

# ePortfolio Green Paper

*Why does not every have an ePortfolio?*

*Disclaimer: this document does not reflect the views of the Europortfolio partnership, nor those of the European Commission which is co-funding this project.*



Lifelong  
Learning  
Programme



THE EUROPORTFOLIO / EPNET PROJECT IS FUNDED WITH SUPPORT FROM THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION.

# Table of Contents

<b>Foreword.....</b>	<b>3</b>
What is the objective of this Green Paper? .....	3
How is it structured? .....	3
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
Why doesn't everyone have an ePortfolio? .....	4
Challenging Statements.....	4
<b>ePortfolio and stakeholders .....</b>	<b>4</b>
Who really benefits from the introduction of ePortfolios in an organisation? Who has the real ownership? .....	4
Are ePortfolios the authentic voice of the learners? .....	5
Why have we not seen the emergence of community ePortfolios? .....	5
Challenging Statements.....	5
<b>ePortfolio and learning.....</b>	<b>5</b>
Do we need ePortfolios to learn? .....	5
Do we need ePortfolios to reflect?.....	6
Are ePortfolios conducive to better learning? .....	6
Do ePortfolios motivate learners?.....	6
Can ePortfolios be graded? .....	7
Challenging Statements.....	7
<b>ePortfolio and technologies .....</b>	<b>8</b>
Have ePortfolios reduced the asymmetry of the learning environment? .....	8
Are there technologies specific to ePortfolios?.....	9
Who are the main beneficiaries of ePortfolio technologies?.....	9
Could ePortfolio technology be designed and managed with and by the learners?.....	10
What is an Open ePortfolio?.....	10
Challenging Statements .....	11
<b>Learning, ePortfolios and innovation .....</b>	<b>11</b>
What is the actual impact of ePortfolio on learning and teaching practice? .....	11
Are ePortfolios a disruptive innovation? .....	12
What innovations in ePortfolio technologies over the last 10 years? .....	12
Do ePortfolios encourage innovation and creativity? .....	13
Under which conditions could the introduction of ePortfolios lead to learning innovation? .....	13
Challenging Statements .....	13
<b>ePortfolios and Open Badges .....</b>	<b>13</b>
Are Open Badges a nice add-on to ePortfolios or a means to reinvent ePortfolio technology and practice? .....	13
Challenging Statements .....	14



# Foreword

## ***What is the objective of this Green Paper?***

The objective of the *ePortfolio Green Paper* is to:

- Ask challenging questions and debunk ePortfolio myths;
- Revisit the very concept of ePortfolio and those associated with it;
- Invite the community to reflect on those challenging questions and provide informed answers to them; and to
- Write a White Paper to inform learning policy and decision makers.

The content of the Green Paper does not reflect the ideas of the Europortfolio project and/or community. Several statements and questions have been deliberately written to challenge the reader and provoke a debate, which is the main function of a Green Paper.

While the *Green Paper* is structured around *challenging questions*, the *White Paper* will be structured around (likely *challenging*) *recommendations* which should, this time, reflect the actual view of the Europortfolio community.

## ***How is it structured?***

This document is structured around themes grouping challenging questions and elements with which to formulate informed answers. Each question will lead to one or more challenging statements on which contributors are invited to vote and comment.

- **Theme 1**
  - *Challenging question 1.1*
    - Elements to formulate informed answers
  - *Challenging question 1.2*
    - Elements to formulate informed answers
  - ...
  - Challenging Statements
    - Statement 1.1: Fully disagree, ..., Fully agree
    - Statement 1.2: Fully disagree, ..., Fully agree
    - ...
    - General comments on theme 1
- **Theme 2**
  - ...

## Introduction

### ***Why doesn't everyone have an ePortfolio?***

If ePortfolios are such a wonderful thing, we should all have one, shouldn't we? Why isn't this the case? What does it say about the state of the art of learning and technologies? Is it because technology is not mature enough? Is it because the learning environment, especially the formal one, is not conducive to ePortfolio practice?

Put differently, what is the causal relationship? Is the underdevelopment of ePortfolios an indicator of the current underdevelopment of authentic learning and assessment, or do we seriously believe that any valuable ePortfolio practice can take place in an unauthentic, artificial learning environment?

### ***Challenging Statements***

- *The underdevelopment of ePortfolios is an indicator of the current underdevelopment of authentic learning and assessment.*
- *Why bother with ePortfolios if only grades are valued? They are one more constraint on top of all those already existing!*
- *If you really believe in the value of ePortfolio, then start by creating the conditions for authentic learning.*
- *Within a formal educational system lead by a centrally designed curriculum, the most likely outcome is reinforced compliance.*

## ePortfolio and stakeholders

### ***Who really benefits from the introduction of ePortfolios in an organisation? Who has the real ownership?***

Is it the learner, the teacher, the organisation and/or the employer who ultimately benefits from ePortfolios? To respond to that question, one needs to understand:

- Who makes the decisions?
- Who is in charge of the design?
- Who controls its content and exploitation?

Can we pretend that the ownership is with the 'learner' when the learner has no say regarding decisions such as:

- to have or not to have an ePortfolio
- the selection of the tools that should be used

- the format
- the audience

While ePortfolio professionals insist on the need for the ePortfolio author to define the audience, in many cases, the audience is not defined by the learners, but by the teacher (“do an ePortfolio so I can see how you learn”) or the institution (“you need to have an ePortfolio in order to get your grade”).

### ***Are ePortfolios the authentic voice of the learners?***

How could an ePortfolio be the authentic voice of its author if the author has no say in relation to its content, its format and its usage? All things being equal, is the voice of someone tortured, an authentic voice? While the parallel is certainly far fetched, it should invite us to reflect on the conditions for *authenticity*. In short, there is little room for authenticity in an unauthentic learning environment.

### ***Why have we not seen the emergence of community ePortfolios?***

While there are some reports on community ePortfolios (add ref), why are there so few of them? Does it reflect the values of our society? How could collective ePortfolios be possible if what is valued is individual over collective performance, competition over cooperation?

### ***Challenging Statements***

- *The real ownership of many ePortfolios is not the learner, but an external stakeholder*
- *Too many ePortfolios do not convey the authentic voice of the learner; they are more like the ventriloquist’s puppets, an illusion of an independent life.*
- *For an authentic voice to emerge in an unauthentic learning environment, this voice is likely to be that of a reflective rebel.*
- *There is no space for collective ePortfolios in a society where competition and individual performance is more highly valued than cooperation and collective performance.*

## **ePortfolio and learning**

### ***Do we need ePortfolios to learn?***

When asked like that, the answer is quite obvious: *no, we do not need an ePortfolio to learn!* People have learned and will continue to learn without the support of ePortfolios. The counter-question might be more interesting to explore: is authentic learning conducive to the production of ePortfolios? Is authentic learning conducive to the production of evidence worth reflecting on and/or worth sharing with others?

The confusion about the need for an ePortfolio to learn is probably connected to another confusion which is the need of an ePortfolio to reflect, so if we value reflective learning, we

should therefore also value ePortfolios as a means to that end. As we we will see below, we do not need for an ePortfolio to reflect, and in certain circumstances, (poorly designed) ePortfolios can even be obstacles to reflection and learning.

So, if it is clear that there is plenty evidence that we do not need ePortfolios to learn, *why bother?* We might probably bother if we believed that ePortfolios are not *a means to an end*, but the natural artefact generated from an authentic learning environment. From this point of view, the lack of ePortfolios might be considered *as a possible indicator of a poor learning environment*. Should we look at ePortfolios as *evidence* or outcomes of a rich and authentic learning environment or as a *means* to achieving it?

So we can now demote the question *do we need ePortfolios to learn?* as based on ill-structured premises to be replaced with *does authentic learning lead to the production of ePortfolios?* To find the response to this new question, we would need to have access to authentic learning environments, something generally absent from most formal education systems. We can only make the educated guess that authentic learning might be conducive to the production of evidence worth reflecting on and/or worth sharing with others.

### ***Do we need ePortfolios to reflect?***

When asked like that, the answer is quite obvious: *no, we do not need an ePortfolio to reflect!* People have learned and will continue to reflect without the support of ePortfolios. The counter-question might be more interesting to explore: is authentic learning conducive to reflection?

To put it more sharply: does the learning environment really care about the outcomes of the reflective process? Let's say that the outcome of the reflection process of a group of students could be summarised into something like: "a centrally defined curriculum sucks!" or "grades suck!" would the teachers, principals, parents and policy makers do anything about it? Probably not.

The message conveyed about reflection by most institutions is: reflect, but not too much! You are encouraged to reflect, as long as you remain subservient, as long as you do not make any attempt to take over your own learning and your own life, and above all, always show respect to authority.

So, the so-called *reflective ePortfolio* could be just another means to force learners to demonstrate their willingness to conform and be subservient. The alternative would be the *ePortfolio of a reflective rebel*, the one who is not afraid to ask why and to say no.

### ***Are ePortfolios conducive to better learning?***

One problem with this question is the explicit relation between the cause (ePortfolios) and effect (better learning) while *is better learning conducive to the production of ePortfolios?* is probably the more relevant question.

### ***Do ePortfolios motivate learners?***

This question, like many in this document, inverts the causal relationship. As the goal of any educational system is not to produce ePortfolios, but *motivated learners*, the proper question to

ask should be: *do motivated learners create ePortfolios?*

The problem with the original question is the idea that ePortfolios might be used as some kind of extrinsic motivation, while research tells us that the use of extrinsic incentives tends to kill intrinsic motivation, the desire to learn. The use of ePortfolios as extrinsic incentives is very likely to destroy even further the intrinsic motivation which is the desire to learn.

On the other hand, in order to deliver a qualification, it is perfectly legitimate for an organisation to require candidates to produce an ePortfolio based on the specifications of this organisation. In that context, the ePortfolio is not treated as an *incentive* but as a formal document linking performance evidence to professional standards in order to facilitate the review, assessment and accreditation process. As a means to an end (accreditation), it should not affect the intrinsic motivation to learn.

While it might sound paradoxical, it is only when ePortfolios are treated as a means to create *extrinsic motivation* that they can destroy *intrinsic motivation*.

### ***Can ePortfolios be graded?***

One of the most common misconceptions is between:

- Using an ePortfolio for grading; and
- Grading an ePortfolio

While it might sound like a paradox, it is perfectly possible to use an ePortfolio to deliver a grade while not grading the ePortfolio itself.

Assessing is *learning about learning*, it is a kind of *meta-learning*, another level or phase of learning. In that sense, there is no difference between formative and summative assessment. The distinction is only meaningful in an institutional context, where the number crunchers need numbers to feed-into the bureaucracy.

### ***Challenging Statements***

- *The lack of ePortfolios is more likely to be the consequence of an impoverished, unauthentic learning environment, than its cause.*
- *Forcing the use of ePortfolios in an unauthentic learning environment is likely to destroy even further any remaining sense of agency learners still possess.*
- *Adding ePortfolios to a poor and artificial learning environment without a clear intention to transform this environment is more likely to generate frustration and/or encourage compliance.*
- *When facing a poor institutional learning environment, the only worthwhile ePortfolio might be the collective narration of the battle to create an authentic learning environment, the ePortfolio of a reflective rebel.*
- *The impact of ePortfolios on the transformation of learning and teaching has been zero or marginal at best.*
- *It is the transformation of learning and teaching that might lead to the emergence of*

*ePortfolios as a natural expression of deep meaningful learning*

- *Any attempt to use ePortfolios as a means to ‘motivate’ learners is very likely to destroy even further any remaining intrinsic motivation, the desire to learn.*
- *The vast majority of ePortfolios produced today tend to reflect the institutional requirements for compliance.*
- *The introduction of ePortfolios in a learning environment based on compliance is most likely to reinforce compliance even further.*
- *Grades degrade learning; grading ePortfolios degrades learning absolutely!*

## ePortfolio and technologies

### ***Have ePortfolios reduced the asymmetry of the learning environment?***

One criterion to measure the value of technologies used for learning is to assess whether they reduce or increase the asymmetry of the learning environment. Learning management systems, like Moodle, clearly reflect and increase the asymmetry between learners and teachers, learners and institutions. Most of, not to say all of, the functions developed in Moodle are designed for the institution and the teacher, not for the learner. Nolens volens, Moodle is designed to replicate and reify through a piece of software the current asymmetry of institutional learning environments.

Moodle is a tool that empowers teachers, not learners. Moreover, a number of functions are designed to control the behaviour of learners, like blocking the access to a piece of knowledge if the conditions are not met (generally a test or a multiple choice question). So, while one is free to read a book from the end, poorly educated teachers and instructional designers use technology as a means to block the access to information, under the bogus pretense that the learner is not ready to access it —just imagine what would happen in a library if we had to ask the permission to choose a book or move to the next chapter. Yet, this is something “*highly sought after by the Moodle community*” (c.f. box below).

*With Moodle 2 completion dependencies can be defined for a course, whereby course B can only be marked complete if course A is complete. Unfortunately this is not a true pre-requisite as the learner can start course B without completing A. Functionality in Moodle to allow true pre-requisites to be defined by the course creator is highly sought after by the Moodle community. ([source](#))*

This is a typical example of how technology is being “*highly sought after*” to enforce control and increase asymmetry between the stakeholders. The fact that it might be thought of as for the benefit of the learner (“*I know better than her how she should learn*”), does not reduce the damage such thinking and technology does to learning.

This discussion on Moodle, a learning management system, can be easily transferred to the



realm of ePortfolio management systems. This example has been chosen in order to avoid naming and shaming any particular ePortfolio system. We leave it up to the reader to deepen this reflection with the ePortfolio management system(s) they practice or know.

### ***Are there technologies specific to ePortfolios?***

To address this issue, one needs to consider the difference between:

- general purpose technologies used to create ePortfolios, and
- *ePortfolio technologies*, i.e. technologies specific to ePortfolios

The same distinction applies to:

- general purpose technologies that can be used to learn, and
- *learning technologies*, i.e. technologies specifically designed to learn

There are two main types of technologies that can be related to ePortfolios:

- ePortfolio management
- ePortfolio authoring

Until now, only the first technology has received any proper attention. ePortfolio authoring tools are still in limbo or a byproduct of ePortfolio management systems. The most sophisticated functions are related to the control of the environment by teachers. From the authoring point of view, ePortfolio management systems look like impoverished versions of Wordpress where learners have no control over which plug-in they can add. They are first and foremost tools designed to control learners, provide a space where they will be able to do what software designers are able to provide (a tiny community when compared with the Wordpress' one) and what the system administrator and teachers have allowed.

The 'freedom' learners have with many ePortfolio management systems, is not that different from that of prisoners in their cells who are free to add posters on the walls, but not to break down those walls.

One of the main challenges that ePortfolio technologists have not been able to address, or not been interested in, is the combination of ePortfolio authoring technologies that are 100% under the control of their authors and *ePortfolio management systems* under the control of the institution. While it is legitimate for organisations to interact with individual ePortfolios, this should not be detrimental to the freedom of learners to choose their own technologies to author and manage their own ePortfolios.

### ***Who are the main beneficiaries of ePortfolio technologies?***

Another way to ask the question above is: *for (and with) whom have ePortfolio technologies been primarily developed? Who are the sponsors?* While the followers of the ePortfolio Vulgate will claim that ePortfolio technologies are *for* the learners, the reality is quite different...

To inspect even further that question one might ask: ***isn't ePortfolio technology designed to lure learners into a system primarily designed for other stakeholders?*** And if so, who are the stakeholders this technology has been designed for, or even better, *designed with?*

The study of the history of the development of ePortfolio technology shows that the most influential stakeholders are the technologists, the teachers and the administration. Learners are only conveyed to check whether what has been developed is good enough to lure them into an environment designed for the prime benefits of others.

### ***Could ePortfolio technology be designed and managed with and by the learners?***

When learners have the choice between creating an ePortfolio within the straightjacket of ePortfolio management system or a general purpose technology, rare are those who do not go for a general purpose technology like Wordpress. Letting learners choose their own technologies is the very first step towards working *with* the learners.

Using ePortfolios to empower learners calls for creating the conditions for:

- giving learners a real choice
- co-designing technologies used for and by ePortfolios
- manage the ePortfolio environment (have full control over the administration)

Of course, the level of involvement will not be the same with kindergarten children and higher education students, but the community of learners as a whole and the learning communities should take over the design and management of their ePortfolios.

### ***What is an Open ePortfolio?***

The word *open* is now used as a mantra: educational resources have to be *open* (OER), software has to be *open source*, knowledge has to be *open*, data *open*, etc. How can we be sure that everything *open* is valuable? There are even plenty of *open things* that would gain from being thrown into an *open sewer*! Open resources are just as open to mediocrity as they are to talent and innovation — the problem is that both share the same umbrella... 'Open' can be a very misleading adjective.

From the point of view of ePortfolios, there is a fundamental difference between:

- Open Source ePortfolios and
- Open (Data) ePortfolios

The first type of ePortfolio, the Open Source ePortfolio simply states that the source code is available under an open licence. The second type of ePortfolio simply states that the data ePortfolio contains are open to other services and applications that can make sense of it.

The problem is that we have two very different kinds of *openness*: the first one, open source, is fully compatible with *closed technologies*. In fact, most, if not all, ePortfolio systems behave like data silos. There is the occasional option to export data from one system in order to be re-imported into another ePortfolio platform. But it is a kind of *closed openness* (another great oxymoron!), not an openness to the unknown, but only to the members of the same secret society: the password to join this secret society is either LEAP2A or IMS-ePortfolio, two technical standards that are totally unknown outside of the ePortfolio world. In terms of interoperability it is as if we had created a special mobile phone *just for learning*. You would be

able to call other 'learning telephones', but you would have to use a normal phone if you needed to communicate outside of the education silo.

So the current reality of the ePortfolio world is that the only interoperability, when it exists at all, is within a silo that does not communicate with the rest of the world.

To have any actual value in the real world, we need to move beyond the *closed openness* of the ePortfolio silos designed by ePortfolio technologists.

## **Challenging Statements**

- *ePortfolio management systems are to ePortfolios what learning management systems are to learning: they are more about controlling learners than empowering them.*
- *Until now, ePortfolio technology has been primarily developed to lure learners into systems designed for the benefits of others.*
- *Authoring ePortfolio is better performed with general purpose technologies than so-called ePortfolio management systems.*
- *To recreate an existing ePortfolio management system, take a regular content management system, remove 99% of its functionalities and lock it so that learners will not be able to add any of their own.*
- *The use of ePortfolio management systems is generally a sign of the low level of technology literacy of the teaching staff.*
- *The main outcome of the most visible ePortfolio technology development has been to increase the asymmetry of the learning environment in favour of the institutions and people in power within those institutions.*
- *10 years of technical development have not contributed to empowering learners, but to extending the power of institutions.*
- *Open source is not a sufficient, nor necessary condition to creating truly open ePortfolios*
- *Current ePortfolio platforms tend to encourage the creation of ePortfolio silos*
- *There is not yet a single ePortfolio platform that supports open ePortfolios*

## **Learning, ePortfolios and innovation**

### ***What is the actual impact of ePortfolio on learning and teaching practice?***

One of the key questions one should ask regarding any innovation is whether this innovation has been assimilated into the old system (reducing the innovation to some minor improvements) or whether the system has been transformed under its influence, introducing major changes, like a paradigm shift. It is the issue of *assimilation* vs. *accommodation*.

Do we have sufficient evidence to support a case that ePortfolios have introduced some major

shifts in learning and teaching? Or do we have more evidence that when ePortfolios have been introduced into an organisation, ePortfolios were mainly used to revamp institutional constraints? *We know that the kind of learning experience we offer is boring and that you have no say in it, but you will see, with ePortfolios [you can replace ePortfolios by any other gimmick, like Open Badges or 'serious games'] it's much more interesting!*

In many institutions of higher education, ePortfolios have been confined to a very limited part of the studies, like a capstone project or sometimes a special module called *integrative learning*. So, instead of using ePortfolios as a catalyst to re-engineer learning, ePortfolios have been segregated out of the 'serious stuff,' out of the bulk of the curriculum. Worse, some institutes of higher education have chosen to grade ePortfolios contributing therefore to destroy even further innovation and creativity.

We have very little evidence that ePortfolios have had any significant influence on the use of grades and examinations, the organisation of teaching through disciplines, etc. Learning in the formal learning environment has remained essentially unauthentic, and ePortfolio impact has remained essentially marginal.

ePortfolios are more a consequence than a cause, so it is very unlikely that adding an ePortfolio layer will create a more authentic learning environment. It is the transformation of learning and teaching that might have an impact on ePortfolio development, not the other way around.

There are of course exceptions, but there are very few of them. Here is a list of inspiring ePortfolio initiatives:

Country	Institution	Description	Link

### ***Are ePortfolios a disruptive innovation?***

To be considered as a disruptive innovation, ePortfolios must demonstrate that they allow us to perform things that were not possible before their invention, that they have transformed the environment into which they were born.

### ***What innovations in ePortfolio technologies over the last 10 years?***

What is striking, when looking at how ePortfolio technologies have evolved over the last 10 years, is the total lack of innovation. Of course, the platforms have seen different releases, but the differences between the initial and latest versions are only marginal. Of course, the designers and vendors might be appalled by such a statement but let's face it, most of the changes in the releases have brought nothing really new. Let's take reflection which is the big thing with ePortfolios: which ePortfolio platform has brought any innovative (or not so innovative) technologies to support reflection.

One technology, which is currently available, but continues to be neglected by ePortfolio

technologists is a semantic editor. The use of a semantic editor would contribute towards scaffolding the reflection process, connecting the different components supporting this process in a meaningful way. Semantic editing is a means to give text a meaning which can then be made available for further analysis.

When reading the changes across various Mahara releases (and we can make the educated guess that it is probably not dissimilar with other platforms), what is striking is the very small number of improvements that really matter to the learners, and certainly not a single one regarding the improvement of the reflection process (for a complete view of Mahara release changes go to [link](#)). Almost all the changes are related to the user interface, layouts, administration and the correction of an ever increasing list of bugs...

### ***Do ePortfolios encourage innovation and creativity?***

The casual reading of ePortfolios produced by a cohort of students rarely triggers the words innovative or creative. Compliance is more often the word that comes to mind.

### ***Under which conditions could the introduction of ePortfolios lead to learning innovation?***

#### ***Challenging Statements***

- *The introduction of ePortfolios will only have a chance to foster creativity and innovation if ePortfolios are simultaneously the place where the narratives of learners' empowerment and the battles against compliance are captured.*
- *Not a single technical innovation over the past 10 years in ePortfolio technology has contributed to any improvement, even marginal, in the reflection process.*

## **ePortfolios and Open Badges**

### ***Are Open Badges a nice add-on to ePortfolios or a means to reinvent ePortfolio technology and practice?***

There are two possible approaches to connecting Open Badges with ePortfolios: assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation looks at Open Badges as a nice add-on to ePortfolios. This can be done by adding a plug-in to an existing piece of software. It is what "Moodle as issuer, Mahara as displayer" does ([link](#)).

Accommodation requires much more than adding a simple plug-in, it should be about rethinking ePortfolios in light of what we have learned from Open Badges. We should start by asking questions such as: what can we do with Open Badges that was not possible with current ePortfolios? How should ePortfolios change in order to use the full power of Open Badges.

If ePortfolio platforms want to keep up with innovation they will have to do much better than adding a layer of Open Badges; they might want to reinvent themselves through Open Badges.



One possible way to describe the difference between Open Badges and ePortfolios is the difference between identity as self-narrative (ePortfolios) and identity through others (Open Badges). As self-narratives, ePortfolios is primarily the outcome of an individual effort: if you do not build your ePortfolio, nobody will build it for you. On the other hand, an ePortfolio built from a collection of Open Badges (and xAPI statements) issued by others is the result of a collective effort. One can imagine a technology that would automatically generate narratives out of the of metadata contained in the collections of Open Badges. Moreover, Open Badge-based ePortfolios would be distributed and shared, unlike the current ePortfolio silos...

### ***Challenging Statements***

- *Open Badges are an opportunity to reinvent ePortfolio technology and practice*
- *Open Badges create the conditions for open, distributed and shared ePortfolios*