and reflective thinking and writing on progress. It is essential these activities don't overlap and cause confusion for the learner. This will occur when teachers give insufficient thought to this, often and wrongly relying on the technology to make everything right.

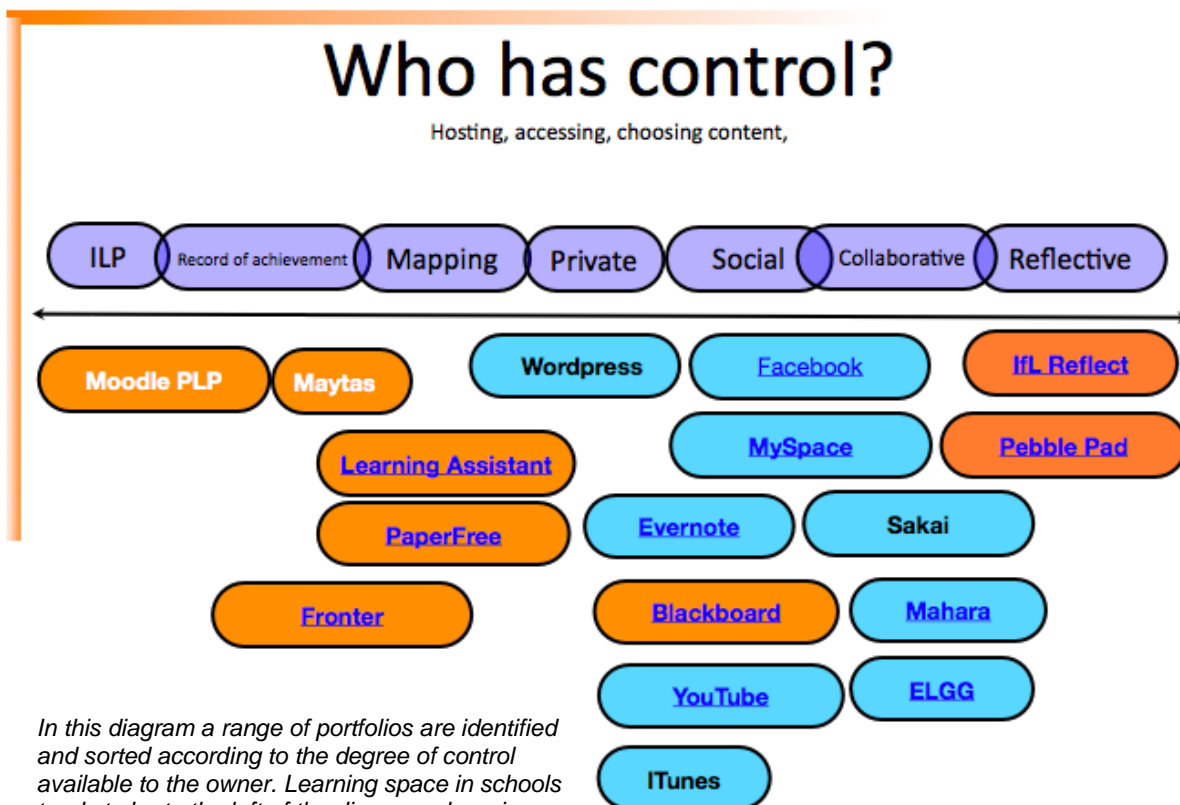
These issues offer the greatest challenges to the successful introduction of the portfolios. Each requires clear thinking and recognition of the need to alter belief sand behaviour in order to get the best from the use of portfolios.

## The rise of personal learning space

The ability of technology to offer more refined and personalised routes and learning is supported by the desire of central government (and to a degree with the support of the teaching profession) for technology to give learners a richer experience of learning based on their own needs and circumstances. Within a few years it is quite likely that every learner will be expected to have personal learning space in which they will chart not only their formal education journey but their journey into employment. With this will come the ability to collect not just incidents of formal training and directed study but the ability to capture the incidental and the accidental incidents of everyday circumstance and life that interrupts our settled view of the world. With portfolios comes the ability to move beyond the collection of knowledge gained in the course of study that to turn this into understanding based on the context and circumstances of each individual learner. This marries together two aspects of learning for which a mechanism for capture has not been so readily available before, the capture of soft skills and the capture of incidents that would previously have been lost in the background noise of the the day. The value of this kind of learning is too great to be overlooked and one reason that college is so keen on staff to use the portfolios themselves is to help them prepare for their use with students.

## Types of the portfolio

In thinking about the portfolios we have identified six types of portfolio: record of achievement, mapping, social, private, reflective and collaborative. Due to the prevalence of Facebook, MySpace, and I-tunes, many students are already familiar with the concept of personal space. In our experience we found that students had little difficulty with the

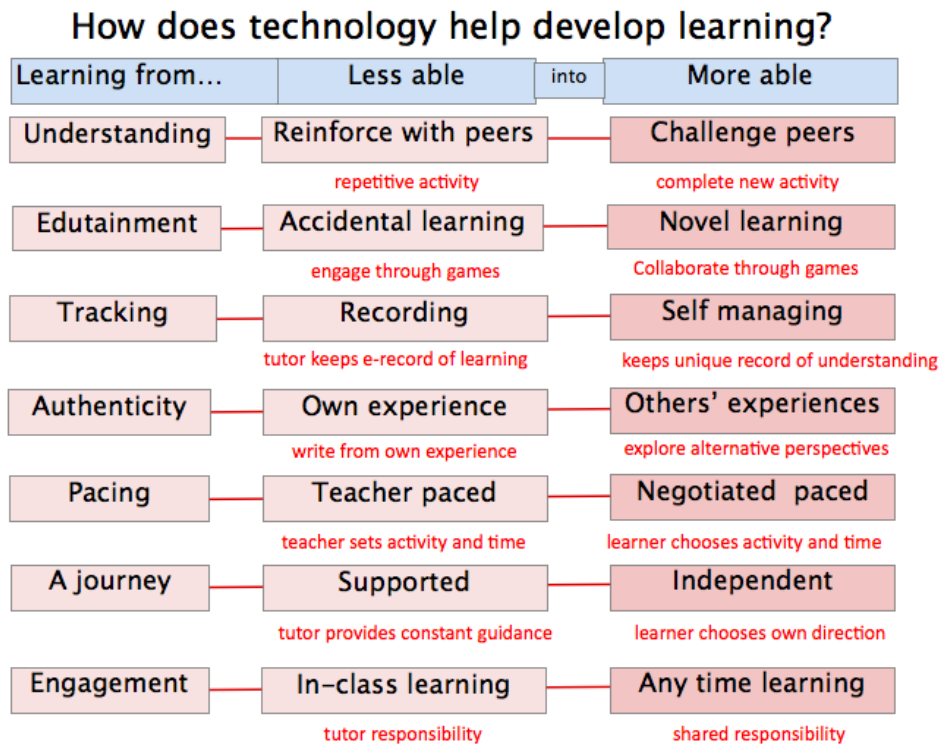


*In this diagram a range of portfolios are identified and sorted according to the degree of control available to the owner. Learning space in schools tends to be to the left of the diagram where is learning space to the right are operated by more intellectually mature learners. Further education colleges span the complete range.*

concept of personal space. However they saw them in terms of gaming or the social interaction or as a private library space. We did have to introduce the idea of personal space to capture and reflect on learning.

### The value of personal Learning Space

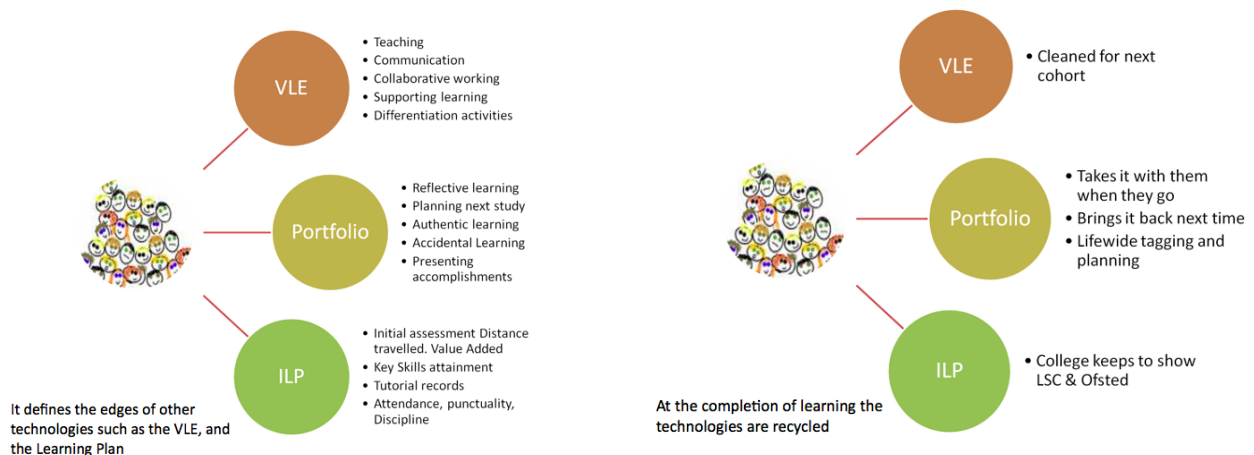
The diagram shows ways in which the properties of technology support aspects of the learning process. Techniques of use help the 'less able' in ways different to 'more able'. It is arguable that technology encourages the transformation of learners from less able techniques to more able and the journey can be categorised as one of developing study skills to managing one's own learning. A personal Learning Space (e-portfolio) is the vehicle for this journey.



Using a portfolio is essentially a personal and private experience. We are building an image of self, based on reflective thinking and writing. There are many types of portfolio and no one type of learning space will be suitable for all student journeys in all circumstances. There is a world of difference between a student of collecting evidence against a list of competencies (NVQ) and a student who wishes to reflect on an incident occurring unexpectedly during a work placement. This is very different from a young student collecting a record of achievement (learning to buy a loaf of bread in a bakers). It is perfectly reasonable therefore to have different types of portfolio within one institution where different types of learning behaviour takes place. As with all technology software is written around the assumptions of behaviour of the owner. This is particularly true of portfolio software and there are simply too many different ways in which learners learn to be accommodated within the confines of one type of portfolio. Sooner or later the software will coerce the learner to work in a particular way or will simply not accommodate the essence of learning the student wishes to capture getting the right portfolio to match the correct student behaviour is critical to successful implementation of any portfolio. The extreme penalty for this mistake is early and terminal disengagement by the students. A further mistake is to confuse the problem as one of too complex software. Simple software is no more a virtue of design either. What is required is software that works *intuitively* for the purpose it was designed. Any good software should feel intuitive when used for the right purpose

It is naive to think in any circumstance that one piece of technology will suit all of the people all of the time in every circumstance. Many national IT projects have learned this lesson the hard way.

Creating software for a reflective portfolio is particularly difficult to write because each portfolio starts with an empty space and is built around the idiosyncrasies of the owner. Software that can make no assumption about the journey it will be asked to support. A Mapping portfolio is so much easier to write because its purpose has an end when the standards entered are met with suitable evidence and the journey has been thousands of times with remarkable similarity.



## What do e-portfolios offer?

Personal learning space captures unique learning journeys. When operated well it is possible to talk about the capture of idiosyncratic learning. Learning that goes beyond the personalisation of approach and style and enters a place where learning can be applied to the unique circumstances of the learner. It allows the capture not only of a formal learning experiences but incidental occurrences, accidental learning, informal learning, authentic learning, situation learning and thereby management of the learning journey. Its strength lies in the ability of asking the learner to think and write reflectively and often some are totally unaware about the value of experiences (including learning) that happened to them until it is undertaken quietly after the event. It is the ability of this software to join these events together that can allow such a unique and rich learning experience for each learner and lead to what we have styled idiosyncratic learning; a form of learning more intimate than personalised learning.

One of the great possibilities that needs further research is the intuitive idea that good reflective narrative demonstrates improvement in the quality of thinking and learning. It may lead to an improvement in the processing of student numbers at the mapping and recording end of the spectrum but still has much to offer in terms of quality of the learning experience. It gives very rich data.

It is worth reflecting on how technology interacts with learning. Teachers use technology to help move the less able learner into more able learners through changing the kind of activity that technology supports the adjacent chart shows the value of moving from a Virtual learning environment to a personal learning space environment that offers more control and management of the reflective consumptive activities that occur when a student at tries to make sense of them understand an episode of learning. Personal learning space technology offers the perfect platform to support this movement. Mapping portfolios

provide mechanical structure required of the NVQ process. Records of achievement provides the right platform for the collation, indexing and presentation of records and certificates of achievement. Reflective portfolios offers the perfect platform to ruthlessly challenge and confront the author with the consequences of their learning. Not only does it help give learning a sense of coherence but then leads on to the management of the next stage.

### **Part 3 - What have we learned?**

**E-portfolios are distinct in purpose and design to VLEs** to the extent (we believe) that it is essential they be kept as separate activities and technologies. Each will be defined to some degree by the other but they should not cross (or worse still overlap) for fear of causing duplication and confusion. A model such as we have proposed has to be the starting point in order to keep clarity of purpose. Our reasons to keep them separated are as follows:

1. One is owned by the college, the content of the other by the student.
2. One is for communication and direct teaching; the other is for wider reflection and development
3. There is an intuitive separation in approach towards two technologies where one is essentially social and the other essentially private
4. One is capable of much greater personalisation than the other (and should be!)
5. One is a more public/social forum than the other (private/directed) and will therefore foster a different approach of interaction from the learner
6. The take-up and usage will be occurring at different speed. Portfolios tend to be more summative and reflective in nature and used 'after the learning event'.
7. There is an undesirable effect that the technology/functionality/software that drives each may be compromised in order to accommodate the other.
8. The College has a much clearer aim of what should end up in the VLE at the end of the course as opposed to what will end up in the e-portfolios that is under control of the learner
9. In one the subject matter is always the author and is introspective, the other has any subject matter and is often written for the benefit of others
10. One is an end in itself; the other is one part of a lifelong journey.
11. One asks others to make judgements on content, whereas the Portfolio seeks self-validation first from the author.

### **How have we used them**

- **Initial assessment** by personal profile
- **Planning**, setting goals, mapping and tracking activity to goals, evaluating training
- **Reviewing** with manager as Appraisal, resetting goals
- **Recording the personal journey**, critical incidents, co-mentoring, critical friendships, Observation and Observation feedback
- **CPD**, recording activity, reflecting, sharing aggregating to a webfolio
- **Publishing good practice**, job applications both internal and external
- **To record study** for Education and training, learning and Skills
- **To make self-assessment** against and provide evidence for Professional standard College requirements
- To gather and present evidence behind narrative for **an ITQ**.

## **Conclusions so far**

There is agreement in College that moving the focus of learning from the group to the individual has value and supports the aim of personalised learning.

There is an urgent need to understand the conceptual properties of e-portfolios including their many facets and purposes.

It is quite possible that learners and tutors may have two or three portfolios in use at any time dependant on purpose and audience with whom they are shared. Most students already use social software such as Facebook or Bebo etc. Whilst they may choose to use these to talk to classmates, it is unlikely they would use them to store College work because each is a presentation of the person and they may wish to have separate identities for different audiences.

We recognise a challenge in teaching many staff how to use a new tool that offers both process and conceptual hurdles to clear. Introducing VLEs was much easier as it was a consolidating technology; bringing known teaching behaviours together in one place. Portfolios give a much greater challenge due to its personal and idiosyncratic nature. There are fresh pedagogical approaches to be worked through. A formal and intensive schedule of training and on-going support will be required, possibly more so than was undertaken with the introduction of the VLE.

It is quite clear that there are a range of portfolios that can be used to reflect the nature of the learning students undertake, given the personal nature of the learning requirement. For professional staff using an e-portfolio should be a place to record experiences in their working day of which formal CPD recording is a part. Many wrongly understand CPD activity to be a record of formal activity only that is to do with staff development rather than using reflection on daily incidents to support professional development.

Personal space through cloud computing is both current and ubiquitous. The widespread use of portfolios by students will be the norm within a few years. Colleges need to take the opportunity to explore portfolios now in readiness for purposeful application with their learners. Portfolios provide the chance to coach and demonstrate personalised learning and to encourage the development of student management of their own learning requirements and management.

An e-portfolio is an excellent tool to capture personal and personalised learning, and perhaps even a new concept of I have called 'idiosyncratic learning', where e-portfolios capture not only the preferred style and processes of learning but the direction and purpose of the learning itself, such is the ability of the technology.

Perhaps the most important outcome is to note that the way e-portfolios are used and the assets added are as unique and peculiar as the author. E-portfolios offer an extremely valuable way of capturing unique learning journeys and processes. Whilst it is possible to provide summaries based on common class questions such as 'what has happened to me professionally this last year'? 'Is there a narrative to my learning journey and what comes next'?

There appears to be great interest in the **potential** of e-portfolios but staff report the need to spend some time exploring . This should be encouraged because successful 'ownership' is not fostered by telling people as they are introduced to an e-portfolio how and by what processes they should use it. This technology is best understood by using it. Sharing is popular and growing in incidence. Once sharing between users occurs, co-critical friendships form and when they continue co-mentoring occurs. Naming this activity and explaining the theoretical construct is worth including in training on using e-portfolios. Time is cited as the main reason for not using e-portfolios. Teaching staff know how to add evidence and create assets quickly should be part of initial training.

We have seen tutors form support groups around previously established groups.

Examples are student teachers, people who share staff rooms, tutors that work on the same courses, learning support practitioners, and specialist groups such as Improvement

Facilitators, Tutorial representatives. In all cases the produce of collaborative working provides a central massive resource against which each individual member can privately (or perhaps publicly?) reflect.

E-portfolios can create communities of teachers or students beyond the college campus. This creates enormous opportunities for working people to support each other to work on activities across colleges and to share thoughts on a given theme. This could be one way of running themed discussions or to provide support for a group of tutors from various colleges who attend events who then choose to follow up the training with on-line discussion.

The number of assets captured is not the issue, but rather the quality of the asset. We have noted a number of tutors tell us they have very few assets but discount the profundity of the reflection. A lesson observation for example may include supporting documents such as lesson plan, scheme of work, observation evaluation and self evaluation and then have further referrals to and from colleagues attached as well. An example would be a tutor who maintains a blog and any asset is added to the blog to tell as story of an incident or time period. There may then be only one asset (the blog) but it could be the source of a great deal of reflection and thinking. Conversely, some tutors have piled assets into their portfolio with little thought as to relevance. They may then choose to sit quietly for an hour or so to review content and see if a journey or theme or other issues identify themselves. Reflection on what emerges and choices of action forms a useful activity. It is similar to '**bone collecting**' in a bag and throwing them down to see if a pattern or message emerges! Both routes to portfolio building have merit.

Such is the importance of the ability to support personalised learning, ('idiosyncratic learning'<sup>1</sup>, lifelong learning, 'Train 2 Gain', employer engagement and federated teaching,) we believe that e-portfolios will be the primary learning repository, taking over from the VLE. The work being done by the IfL amongst others will be seen in time as instrumental in preparing teachers to deal with the challenge of using e-portfolios with pedagogical purpose with learners both in college and in the workplace. This is not yet realised by the wider FE community.

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<sup>1</sup> see [previous explanation](#) of this term