

**Wills, Katherine and Rich Rice, eds. *ePortfolio Performance Support Systems: Constructing, Presenting, and Assessing Portfolios. Perspectives on Writing.* Anderson: Parlor Press, 2013. 248 pages. \$29.95. 978-1602354418. Print.**

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Composition instructors and writing program administrators have the benefit of more than three decades of a continuing conversation on the praxis of the portfolio, so choices to adopt the practice in its myriad forms are easily grounded in enduring, robust scholarship. This act of taking a portfolio requirement into modern, computer-mediated composition pedagogy may at first seem simple, but as Kathleen Blake Yancey tells us in the opening chapter *ePortfolio Performance Support Systems: Constructing, Presenting, and Assessing Portfolios*, ePortfolios “are different in kind rather than degree” (“Postmodernism” 23). Readers should look to *ePortfolio Performance* for a compilation of experienced voices of practice that explore this ecosystem, and an expansion of the ePortfolio conversation that has developed rapidly in recent years.

Editors Katherine Wills and Rich Rice have assembled twelve chapters of scholarship, divided into four sections that articulate the qualities of the ePortfolio in practice, encompassing the support for its adoption, inventive iterations of its deployment, assessment of its value in student learning and reflection, and impacts of its use beyond the classroom. The collection starts from the assumption that readers will be familiar with, or practitioners of, portfolio-based composition. This assumption of familiarity is reasonable, considering the decades-long conversation on portfolios in practice, but it helps to look again to Yancey for a foundational understanding of what portfolios *are*. To further condense Yancey’s already thrifty encapsulation in her 1996 introduction as guest editor of *Computers and Composition*: a portfolio is a collection of work, culled, edited, and reflected upon by its creator with the purpose of showcasing presumed

growth in the creator's abilities, as well as what that creator holds in esteem about that work; portfolios are versatile evaluative devices that are contextually sensitive to diversity, among both creators and their content (130). Portfolios, when used effectively, represent an instructor's best hope of focusing writers on growth before grades, and for keeping that same instructor focused on growth when grading.

It is no coincidence, then, that *ePortfolio Performance* opens with a chapter of Yancey's attention to the potential of ePortfolios, benefiting immediately from the years of expertise as one of the most notable voices on portfolios in practice. Because the strengths of a traditional portfolio system are now well known, Yancey's "Postmodernism, Palimpsest, and Portfolios: Theoretical Issues in the Representation of Student Work" sets the inquisitive, enthusiastic tone for ePortfolios that the rest of *ePortfolio Performance* will fit neatly within. Yancey's contribution is well suited to take point on ePortfolios, offering a broad view of the topic. Her inquiry here is focused on contextual understanding of a portfolio through its *palimpsest* – how edited work still bears traces of its previous incarnations. Yancey contends that until relatively recently, written argument has been the dominant communicative mode, having pushed aside oratory in prominence. In a written, static portfolio, palimpsest was accessible chronologically, depending on the amount of pre-existing work to compare with submitted versions, but the rhetorical flexibility afforded to creators was meager (20). The format of the truly creator-guided ePortfolio allows for unique contextualization experience if the creator takes advantage of the inventive potential of web-based ePortfolios. Navigation within the ePortfolio content is recursive in "Web sensible" formats, and allows the creator complete control over contextualization; content can either be rigidly structured to guide a user on a predetermined path of inquiry, or it can also be recursively navigable, allowing the user to form his or her own conclusions depending on the path individually chosen (22).

But Yancey astutely zeros in on the greatest potential of ePortfolios: non-permanence. When a portfolio is printed and handed in, it is frozen in time and quickly loses relevance to its creator, who continues to develop demonstrable skill and expand relevant literacies that are not suitably represented in this single snapshot. An ePortfolio is a dynamic document that is as current and representative of the creator as he or she chooses to make it, and this inherent potential excites Yancey:

Identity is itself a composition. The relationship between identity and the digital portfolio is reciprocal, hence the importance of both print and digital. Enabling different arrangements, they permit different inventions, invite different representations. We understand fairly well the value of the one, print, but we are only beginning to chart the potential of the digital. (31)

Thus, Yancey leaves the reader primed for the rest of *ePortfolio Performance*, having clearly marked the trailheads where the authors yet to come will cut wider paths.

This connection between the broader context of ePortfolios in theory and narrower target of ePortfolios in practice stands as the key strength of *ePortfolio Performance*. A reader coming to this text—not as a novice to portfolios in general, but perhaps unclear on the distinct differences of ePortfolios—will benefit from the articulation the text offers. Yancey’s “Postmodernism” is the jab in a 1-2 combo, with the follow-up connecting in the form of highly developed examinations of what ePortfolios look like in practice. This examination offers generous lessons in the benefits of ePortfolios, and as such, will be an intriguing read for instructors and administrators alike.

The second section of the collection, “Constructing the Bridge,” is especially relevant to programs sending forth graduates into the hypercompetitive employment market. The scholarship in these three chapters details the benefits of requiring externally accessible ePortfolios for students who will soon be graduating.

These students can provide links to the finished portfolios to potential employers during interviews and on application materials and are quick to embrace this potential. For example, long time advocates of electronic portfolios Karen Ramsay Johnson and Susan Kahn use a capstone portfolio for Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis' students, who

are easily able to envision a potential employer visiting their webfolios; many students say that they expect to maintain and update their webfolios regularly...and [the portfolio] provides students, professors, and other site visitors with a highly individualized, immediately engaging, and visually exciting representation of student work and reflection. (98)

In addition to the display of work produced during a student's college career, these ePortfolios provide employers a considered, contextualized reflection of students' creations and revision processes far better than résumés can, giving students a chance to stand ahead of their peers in the candidate pool. Two more chapters join Johnson and Kahn to promote the workplace "bridging" benefits of ePortfolios: Barbara D'Angelo and Barry Maid's "ePorts: Making the Passage from Academics to Workplace," and Karen Bonsignore's "Career ePortfolios: Recognizing and Promoting Employable Skills." This trio of articles articulates the value of ePortfolios as displaying students' mastery of employer-desired skillsets and contextualizes these benefits with students' own reflections on their ePortfolios' utility.

In an excellent balance to theoretical *whys* of ePortfolio adoption, *ePortfolio Performance* also presents valuable answers to *how*; readers looking for current and engaging ways to introduce an ePortfolio requirement will find an appealing suggestion from Lauren Klein, director of the portfolio program at City University of New York Macaulay Honors College. Klein proposes adding a social component by situating portfolios on student blogs, encouraging better engagement with communities of discourse

relevant to their chosen fields and more performance-minded content choices. Klein notes that by making portfolios publically accessible, students may be presented with the invigorating challenge of having an unexpected visit from an outsider, which will inspire them to see their work as it is viewed by ever-broader audiences. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Klein also falls into step with the “Bridge” section authors, invoking these public conversations on student compositions as appealing to prospective employers: “This content in turn may provide potential employers with evidence of students’ analytical ability, intellectual leadership, and capacity for creativity, productivity, and growth” (67). As with the highly-developed topic of workplace readiness above, Klein’s contribution expands in the form of Geoffrey Middlebrook and Jerry Chih-Yuan Sun’s “Showcase Hybridity: A Role for Blogfolios,” albeit four chapters apart.

That gap between “blogfolio” chapters, when taken with the “Constructing the Bridge” section of the collection, represents one of the few weaknesses of *ePortfolio Performance*: an inconsistently unified narrative. The strength of constructing an entire section of the book—three chapters in a row—around so similar an application of ePortfolios is that readers enjoy a sustained, multi-faceted examination of a single, narrow subtopic. After learning so much about one application, readers are invested in the perceived value of fewer topics explored in depth. The blogs-as-ePortfolio application gets similar development, although its two constituent chapters do not appear contiguously. The result of these developed themes is that the first half of *ePortfolio Performance* seems more interconnected and congruous than the second. While all chapters offer insight on ePortfolios in practice that are equally substantive and valuable, the lapse of topic continuity may be tangible and distracting to the reader.

Yet the final chapters of *ePortfolio Performance* do add a different asset to the collection by showcasing the breadth of topical reach into which the ePortfolio conversation extends. These chapters include diverse offerings: accessibility design of ePortfolios for disabled users (Oswal); perceptions of value regarding community

literacy programs that utilize interactive ePortfolios (Cambridge); tracking the success of undergraduate knowledge accumulation and transfer (Whithaus); and effective assessment practices to document the outcomes of ePortfolio use (Zaldivar, Summers, and Watson). *ePortfolio Performance*, within the microcosm of its 12 chapters, effectively represents the gamut of considerations for the diverse parties who make use of ePortfolios. Little is left behind, and the reader is left equally primed both to benefit from the experience of the ePortfolio adopters within these pages, but also to forge new prospects for ePortfolio application.

Overall, readers can be confident that each chapter of *ePortfolio Performance Support Systems: Constructing, Presenting, and Assessing Portfolios* will provide invaluable insight on the potential for ePortfolios within their classrooms and programs. Newcomers to ePortfolios will appreciate its comprehensiveness, instructors will appreciate its robust praxis, and administrators will appreciate its sustained attention to outcomes.

#### Works Cited

- Yancey, Kathleen Blake. "Portfolio, Electronic, and the Link Between." *Computers and Composition* 13.2 (1996): 129-133. Print.