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BRIEFING PAPER

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e-Portfolios

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Introduction

There is plenty of talk about portfolios and many conference papers on them, with lots of tools to support their creation. These seem to fall into a small number of offerings:

- CV building and job application preparation;
- Tools offering a glorified file store for Word files, graphics, etc.
- Things we couldn't really see value in.

So what is an e-portfolio?

It is worthwhile trying to pin down what e-portfolios are. The Wikipedia definition reads:

“an **e-portfolio** or **digital portfolio**, is a collection of electronic evidence assembled and managed by a user, usually on the Web. Such electronic evidence may include inputted text, electronic files, images, multimedia, blog entries, and hyperlinks. E-portfolios are both demonstrations of the user's abilities and platforms for self-expression, and, if they are online, they can be maintained dynamically over time. Some e-portfolio applications permit varying degrees of audience access, so the same portfolio might be used for multiple purposes.”

Everyone may have a different definition of what an e-portfolio might be, so it is actually quite difficult to find a hard and fast definition for them. Their use and purpose depends on the context and aims of their use, but there is some commonality emerging as to what they might be. For example, they are created by learners so they can include simple reflective inputs (which is probably the dominant form taken), or they may be wide and varied collection of digital objects expressing views and learning experiences and student achievements.

Though there are a reasonable number of commercial tools now available, there is still little consensus on the **processes** that learners may be involved in when building portfolios. If we were to be unkind we might suggest that many of these tools are but glorified file stores. Surely there must be some more 'learning orientation' to e-portfolios?

CAPDM is keen to be involved in the development of e-portfolios, but we need a better understanding of how learners may use them. We are not alone in this respect. What does interest us though, is more than their use -- it is also about how best e-portfolios can be **embedded** within courses and the course materials.

As a company immersed in semantic mark-up this means that we have to be able to present simple mechanisms to the content developers to allow meaningful portfolio input points to be freely included. The mark-up utilised for this purpose must be simple enough to be used, but the interpretation in the delivery environment must be powerful, engaging and meaningful.

Where to start?

The effectiveness of e-portfolios will depend to an extent on the subjects that they are being used to support. It's hard to see how they might be effective in highly analytical subjects such as Accounting, but they could be extremely effective in subjects where observations are important. Fortunately CAPDM develops courses in Fitness and Exercise (see [Kilgore Academy](#)). These courses offer great opportunity to include and experiment with e-portfolios in a way that absolutely supports learning and the overall student experience.

These courses have a large number of videos, for example, used to demonstrate right **and** wrong technique, how to make coaching inclusive for all, and to explain the very technical detail. With this type of material it is valuable to have students **reflect** on what they see as they are learning. At the end of the course, if the aims of the course have been successfully met, their powers of observation should be greatly enhanced, and able to be compared – through the details in the personal portfolios – against their initial thoughts.

Tutors, who share the student portfolios, can also follow the learning experience of the students and can intervene with additional support where necessary.

If it is difficult to define an e-portfolio then where do we start with an implementation?

CAPDM has taken a lead from a very simple process that we have all been engaged in – building a workbook. In the case of online delivery of learning this will take the form of a **digital workbook**, but it should contain all of the standard input forms that we might use in a paper-based workbook. It should hold free thought (text), images and files (which might have been snippets pasted into our conventional workbook) and it should record more structured inputs such as ticking boxes, answering questions, selecting options and even using coloured pens to highlight points.

These inputs should be included wherever they are needed in the learning materials and they should be easy and obvious in their application. Inputs are only of use if they are usable. In our case they build up into a Digital Work Book (DWB) which the student can access at any point over the web, or print as an electronic (PDF) booklet – see Figure 1.

