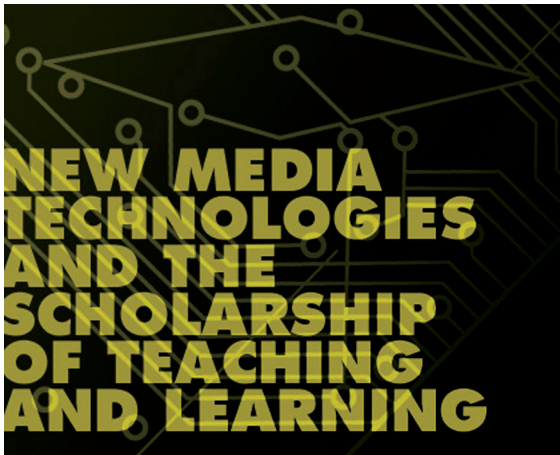


*“New Media Technologies and the
Scholarship of Teaching and Learning”*

January 2009 issue of *Filtered: The Academic Commons Magazine*

*Edited by Randy Bass with Bret Eynon and an editorial group from
Georgetown University’s Center for New Designs in Learning & Scholarship
(Eddie Maloney, Susannah McGowan, John Rakestraw and Theresa Schlafly)*



Reprinted from the January 2009 issue of *Academic Commons* on "New Media Technologies and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," edited by Randy Bass with Bret Eynon and an editorial group from the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship (CNDLS) at Georgetown University— Eddie Maloney, Susannah McGowan, John Rakestraw and Theresa Schlafly
<http://www.academiccommons.org/issue/january-2009>

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Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship (CNDLS)

3520 Prospect St. NW, # 314
Washington, DC 20057
<http://cndls.georgetown.edu>

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Participants:

Dr. Helen Barrett, Center for Advanced Technology in Education, University of Oregon
Dr. Trent Batson, Communications Architect, Educational Innovation and Technology, MIT
Dr. Darren Cambridge, Internet Studies, George Mason University
Dr. J. Elizabeth Clark, English, LaGuardia Community College, CUNY
Dr. Melissa Peet, Generative Knowledge and ePortfolio Program, University of Michigan
Mr. James Richardson, New Media Technology, LaGuardia Community College, CUNY

Moderator:

Dr. Bret Eynon, Center for Teaching & Learning, LaGuardia Community College, CUNY

On April 10-12, 2008, LaGuardia Community College held an international conference entitled “Making Connections: ePortfolios, Integrative Learning and Assessment.” The conference was keynoted by Kathleen B. Yancey and offered fifty-five different sessions by faculty and students, half from LaGuardia and half from other institutions using ePortfolio. More than six hundred people attended, coming from seventy different colleges in thirty states and five different countries. This is the transcript of a well-attended roundtable session that joined LaGuardia faculty with internationally recognized ePortfolio leaders to discuss the issues facing the ePortfolio movement.

Setting An Agenda

Bret: I want to start out by asking, what are the key questions facing ePortfolio? What issues do you think we’re wrestling with?

Trent: Well, I’m focusing on Web 2.0. Open source is a construct—unbundling the code from the services. That seems to be working. The code is free, and the services we pay for. Now I’m thinking, what if we apply that to ePortfolio learning or to learning in general? Unbundle the code and the services, the code in this case being the content. So that teachers no longer own the content—the content is open and free, and what we provide are the services around that content. My question is: Can education itself open up? I’ve got an essay in a book coming out with MIT Press called *Opening Up Education*. How do we open up education in a way similar to the ways the open source movement opened up the creation of software?

Elizabeth: For me, one of the major challenges is what Trent and Darren mentioned earlier today: an intellectual/philosophical tension around how we open the door for creativity by students, and get students fully invested, but also answer to our institutions. How can we use ePortfolio for assessment without losing the flavor and the creativity that brought many of us into the movement?

Helen: That's a major tension right now—between student-centered and institution-centered portfolios. Between what I would call the Assessment OF Learning on one hand, and on the other: assessment FOR learning, assessment AS learning. Those issues emerge because we're in an age of accountability.

Darren: We need to reframe the role of portfolios in assessment as assessment FOR institutional learning. Currently, I don't think accountability-oriented assessment actually does much good for institutions, because it's not in service of organizational learning. Reframed, it might be. How do we build on our successes with portfolio authors? How do we cultivate new portfolio audiences, particularly institutional organizational audiences—audiences that really understand how to learn, as organizations, from these new, richer, student-created representations of learning?

James: I don't see institutional assessment as separate from student self-assessment. This is something I've seen in my own courses. When students are able to self-assess, they see how they've grown over time. And that helps them to reflect and make better choices in terms of career, in terms of transfer schools. On an institutional side, it helps us look at how well we instruct the students. If a student's portfolio hasn't strengthened from the time they've entered to the time they're ready to graduate, there's a disconnect there. We can look at how well we're doing, and then hopefully redirect our curriculum to address any gaps.

Darren: That's exactly the right direction. LaGuardia is exceptional—nationally, perhaps internationally—in its commitment to link student self-assessment with institutional improvement, from senior leadership all the way down to grass-roots enthusiasm from students. There's a lot we all can learn from what's happening at LaGuardia, and what made that possible. But that's very different from the situation at many other educational institutions.

Melissa: Here's a questions that comes to me in conversations like this: ePortfolios to what end? For whom? For what purpose? I think that oftentimes so much meaning and possibility is compacted onto ePortfolios. And we need to unpack that.

What's powerful about LaGuardia's ePortfolio is that the fact that the ePortfolio is an outcome, generated by an institution-wide commitment to fostering students' identities as learners and professionals, with a group of students who are often forgotten in higher education. And I want to know: how can ePortfolios enable a conversation about the purpose of higher education in the twenty-first century? It should enable but not compact that conversation. How do we become learning communities? I think that's what LaGuardia is showing us. But I think that hasn't even begun to be unpacked. I consider LaGuardia a leader, embodying a learning community—and a powerful part of that is ePortfolio and integrative pedagogy. So that helps to switch the conversation. People go around saying "ePortfolio, ePortfolio," like it's a magic wand thing, but it really is about organizational change.

Trent: I agree with you, Melissa. I was in a session where Julie Hughes from the University of Wolverhampton, in the UK, said something really interesting. She said they try not to start with student deficiencies but with student competencies. That's a key ePortfolio idea. As educators, we've so often focused on deficiencies. But we can start with competencies: what students already know.

Building Sustained Institutional Commitment

Bret: Excellent. We've just identified an interesting and overlapping set of challenges about audience, creativity, assessment, institutional purpose, this whole question of Web 2.0 erupting underneath us. Now, I'm curious about what you've heard at the conference that could help us think about some of these challenges. Trent just surfaced something he heard from Wolverhampton. What have others seen or heard that can help us think about the challenges and the possible solutions?

Helen: I would say LaGuardia's institutional commitment to ePortfolio, from the top down to the students. And the focus on learning and integrative learning, rather than on what I'd call bean counting. Too many ePortfolio implementations have been funded out of institutional accountability rather than out of the focus on student learning. I see both here, but I see more of an emphasis on learning. You know, "It's the learning, stupid." That's the focus.

James: We did a lot of planning before we started talking about systems. So the systems supported the process, as opposed to buying a system and then tweaking the process to fit. And we were lucky. We had so much support from the administration. And faculty development was key. We got buy-in from all the stakeholders, from the administration to the faculty to the students. Each had its own level of challenge, of course. But without all of this falling into place, I don't think it would have blossomed the way it has.

Trent: What's so surprising about LaGuardia is the institutional commitment that wasn't about accreditation. Or was it that, too?

Bret: We have to do assessment, too. That's our challenge: how do we combine it? What we've done is start with an emphasis on ePortfolio for learning and transformation. And that makes it more likely that the assessment process stays focused on learning.

Melissa: I'd like to go back to what James just said about LaGuardia; it wasn't like you had a master plan, but here you are. You said things that are very key. You said "technology," you said "institutional commitment." You said "a strategy, a plan." You said "faculty development." Implied is also "pedagogy" and "organizational learning" and "time" and "commitment" and "transformation." Those are big.

My big moment of great inspiration was hearing about LaGuardia's plan for a National Resource Center. Because, from what I heard, this is going to be about all the things that are essential for something like ePortfolios to succeed. Actually it's not even about ePortfolios; it's about *your students* becoming successful. That's what I keyed in to.

ePortfolio Beyond Technology

Darren: I would even say that ePortfolio is *not* a technology. It is manifestly *not* a technology. There are a range of technologies that can support the key processes associated with ePortfolios, such as collecting evidence of learning, organizing it, reflecting on it, receiving feedback, and planning for future learning and personal development. The ePortfolio is one *genre* that fits well with those processes. As a genre, an ePortfolio is not just any reflection supported by technology or any digital evidence of learning, but reflection on evidence of learning that is also part of the portfolio. Making

the link between reflection and evidence is what distinguishes an ePortfolio. There are a range of tools that can help with the processes of documentation, reflection, and planning, a range of tools that can create ePortfolios that link reflection and evidence in powerful ways—things called ePortfolio systems, general purpose Web design tools, and also the whole range of social software technologies that we've talked about at this conference.

Elizabeth: I'd actually take that one step further. I'd say that the key to ePortfolio is not technology at all. It goes back to what Trent said this morning. ePortfolio is all sorts of things coming together in this contemporary moment—it's ephemeral, right? Trent talked this morning about the ephemeral moment, the ephemeral technology. Five years from now, if we are doing our jobs well, it's not going to be ePortfolio, or it's not going to be ePortfolio as we know it. It's going to be something totally new.

To me, the key thing about this is the evolution of this educational technology *with the students*. At LaGuardia, our students created those gorgeous templates. We didn't create them. The students created them. The students said, "This is how we think that we should organize our knowledge, and now we're going to give this to other students." The students say, "Dr. Clark, you're not doing that right. That's wrong." Then they show us how to do it. It's about that co-learning moment.

That's exactly what Kathleen Yancey said this morning, right? She had that amazing transformational moment when, as an educator, she realized she's co-learning with her students. She's taking notes with them, she's typing them up, and that's becoming the learning process. To me, that's what ePortfolio is about: learning with and from our students.

James: It took me a while to get to that point because I was by nature a technologist. For me technology was key. So when I initially came on to the project, I'm thinking, Web pages. Why is everybody so excited about student Web pages? But as I started to look at it, I started to see that it's not the Web pages, it's the content. And really, it's the way the content is developed. It's what the students gather from content, what they learn about themselves, and how they use that information to make themselves better.

And then I also started to see, from the way that they were designing and developing the pieces, what I was doing right and what I was doing wrong as an instructor. In the long run, I think I'm a much better instructor now than I was when I first started. I know what works. I think I know how to approach it better. I think I know how to steer students towards moving toward self-discovery. But it took a while. Now, when people talk about how do we extend this to faculty, many of whom are tenured, it raises a question: how do we get them to buy into this and really have it be meaningful?

Elizabeth: This approach changes the educational paradigm. To be involved with students in this way means that you don't get to pull out your lecture notes you've been teaching from for the last twenty-five years on the history of military strategy. Right? You don't get to do that. You have to change what you're doing. Every time you go to back to the classroom it's new. It's different. It's evolving.

Trent: That's a key issue, one of the biggest questions: Can we trust the students? Can we trust that they learn, if we're not watching their every move? Or we're not controlling the parameters? Trust.

Melissa: A related question: how can we become institutions that build students' capacities as life-long learners? How do we, as institutions, build collaborative and deep learning capacities in our faculty? So to me, asking questions about ePortfolios is synonymous with asking questions about the future of learning. And the future is here now.

Trent: There's another side to the trust issue. It's so easy to produce content, now. There are so many ways to do it. But what we know about this new age, what Kathleen Yancey was talking about, is that we don't want to do prior censorship. That doesn't fit. Prior censorship is when we say: this is the syllabus, these are the four walls, and you follow my path. No. We have to trust the students. We're not really able to do prior censorship anymore. But we can do post-production editing with the students. That is Web 2.0. That's our age.

Life-Long and Life-Wide Learning

Helen: It's very important, as we implement ePortfolios, that we look at this in the context of a life-long process, a lifelong process of self-directed learning. That's one of the challenges I would pose to all of you, as you start implementing ePortfolio: is this something students can continue after they graduate? Not only, what types of skills and competencies are they bringing in? But also, how is this going to fit in the rest of their lives? I'm also anxious to see some more examples of the ways you've brought in the community and people's backgrounds and their lives and their families. It's so important to educate the whole person, not just someone who meets our graduation requirements.

James: For us it was reflection. It took me awhile to get that point, too. It was like, "Reflection, what does that really mean? Thinking about myself?" It boils down to thinking about choices. What brought you to this point? And what choices can you make that will take you—hopefully—where you want to go? I don't know about all of you, but the choices that got me here were pretty hit or miss. For students—particularly students at LaGuardia, many of whom are underprivileged, who have a lot of things stacked against them—it's even more critical to think about the choices they make. Because they have less leeway for mistakes. So, reflection becomes an issue of thinking: what's the right choice? If that's one thing they can take away from ePortfolios, then I think it's a miracle.

Melissa: Another way to think about reflection is that they're learning to find a projected self. I can project myself into the future as—I saw an example earlier—a graphic designer, as an artist/dancer/writer, all in the same person. Developing a projective capacity is a part of empowerment, or agency.

Stories and Numbers: Dealing with Accountability

Darren: But again, it's a wider version of projective capacity than a lot of other contexts invite. It's not saying "Project yourself as a teacher by checking off standards 1 through 8." It's saying "Envision what it means to be a teacher and how it connects to being someone who grew up in Nepal and someone who lives now in Queens and someone who is a mother, and how do I connect those things into a version of myself that connects with that larger profession."

Trent: That's in strong tension with what Helen brought up before, the whole accountability push. This group seems to be positioned very much toward the end of spectrum of ePortfolio as story, ePortfolio as narrative, personal narrative. So then, the question becomes what metrics do you use from a story to quantify results, to meet the accountability requirements?

Helen: That's the major dilemma right now. How do we take this very rich story and assign numbers to it?

Melissa: The way we address that dilemma at Michigan, in our ePortfolio integrative learning environment, is having students self-assess around those outcomes, both quantitatively and qualitatively, at

the beginning. Then they create their knowledge artifacts, they create their philosophy. They create a narrative of coherence. And while they're doing that they're also mapping those knowledge artifacts to outcomes. At the end they also assess again. We can take that data to accreditors—that's what we're doing. So I don't experience that level of disconnect.

Elizabeth: I think the story is the road map to what's actually in the portfolio. It's the narration of the journey that the student has taken and the way the student understands the pieces. If you need to pull out the pieces—*the* research paper, for example—to demonstrate that your students have intellectual literacy or technological literacy, that's not a problem: here it is. But the meaning is in the story. The assessors don't necessarily care about that, but the students care about that and we care about that.

Darren: But they *should*! They should care about that! And we're not taking up the real challenge if we don't try to transform what assessors want, if we just give them numbers that have no impact on actually improving the educational enterprise. That's hard as hell. It really is. I don't have the perfect solution—but I don't think we can give up on that challenge. I think that accountability can be a really good thing. I think it is important. We have got to continue to do better, and we ought to do it in a systematic way. But we ought to do it in a way that takes advantage of the really rich representations of learning we can get through the processes, the genre, and the technology related to portfolios.

Bret: I've served on an awards committee for the national Council for Higher Education Accreditation, giving awards for innovations in assessment of student learning.¹ I was on the committee with all these chancellors, presidents, and the heads of accreditation agencies. And our conversations are very interesting. These folks are very smart, and they're open to possibilities. They're not set in stone. They're thinking hard about how to make things work.

You know, I'm a historian, and I believe in the contingent quality of history. The future of education is not set in advance. It's evolving, it's in flux, and we're part of determining how it's going to shake out. All of us, all around the room, all of our students. We have opportunities to get in there and wrestle with it and push it this way and push it that way. We don't have total control, but we do have some weight. We do have potential to make an impact.

If we think that an integrative approach and the questions of story and the questions of deep learning need to be part of picture, then we have capacity to open a space for that. To help make it happen. What we choose to do matters.

Darren: And it's not as if the ePortfolio community is the only group in higher ed taking this up. In fact one of the things that's powerful about ePortfolio as an idea and as a community is that it stands at the intersection of a number of powerful initiatives trying to transform higher ed. The discourse around Integrative Learning, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Assessment for Learning, Community Engagement, and so forth. One of the things that I like about portfolio as a concept is that it's a place where all of these things can be connected up. It touches the concerns of all of those other communities. And we need all of those folks to make the kind of change we're advocating.

¹ <http://www.chea.org/>

The Faculty Role with ePortfolio

Question from audience: First of all, I sort of like the feeling in this room, like I'm in the French Resistance or something. It's great. Also, I was interested in the comment in the keynote, about the potential demise of the professoriate in the twenty-first century. I'm wondering about your thoughts on the changing role of professors.

Trent: We've talked about the guide on the side for a long time, but we didn't know what that really meant. But now we have concrete models. Companies ask the same thing about Open Source: "Are companies going to go away?" But of course, we need companies, because they provide services. IBM, ten to fifteen years ago, realized they were going to make more money from services than from selling big iron. That's a model to think about: unbundling the parts. Right now, the professor provides the services and controls the content. Maybe that's changing. But that doesn't mean that professors are going out of business. It means that they have to shift to support students doing the kinds of things LaGuardia students do, the kinds of things that Michigan students do. Discovering their stories. Provide support and guidance and then see what use we can make of it. It's a service model. But it does depend on trust. And I don't think most faculty, to be honest, trust their students.

Melissa: Our students get a lot of guidance and support. When they first come to class, they don't know how to create knowledge artifacts. That's a process and it's really iterative. But once they have that scaffolding, they'll have it for the rest of their lives. That will stick with them. As faculty, we are by no means obsolete. There is a great deal that we need to do. We just have to think about it in different ways.

Question from audience: There's a parallel with online education and the open educational resources world. Some institutions, MIT included, have put all of their content online. So what would a student get from taking a course at those institutions? It's the interaction. It's the social construction of knowledge. That's what you're paying for.

Darren: There's some *unlearning* that has to happen for a lot of students to take advantage of open resources and social learning networks. A lot of my students want to be told what to do, step by step. They fight tooth and nail if I ask them to take responsibility for their own learning. If they've been successful in school, they've learned to follow the old rules. It's a challenging process to help them realize that it doesn't have to work that way. We've got to help with that unlearning process.

Question from Audience: I hear you about student resistance, but I'm imagining resistance among faculty. There's so much status attached to the whole professorial career; to give up authority so that you don't control the agenda, you don't control the curriculum—I can see my faculty going out of their minds. So my question is: are there models where faculty have bought in and it's not just people like ourselves?

Elizabeth: I'm faculty! There's a lot of faculty in the room. That goes back to the question about the future of the professoriate. So, James is in CIS [Computer Information Systems] and I'm in English. If you told us in graduate school that I was going to spend a lot of time coding Web pages and that he was going to craft reflective writing assignments, we would've said you were crazy. But ePortfolio pushes you as a faculty member, pushes you to get outside of your silo. I'm not in the creative writing/poetry silo anymore. I would argue, for the future of our profession, those silos can't exist anymore. Maybe if you present that to faculty as a philosophical challenge, you can get more buy-in.

You can't walk in to faculty and say "Everything you are doing is wrong." You have to explain why this is a wonderful educational movement they want to get on board with.

To do that, you've got to invite them into the room, and you've got to make it okay for them to fail. Because they are going to fail. We've all failed, at some time or another. James and I have both failed a lot in different things that we've tried. But our institution has given us permission to fail and to say "Great," not "You screwed up," but "That's so awesome! We're so happy you screwed up. What did you learn from it and what are you going to do differently?" I think that what causes the fear that you're suggesting for a lot of faculty is the idea that there are going to be huge repercussions if you walk into your classroom to do ePortfolio and you screw up.

Darren: But we're not going to get everybody, so you've got to plan the way you think about portfolios on the campus so that there's space for some people who are not going to be on board. Certainly for the next couple decades that's going to be the case, and maybe perpetually, and you probably don't want to waste your energy!

Bret: There need to be opportunities for differential levels of engagement.

Melissa: Also we can portfolioize the curriculum. When you do that, there's a little piece that Darren does, a little piece that Melissa does, a little piece that Helen does, and the student owns the coherent whole. Our mantra with faculty is "three critical degrees of difference"—that's all we're looking for. It's really powerful when a student creates a knowledge artifact in a faculty member's class that then becomes part of their coherent meta-narrative, and then you can get faculty pretty pumped up about that.

Stories That Matter

Liz: I'd like to think about whose stories get to matter in our culture. We're in an election year: how do we get to know our politicians? They publish autobiographies. They tell us their stories. We're supposed to be invested in John McCain because he has a story of his transformation in Vietnam. Yes, that is a powerful story. Why does that story get to be more powerful than the story of my student who crossed the border illegally into the United States? As a society, what do we value? And how do we, as an educational community, say, 'Wonderful, you've set the bar, you've said stories matter, and you've shared your stories with us, and that's great.' And now, we as an educational community say 'Yes, stories matter, so here they are, thousands and thousands and thousands of stories, every one is as important as John McCain's.'

James: I've also seen the stories in ePortfolios work almost as an electronic mentor. I had one student develop his portfolio and then get a job at a major interactive firm. A lot of my students who are now taking my introductory flash courses look at that and say "Jimmy did it. These are the steps Jimmy took; these are the courses Jimmy took. It can be done. I knew Jimmy." It's very powerful as a model, very influential.

Helen: This is why using the ePortfolio is a way of creating a map toward the future. Helping students realize "these are my strengths." As we get down in the secondary schools I think that's even more important: "These are my strengths, this is where I want to go in my life, this is how I'm going to get through high school, this is what I'm going to do after I graduate, this is how to get there."

Melissa: That goes back to why it's important that we're at LaGuardia right now, where we see the construction of narratives of possibility for other people to follow. Someone said it today. We're really talking about different forms of knowledge generation. When students learn to bring their identities and backgrounds and positionalities to the formal educational enterprise; and they mash them together and they create something new--not just like, "Here I am," but "This is what I can do. This is what I can do now." That's new knowledge creation. That's the kind of epistemological shift that we need.