

ePortfolios as Vital Tools for Grassroots Leadership Training Initiatives

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ePortfolios have arrived. In 2013, Dahlstrom, Walker, and Dziuban documented that over 50% of universities made use of ePortfolios and 50% of post-secondary students reported engaging with ePortfolios in at least one of their courses. Susan Khan reported on the state of ePortfolios in her 2014 review “E-Portfolios: A Look at Where We’ve Been, Where We Are Now, and Where We’re (Possibly) Going.” While she hesitated to predict the future of ePortfolios, she did envision a future where ePortfolio use blossomed. She was right. Course-based ePortfolios, degree-oriented ePortfolios, and professional ePortfolios are staples at most US universities. Adaptations of ePortfolios are now trending in academic advising (Douglas et al., 2019; Al-Nassar & Gharib, 2020), and ePortfolios have emerged as innovative assessment tools, even for clinical training (Elshami et al., 2018). While the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) and other organizations publish studies about the use and benefits of ePortfolios at the university level, there is little exploration of the ways ePortfolios could be adapted and used in settings beyond universities and personal-professional ePortfolios. In one attempt that moved beyond university-professional ePortfolio genres, an Advanced Grassroots Maternal Child Health Leadership Training Program used a shared ePortfolio to support learning and document participants’ journeys. This innovative training program blended an instructional Wiki and ePortfolio with grassroots leaders’ stories and projects to create a digital

record of the curriculum, document big ideas from Zoom meetings, and share materials developed by training program participants. These pioneering modifications in both scope and purpose expand the ways ePortfolios can be used to support grassroots leadership training programs.

Grassroots Maternal Child Health Initiatives

Grassroots maternal child health initiatives support community organizers who work tirelessly to help their communities address social, economic, and political inequities that range from safe housing and access to quality health care to reentry programs for women who were once incarcerated. With minimal funding and little, if any, access to learning management systems, grassroots leadership training programs often use free, open-source materials. Two leading providers of free grassroots training materials included:

- W. K. Kellogg Foundation’s online workbook, “Grassroots Leadership Development: A Guide for Grassroots Leaders, Support Organizations, and Funders,” and
- Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas’s website “Community Tool Box.”

Markum et al. (2020) “NEEDED: Grassroots Leaders to Lead Systems Change Efforts That Reduce Infant



Mortality” documented advancements in grassroots programming for Maternal Child Health (MCH) initiatives and highlighted grassroots training programs around the globe. This groundbreaking documentation provided clear evidence that grassroots MCH work saves the lives of mothers and babies and that there is a need to expand grassroots MCH training. Markum et al. (2020) did not uncover any programs that provided advanced leadership training. The research revealed a need for ongoing grassroots training opportunities to support and encourage grassroots leaders as they persevere in their work.

Grassroots leaders are familiar with their community’s needs and have access to networks within their communities which support people who are often underserved by governmental and social outreach programs.



“The lockdown

posed challenges for sharing reading materials, keeping up with training goals, personalizing information for participants, and providing convenient ways for the coordinator and grassroots’ leaders to exchange documents.”

Jack Turman Jr. of Indiana University’s (IU) Richard M. Fairbanks School of Public Health and Interim Chair of Social and Behavioral Sciences, works with Grassroots MCH Initiatives and proposed an advanced curriculum for grassroots leaders who previously completed a one-year training program through IU’s unique grassroots community programming. The goal was an Advanced Grassroots MCH Leadership Training Program with 15 in-person sessions that would include open-source leadership materials. The spread of Covid-19 posed challenges for sharing reading materials, keeping up with training goals, personalizing information for participants, and providing convenient ways for the coordinator and grassroots’ leaders to exchange documents. The solution? A shared curriculum Wiki and ePortfolio.

Indianapolis-based grassroots leaders applied to be part of the Advanced Grassroots MCH Leadership Training Program and embarked on the six-month, fifteen-session journey. Several of the leaders included: Deborah Fisher, Nina Porter, and LaToya Tahirou.

- Deborah Fisher is a mother, grandmother, and grassroots advocate dedicated to reducing maternal mortality rates in Indiana. She is the Family Interview Coordinator with an initiative to interview families who experienced the death of a mother during pregnancy, labor, and delivery, or the first year of her infant’s life. This important work is part of the Indiana State Department of Health, Maternal Mortality Review (MMR) Committee.
- Nina Porter is a mother and advocate for women leaving incarceration through the Mothers on the Rise (MOR) initiative. Many Indiana mothers leaving incarceration step out of a facility with no options for safe housing, no diapers for their child/children, and no idea where their next meal will come from. With support from IU Fairbanks School of Public Health Grassroots MCH initiatives, AmeriCorps, and the Indiana Department of Corrections, MOR provides training and assistance for women and their children during re-entry.
- LaToya Tahirou is a mother, community health worker, and grassroots advocate for safe housing. As part of her work with IUPUI’s Grassroots MCH Initiatives, LaToya hosts community baby showers to promote healthy pregnancies, safe sleep, and safe housing.

These and other grassroots leaders share their stories of loss and grief as testimony of the need for community intervention to reduce infant mortality rates. *U.S. News and World Report* (2020) stated, “Indiana has historically had one of the highest infant mortality rates in the country. From 2013 to 2017, Indiana’s average infant mortality rate was 7.3 per 1,000 compared to the national average of 5.9.” IU’s Grassroots MCH supports the work



of grassroots leaders fighting to save the lives of moms and babies.

A Shared ePortfolio Showcase and Revising the Curriculum

As the instructor for the Advanced Grassroots MCH Leadership Training Program, I worked with Jack Turman, Jr.'s curricular concepts and added Project-Based Learning components, including a shared ePortfolio Showcase. WIX was selected for the instructional areas and shared ePortfolio because it is user-friendly and free. The Advanced Grassroots WIX instructional Wiki and ePortfolio linked directly to the IUPUI Grassroots Maternal Child Health Initiatives webpages to anchor our work to open-source materials available through IU Fairbanks School of Public Health. One of the major benefits of using a website platform outside of the IU's system was that participants could access and navigate the webpages even though they did not have IU usernames or student status. Because the advanced leadership training participants were not IU students, this work-around ensured that participants and invited guests could gain access to course materials without dual authentication and university identifications required to use IU's course management system, Canvas.

Using the Curriculum Wiki and ePortfolio website hybrid in place of a learning management system was essential to the success of the program. The persistence of the pandemic made it impossible to meet in person, so the training program moved online with sessions hosted through Zoom. The Curriculum-ePortfolio hybrid gave participants easy access to readings, session goals, and other information with a simple click on an email hyperlink or session tab. For participants who opted not to build an external ePortfolio of their own, the shared ePortfolio Showcase provided space to share the materials they created

as part of the Project-Based Learning curriculum. The materials participants created—we called these artifacts—supported the planning, implementation, and assessment of their grassroots initiatives. For transparency and to cultivate a sense of program ownership, participants had access to edit and add materials to the shared training curriculum Wiki and ePortfolio.

ePortfolio? Learning Management System? Wiki? A Hybrid that Challenged ePortfolio Definitions

The University of Waterloo, Center for Teaching and Learning website “ePortfolios Explained: Theory and Practice” (n.d.) explains the ways ePortfolios are and are not like a Learning Management System (LMS).

With an ePortfolio, the student is in charge: the student decides who can view the ePortfolio, what artifacts get added, how it is designed, and so on. Typically, a student loses access to the LMS when courses end; in contrast, ePortfolios remain the student's property after finishing university.

The Advanced Grassroots MCH Leadership Training website bridged this divide. The grassroots leaders were given the WIX username and password to make additions, changes, and updates. Because the leaders were reluctant to modify the curriculum-sessions pages, I built a separate Participants area. The grassroots leaders could access their own *Participant* areas without feeling like they would “mess up” our session materials.

When participants continued to show reluctance to modify the website, I made changes as they asked for updates. They served as reviewers, editors, and content creators. I was the typist and website geek. I could easily add and move materials in response to their requests.

For example, LaToya said that it helped her to read some materials two or more times, but that she knew herself well enough to know that she would not go back and click on a previous session after we moved to the next one. I asked if she would like me to copy-paste ideas she told me



QR: The Advanced Grassroots MCH Leadership Training Syllabus

(Scan this QR Code with your smartphone to visit the website.)



were important onto the next session—to repeat the materials. She said, “yes.” Other participants agreed that this would help them review materials and become more familiar with important concepts if they appeared on more than one Session page.

During the Zooms, we would reflect on readings and what the leaders wanted to revisit or update for the next session. I would copy-paste those materials into the next session and add comments, which they said would add clarity. Because of this give and take, some materials, like the nine components of a good TED Talk, appear several times on the website.

of Great Talks,” Simon Sinek’s “How Great Leaders Inspire Action,” and techniques they noticed in MLK’s work to develop nine important steps they would take as they composed their own TEDTalks.

Our work together during Zoom sessions helped each of us see the value of constructing and documenting knowledge together on our session pages. We used the share screen Zoom function, and I would type as they discussed additions and suggested tweaks to our materials. Participating in these conversations, sharing ideas in the chat function, meeting with me individually, and building materials live—during Zooms—made learning visible and pulled back the veil between content creator and

MCH Leadership Training Website/Wiki Teacher Created - Student Moderated

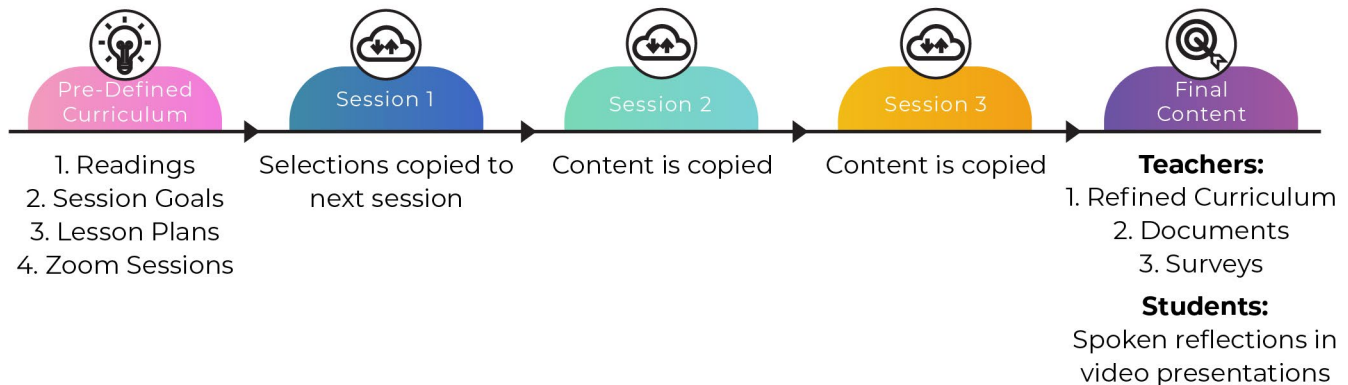


Figure 1: Business The Wiki/ePortfolio Dynamic

More Than Readers and Participants: The Shift to Content Creators

The shared ePortfolio-Curriculum website did much more than provide an overview of what participants read and valued; the pages documented their ideas and contributions. The TEDTalk segment is a wonderful example of collective content and demonstrates one way the website functioned like a Wiki. After watching a series of TEDTalks on how to give a good TEDTalk, analyzing Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream,” and discussing his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” the participants created their own list of strategies to optimize presentations and TEDTalks.

I served as scribe and coach. The leaders fused concepts from Nancy Duarte’s “The Secret Structure

audience. We were working together to build the tools that they would re-read for the next week. They were building pieces of their own curriculum and taking control of their own leadership training journey.

As we built materials together, participants commented that they could never build a website like we were constructing. So, I pulled back the veil a little further. I showed them blank pages ahead and revealed that I built the pages one to two weeks ahead of our schedule. This gave me much-needed time. More importantly, this gave me the flexibility to build materials that were responsive to Zoom dialogue across the six-month program. LaToya noticed, “Rome wasn’t built in a day.” She recognized that content building takes time.



She asked, “Do you know how to eat an elephant?” I didn’t. “One bite at a time,” she said with a smile. We were learning together that big projects take time and that the way to tackle an ambitious initiative was through planning, small steps, and consistent progress. This process-oriented approach is also at the heart of grassroots change. Participants made the connection. “You’re breaking it into little pieces, then putting it together,” Nina observed. Groundbreaking initiatives that included Nina’s work with Mothers on the Rise would take years to initiate and implement. Likewise, we were working together in the pilot program to build a curriculum for future grassroots leaders.

Our work together posed a different issue for me as an ePortfolio user: What part of the curriculum and website had I created? What role did the participants play in this creation? What was an educational website? Was the Showcase the only ePortfolio area? While initially, I was seeing the shared webpages as a way to use WIX as a LMS, our work together revealed that giving stakeholders voice and choice mattered. The website was more than a curriculum, lists of assignments, or lecture notes; our shared pages evolved as spaces to reflect on Zoom conversations, course readings, and learning objectives. Symbiosis.

My willingness to toss all sorts of digital material under the term “ePortfolio” and suggest that ePortfolio is a big tent for a wide range of web-based materials does not mesh with the ideas that there are three types of ePortfolios: Showcase/Professional ePortfolios, Learning ePortfolios, and Assessment/General Education ePortfolios (“The What, Why, and How of ePortfolio,” n.d.). I’m arguing for a bigger tent with more room for hybrids and experimental mash-ups. I recognize that ePortfolio may not be a one-size-fits-all container, but I want to advocate

bigger tent. A tent for the idea of both-and rather than either-or. At what point does shared content function more like an ePortfolio and less like a content page? Or can a page do both?

Reflections Through Formal Presentations

Reflection in the Advanced Grassroots MCH program also moved in a different direction: formal presentations. Because we placed emphasis on oral traditions and telling individual stories, we opted to host formal, spoken reflections in addition to informal reflections on a Google planning document [not available on the ePortfolio Showcase]. These presentation-reflections replaced the traditional written ePortfolio reflections on learning. Prior to the presentations, the grassroots leader-participants had access to a shared Google Doc to outline and comment on what they learned through the training program, how this learning changed them, and why it mattered. Participants prepared visuals to support their 20-minute presentations and included comments on their readings and learning artifacts. Jack Turman, Jr., local advocacy affiliates, and program participants attended the May 6th, 2021 Zoom Showcase. The presentation format included time for questions and comments after each leader reflected on her growth as a grassroots advocate. The leaders presented a second time on May 10th, 2021 at the Grassroots MCH Family Meeting Zoom attended by other Grassroots MCH leaders, staff, and faculty.

The pilot program diverged from typical ePortfolio practices when we moved away from publicly accessible written reflections. We opted for oral presentations as the primary metacognitive component. There is precedent for using oral exchanges to reinforce and assess learning. Singh (2008) studied the use of oral assessments in an undergraduate dentistry program to address faculty complaints that facilitators heavy-handedly influenced students’ written reflections. In the second phase of this study, Singh writes, “[W]e decided to assess the learners orally so that their reflections could come alive and so that we could learn from the assessment and restructure or revise where necessary” (p. 180). Singh reports that this approach was anchored in social-constructivism



QR: The Advanced Grassroots MCH Leadership Training Showcase: Shared ePortfolio

(Scan this QR Code with your smartphone to visit the website.)



and posits that “thinking is a skill further developed through dialogue.”

Lambert, Sorenson, and Elliott (2014) likewise validate oral interviews as a practical tool for reflection and assessment. Their study examined written and oral reflections from pre-service teachers over three reflection cycles. Their research suggests that a blend of written and oral reflections is better than only written reflections or only oral reflections. The Advanced Grassroots MCH Leadership Training Program provided opportunities for written reflections. One participant actively engaged through reflective writing. The other participants were more comfortable writing informally in the shared Google Doc to prepare for the May 6th Presentation Showcase and talking about what they learned. Providing options for informal and formal written reflections as well as informal and formal oral reflections gave participants multiple opportunities to reflect in private and public spaces.



“We can and should use both the written and oral reflections for assessment and analysis in leadership training ePortfolios. Applying what we are learning in higher education to leadership training can help build more effective leadership.”

Creating More Opportunities for Typed Reflections in Future Programs

In future advanced leadership training programs, I will build-in more time for typed reflections during the Zoom sessions. The previous program allotted time for reflection during Zooms. However, most participants wrote reflections by hand rather than typing during these reflective exercises, which made it difficult to capture the energy and insights in their ePortfolio pages.

In addition to typed reflections, we will continue to talk about these reflections during the Zoom so that we participate in the ebb and flow of dialogue as a valuable component of reflection. We can and should use both the written and oral reflections for assessment and analysis in leadership training ePortfolios. Applying what we are learning in higher education to leadership training, especially with the use of ePortfolio and reflection, can help us build more effective leadership training programs.

The Digital Divide: Access, Technologies, and Digital Literacies

Our work in the Advanced Grassroots MCH Leadership Training Program was no Nirvana. Problems arose. The most profound challenge we faced with the shared ePortfolio was that participants continued to feel uncomfortable editing the Wiki or adding their own work on the Participants area of the shared ePortfolio. They had lingering concerns that they might accidentally delete or displace other materials, even after we worked on and edited pages together. When we talked more about their reluctance, participants said they were uncomfortable with web-building tools. As we discussed technological literacy, it became clear that participants wanted to develop their technological skills and that they had a range of experiences with formal digital instruction. There was a digital divide.

Discussions of the digital divide have waned as more rural areas gain Internet access and as mobile phone use penetrates 95% of the world population (Pursel, 2015). However, experts suggest that the digital divide is as much about who knows how to use digital technologies as it is about who has access to broadband and computers. Pursel, Associate Director of Teaching and Learning with Technology, Penn State University, argues that the new digital divide is about the “relative inequality between those who have more and less bandwidth and more or less skills” (*para. 2*) Addressing this divide became a point of emphasis when participants said they were not familiar with technologies like PowerPoint or Google Docs. In addition to providing supplemental tech instruction during individual meetings, we worked together during Zoom sessions to share materials on



Google Docs, WIX, and Survey Monkey. Participants became more familiar with a variety of digital platforms because we embedded technology instruction into the curriculum as part of several Zoom sessions—this included practicing with Zoom’s chat function, audio/video settings, and screen share.

I also learned that some participants were not familiar with email management, attachments, organizing saved files, and/or presentation platforms. I asked what skills they wanted to learn and provided support. In one-on-one meetings, the participant and I shared screens on Zoom as she designed file folders to manage documents, became more comfortable searching for and uploading email attachments, selected PowerPoint templates to design presentation visuals, built surveys using Survey Monkey, and/or created their WIX ePortfolios.



“As we discuss ePortfolios in higher education, we often emphasize folio-thinking, high impact practices, reflection, assessment/rubrics, or scaling ePortfolio use. We gloss over the value of expanding users’ digital literacies. This may be shortsighted on our part.”

Providing support at intersections with missional interests was an essential part of embedding Project-Based Learning (PBL) within the curriculum. PBL helped participants recognize how they could transfer what they were learning in the training program and use their newly-developed skills to support their grassroots initiatives. Deborah Fisher workshopped her interview questions for a Maternal Mortality Review survey. Nina Porter built a website for Mothers on the Rise. LaToya Tahirou built a PowerPoint to support her TEDTalk-style presentation: “Diversity, Equity,

and Inclusion: Critical Conversations” at the 2021 Prosperity Indiana conference. Providing technology training was part of responding to and supporting participant needs. Bridging the digital training divide contributed to the overall success of the program.

As we discuss ePortfolios in higher education, we often emphasize folio-thinking, high impact practices, reflection, assessment/rubrics, or scaling ePortfolio use. We typically gloss over the value of expanding users’ digital literacies. This may be shortsighted on our part. Many college students, much like the grassroots leaders, have limited experiences with website building platforms for ePortfolios. In 2019, half of IUPUI students across two sections of a second-year Professional Writing Skills course reported that they had no previous experience with website building technologies. After one semester and a team project which included micro-ePortfolios, 100% reported that they were familiar or somewhat familiar with a web-building platform.

Deborah Fisher, Advanced Grassroots MCH Leadership Training participant, previously earned both an undergraduate and graduate degree. She reported that the advanced training program ePortfolio was her first introduction to a website building platform and that she valued learning new technologies as part of the curriculum. In an email, Deborah added, “I was given many tools that are useful in the work that I must do to assist in bringing about changes in our community settings” (personal communication, September 10, 2021). Digital user know-how and flexibility are essential in most professional settings, and ePortfolios are one way to expand digital know-how and familiarity.

The Advanced Grassroots MCH Leadership Training exit survey verified the value of technology training as part of the overall program. 100% of the respondents said that technologies and technological support were essential parts of their training. Participants pointed to WIX (as a web-based ePortfolio tool), Google Docs, Zoom, and the TEDTalk format (which included PowerPoint



visuals), as technologies they experimented with and will continue to use in their grassroots work. On the exit survey, one respondent typed: “All of these skills were crucial to me remaining a [Grassroots Maternal Child Health Leader].” In the exit interviews with Jack Turman, Jr. [participant names were kept confidential on the interview report], a respondent stated: “*The technology skills were so valuable.*”

In a personal interview, Deborah Fisher said, “The training program gave me opportunities to try new technologies. I enjoyed working with WIX to build an ePortfolio of my grassroots work and personal journey” (2021). The overwhelmingly positive response to learning and using new technologies echoes other digital divide research. Dutton et al. (2004) reported that closing the digital divide helps people “gain the knowhow and proficiency to use the technology to make changes to improve their relationships with each other, and with government, business...and the other resources with which they would not otherwise be able to interact.” The real-world value of learning new technologies in context raises other points that may be under-developed in ePortfolio research, like: What are the benefits of teaching ePortfolio as part of expanding technological skills to help support digital literacy?

Answer Options	Response Rate
I'll apply these strategies in my professional life.	100%
I'll apply these strategies in public speaking.	100%
I'll apply these strategies in my work talking with community members as a grassroots leader.	100%
I'll apply these strategies in personal life situations with technology, planning, and being strategic.	100%

Table 1: Survey Responses

The exit survey also explored the idea of learning transfer: transferring skills learned during the training program to other areas of life. The responses verified that the skills learned and implemented through real-world artifacts and the ePortfolio made it clear how these technologies, leadership strategies, and tools would benefit the leaders’ lives, including their professional work, public speaking, promotion of grassroots initiatives, and personal life.

Overall, the shared instructional Wiki and ePortfolio played a vital role in the success of the first Advanced Grassroots Maternal Child Health Leadership Training Program. In addition to serving as an open-source learning management system, these resources helped participants learn vital technological skills because they were embedded into sessions, activities, and artifacts. The May 6th, 2021 end of program Showcase Zoom gave participants the opportunity to reflect on their leadership training experiences as they presented their work to peers, IUPUI faculty, and local professionals who share their passion to support mothers and babies.

Next Time Around: Ideas for Improving Wiki Participation and ePortfolio Development

The program was a success. But, as I reflect on the pilot and on feedback from participants, I will do more to support technological training and place more emphasis on folio-thinking. Two points of emphasis:

- supporting leaders as they contribute materials to the instructional Wiki under Sessions, and
- working one-on-one with participants to add artifacts to their ePortfolios every month.

Central to supporting leaders as they edit the Wiki will be defining our three digital spaces: the training program website, the curriculum/instructional Wiki, and the shared ePortfolio Showcase. Identifying these as three distinct, hyperlinked workUnivspaces may help participants better understand areas that are static, areas that we build



together, and areas that they build independently. I will dedicate Zoom time to discussion about the scope of what we can do in our shared instructional Wiki, and we will make updates in real time during Zooms to the Session tabs. To encourage after-Zoom contributions, I will dedicate space for leaders to develop within the Sessions tabs by typing placeholder notes, like “LaToya’s comments here.” Participants may feel more freedom to make Wiki updates once they know there is a space reserved for them. We will make developing the curricular Wiki together part of the culture of our leadership training program.



“As educators

and researchers continue their efforts to assess the benefits of ePortfolios as a meta-high impact practice, there is room to expand our work to include the ways ePortfolios can benefit grassroots leadership training programs.”

I will make ePortfolio-building a central part of our meetings by adding it to the syllabus. Our ePortfolio-building meetings will be listed in two places: on the syllabus and under Session goals. Adding ePortfolio updates as a part of the curriculum may help participants better understand the ways their artifacts and reflections can live side-by-side in conversation with other materials in the ePortfolio Showcase. My hope is that these strategic changes will help participants feel ownership of the instructional Wiki and give them more support as they build and share artifacts related to their grassroots initiatives in their ePortfolios.

Leadership Training: an Opportunity to Expand ePortfolio Use

Corporations invested over \$357 billion in training initiatives in 2020, about \$13 billion less than they spent on training in 2019 (2020, Training Industry). As billions are spent on corporate initiatives, other organizations are exploring ways to use ePortfolios in training programs that are not as well-funded.

Shrestha and Joshi (2021) documented their successful implementation of professional ePortfolios in workforce development programs for highly-skilled immigrants and refugees. Our Advanced Grassroots Maternal Child Health Initiatives at IUPUI also used ePortfolios curricularly and to showcase participant work. As educators and researchers continue their efforts to assess the benefits of ePortfolios as a meta-high impact practice, there is room to expand our work to include the ways ePortfolios can benefit grassroots leadership training programs.

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About the Author



Deborah J. Oesch-Minor integrates ePortfolios into her writing and literature classes at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis. Her students explore their passions and work with community partners,

then build dynamic project-based ePortfolios. Inspired by her students’ work, she started working with IU Fairbanks School of Public Health, Grassroots Maternal Child Health Initiatives in 2019 to support grassroots leaders as they advocate for mothers and babies in Indianapolis. Debbie also serves as a Faculty Fellow at the IUPUI Institute for Engaged Learning where she supports Project-Based Learning initiatives.



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