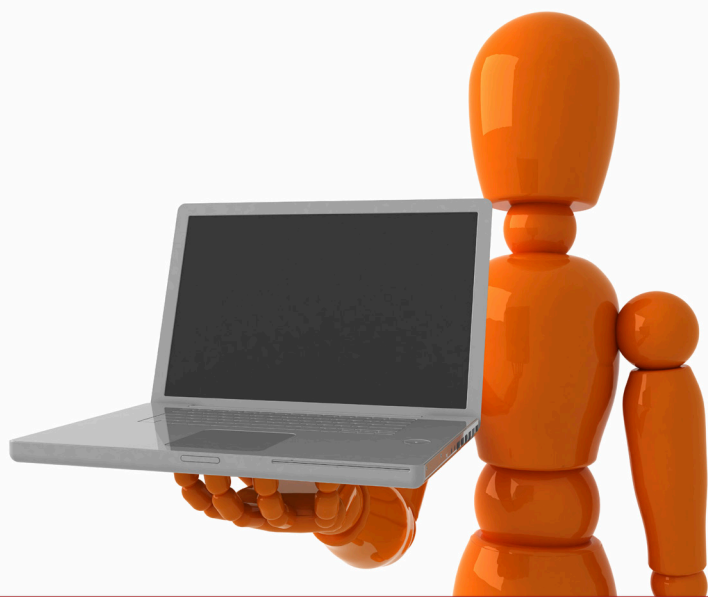


Getting Started in Epsilon

A Guide for Texas Educators

e-LEARNING



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This publication serves as an introductory guide for new Epsilen account holders. It is not intended to take the place of acceptable use policies currently established within an ESC, district, or open enrollment charter. For final decisions regarding use of the Epsilen platform, please refer to local policies and guidelines.

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Introduction

A press release issued by the Texas Education Agency on November 13, 2009, made the following points about the partnership between TEA and Epsilen:

The Texas Education Agency (TEA), in collaboration with Epsilen LLC, and The New York Times Company, is pleased to announce Project Share, a new initiative to expand the development and delivery of high quality professional development in an interactive and engaging eLearning environment and provide access to online resources, online course content, academic networking, and professional learning communities.

Project Share will utilize a single online environment to leverage existing and new professional development resources for teachers across the state and build professional learning communities where educators can collaborate, share, and tailor professional development to meet individual needs. . . .

“Project Share. . . will also allow the state and its partners to deliver training to educators in an interactive and timely manner,” said Robert Scott, Commissioner of Education.

The first phase of Project Share begins with building a community of practitioners dedicated to improving teaching and learning through collaborative professional development and ongoing support.

This manual will introduce you to Epsilen and demonstrate how it can enhance the experience of taking future professional development courses.

Online Learning



“Online learning” refers to courses taught and taken on the Internet.

For **participants**, online courses can be a convenient way to obtain:

- Continuing Professional Education units
- New teaching skills
- Various types of certification

Additional benefits to **participants** of online learning include:

- Self-paced or flexibly scheduled classes, which allow learning to take place at a participant’s own rate and convenience
- Classes available wherever there is access to a computer with Internet service
- No inconveniences associated with commuting, parking, scheduling around work hours, or arranging child care

The main drawback for course instructors and participants: the absence of the kinds of face-to-face discussions that mark a lively classroom

To make online classes seem more like traditional classes, instructors can enhance them with:

- Short videotaped lectures
- Links to videos on the Internet
- Graphics
- Music
- Sound effects

Online courses can be divided into three general types of instruction:

- Instructor-led courses
- Instructor-facilitated courses
- Self-paced courses

In an ***instructor-led course***, the instructor:

- Develops a curriculum
- Leads classes
- Makes assignments
- Guides discussions
- Assigns grades

This type of course is most similar to simulating a traditional classroom setting.

In an ***instructor-facilitated course***:

- Participants learn at their own pace by following a course guide.
- Course materials are generally videos and online instructional materials.
- Online discussions with other participants foster classroom-style exchanges and support.
- Instructors evaluate participants' work and progress and offer feedback.

A ***self-paced course*** (independent study) allows participants to study completely on their own. In this type of class, there is:

- No instructor
- No start or end date (generally)

For ***professional development*** (PD), online learning offers a solution to the constraints and challenges sometimes associated with face-to-face training. Instead, the best on-line courses:

- Are flexibly scheduled
- Are interactive
- Present new material concisely yet thoroughly
- Offer a variety of ways to give and receive feedback
- Include videos and links to resources available on the Internet

The goal of Epsilon is to make the PD courses offered informative, easy to use, and tailored to each educator's unique needs.

Standards for Professional Behavior



As an online platform for professional educators, Epsilen presents a multitude of benefits and opportunities to enrich the professional development experience. However, Epsilen users must be aware and cautious of the kind of behavior that is expected as well as the kind of behavior that is unacceptable when participating in the online world.

Teachers and administrators are often seen as role models no matter what they are doing. Students, parents, and the public often scrutinize a teacher's appearance, bearing, attitude, and—perhaps especially—language as indications of competence and trustworthiness.

Because of this, ***anything an educator does in the electronic/online realm must be professional***. Electronic communications (e-mail, blog comments, chat-room exchanges, tweets, text messages, photographs, videos, etc.) seem impermanent—as they are just blips of light on a computer screen—and yet, these forms of communication are the most long-lasting of records.

There is a paradox about physical versus nonphysical forms of communication:

- A written letter (a one-of-a-kind material object) can be shredded.
- Theoretically, all traditional forms of written communication can be located and destroyed.

But:

- Something as negligible as a casual e-mail can be effortlessly copied onto countless servers, computers, and websites dispersed across the entire range of cyberspace—thus becoming, for all practical purposes, a permanent record.

Besides their permanence, electronic communications can be searched for and read by:

- Law enforcement agencies
- Data-mining companies
- Current and prospective employers
- Curious students and parents

If found by someone who wishes you harm, the results can be publicized via social-media tools such as Twitter and Facebook, reaching thousands of people in seconds.

Before committing words to screen and sending them to another person, it is helpful to ask yourself, “Would I be comfortable if this appeared tomorrow on the front page of a newspaper?” Unfortunately, the potential for exposure is that great.

This admittedly frightening possibility is not meant to discourage the use of computers, cell phones, or personal digital assistants (PDAs) for communication. Rather, it is meant to encourage you to communicate with caution and respect.

The best habit to cultivate is to keep electronic communications neutral to positive. Users are strongly encouraged to mitigate potential risk by ***not sending electronic communications*** that include a critical, harsh, or threatening tone.

The guidelines for e-mail and other online communications on Epsilen include:

- Be respectful
- No inappropriate language
- No comments that could hurt or offend someone
- No photos or videos of alcohol or drug use
- No sexual content of ***any*** sort
- No racial, ethnic, or sexual slurs
- Nothing about a peer or student that would allow that person to be identified

In addition, the guidelines for discussions, forums, and other sorts of group interactions include:

- Stay on topic
- Try to build on what others have said
- Handle sensitive topics with extreme tact, if at all
- Be respectful of the differing views and opinions that are often present in on-line discussions

For a helpful list of “dos” and “don’ts” when participating in online discussions, please visit: http://www.edtechleaders.org/documents/disc_expectations.htm

In conclusion, it is always in a user’s best—professional and personal—interest to keep online communication respectful and dignified.

Epsilen



Epsilen (www.epsilen.com) is a website that provides an integrated environment for online learning. On Epsilen:

- Instructors can set up groups and courses.
- Participants can join groups and take the courses they need.
- All site users can interact through e-mail, forums, blogs, course chats, and wikis.

The Epsilen experience—referred to as the Epsilen Environment—is built around three main components:

- eLearning
- ePortfolios
- Networking

The ***Epsilen eLearning system*** includes course-management tools that make it easy to create syllabi and lesson plans and to enhance them with multimedia, videos, and Internet links. As a bonus, Epsilen members have access to more than 150 years of *New York Times* archives through the New York Times Content Repository. Educators will also have access to other repositories, such as Smithsonian Education, NASA Education, and PBS Digital Learning Library.

Collaboration and interactivity. Instructors and participants are given numerous ways to keep in touch and work together:



Epsilen e-mail



Course chats



Calendars



Blogs



Forums



Wikis



Post-It messages

(A wiki, from the Hawaiian word for *quick*, is a collaborative, easily editable document to which members of a group contribute knowledge and expertise. The online reference work Wikipedia is a well-known example.)

Participants can use these tools to work on class projects together and to communicate outside of class.

Security. While the eLearning system is premised on the idea that transparency and openness stimulate learning, security always remains important. Therefore, the Epsilon Environment uses “drop boxes” to provide a protected (controlled-access) place for instructors to post lesson plans and participants to deposit (upload) assignments.

In addition, Epsilon members are subject to a Terms of Service agreement and a Privacy Policy. Epsilon is mindful of considerations of privacy and security when educators and students work in online environments. Epsilon is also fully aware of Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and Child Online Protection Act (COPA) guidelines and adheres to those requirements as participants are invited into and work within the Epsilon environment.

Assessment. Since all learning involves assessment, Epsilon provides instructors with many ways to check participants’ progress. Virtually every part of the eLearning system that can contribute to assessment is linked to an integrated grade book.

The second component of the Epsilon Environment, *ePortfolios*, is the subject of a later—more detailed—section of this guide, so only two points will be made here:

- Epsilon gives its users maximum control over who can view specific parts of a portfolio.
- Participants’ ePortfolios are theirs for life, even if their sponsoring institutions withdraw from Epsilon or if they change careers.

The online world is a networked world, and Epsilon is no exception. Members can:

- Join existing **professional networks** (there are currently around 2,000 on Epsilon)
- Start up an unlimited number of new networks and invite people to join them
- Accept invitations to join others’ networks

These networks or groups can be:

- Public (open to all)
- Private
- Invitation only
- Open to invitation requests

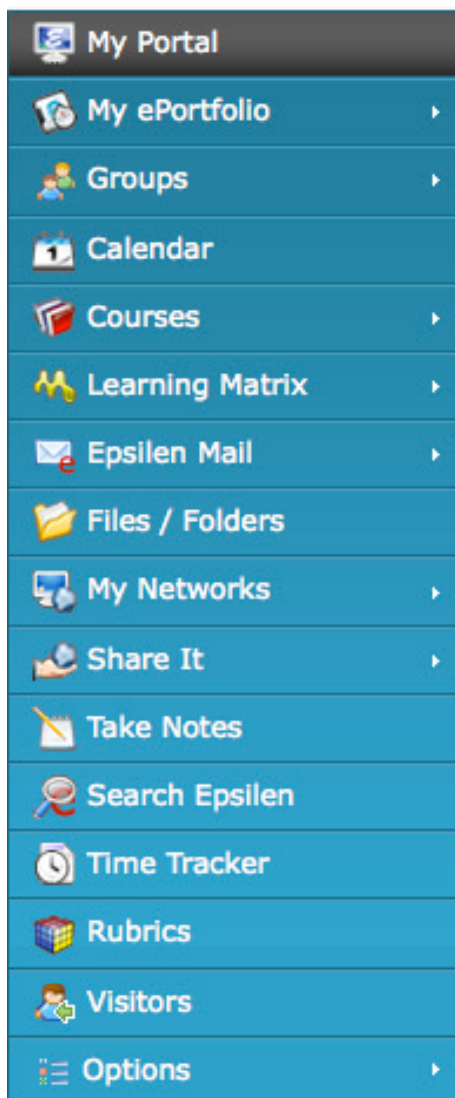
This brief overview provides at most a hint of all that Epsilon offers online learners. How well and to what extent participants utilize these resources is up to them.



My Portal

You will be provided with a user name and password for your Epsilon account. When you log in, you will be taken to a webpage labeled ***My Portal***.

As the name suggests, this page is a gateway to all of your connections to Epsilon. When you gain access to your portal, be sure to note the tools available to you. These tools will be listed on the left-hand menu, or “toolbar,” and may include any or all of the following:



This toolbar provides access to all parts of Epsilon. It is the main way to navigate to anywhere on the site.

Near the middle of the page, under the heading My Network Channel, is a row of tabs:



- Visitors to My Corner
- Added me to Networks
- Similar Teaching Interests
- Similar Research Interests
- Similar Consulting Interests
- Similar Academic Interests
- ePortfolio Examples

These tabs show the Epsilen members who have visited your page or share particular interests of yours.

In the center of the page is a section called Selected Gadgets. This section can be personalized to only show certain “gadgets.” In it are boxes for several types of information:

- Epsilen Postings
- Epsilen News
- Things I Need to Know
- Announcements

These boxes provide a snapshot of current information related to your courses, your networks, your groups, and the Epsilen Environment.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How do I change my password?

A: Follow these steps:

1. Log in to Epsilen.
2. Select **Change Password** from the left menu.
3. Enter your current password.
4. Enter a new password.
5. Reenter the new password.
6. Select **Update** to complete changing your password.

Q: Can I keep my Epsilen account even after I graduate or leave my institution?

A: Each Epsilen user may maintain his or her account after s/he leaves an institution. In these cases, the user will be migrated to the general Epsilen environment, rather than continuing to be associated with a specific district or open enrollment charter.

Q: How do I use the My Networks tool?

A: The My Networks tool allows you to organize your professional networks of colleagues, peers, or those you meet within the Epsilen community. You can configure each network to restrict access to your personal contact information and file collections.

To create a new network:

1. Log in to Epsilen.
2. Select **My Networks > Create Network** in the left menu. (The symbol ">" means "then click on.")
3. Enter a **Network Name** and set security permissions for your personal contact information.
4. Click **Create**.

To add Epsilen members to a network:

1. Login to Epsilen.
2. Select **My Networks > Search People** in the left menu.
3. Enter text in the boxes under **Search For:** and click **Search**.
4. Once you have found the Epsilen member to add, select the icon under **Action**.
5. When the **Add to Network** pop-up appears, select the network to which the member should be added.

Q: How do I send an Epsilen Mail message?

A: Follow these steps:

1. Log in to Epsilen
2. Select **Epsilen Mail > Send New Mail** in the left menu.
3. On the **Send Epsilen Mail Message** page, select the message recipients.
 - Search for Epsilen Members.
 - Select Epsilen Members from your networks.
 - Enter external e-mail addresses. Note that you will not be able to send attachments or save a copy of your e-mail when sending Epsilen mail to external addresses.
4. Enter the message subject.
5. Enter the message.
6. Click **Send**.

Q: How do I manage my Epsilen Mail forwarding?

A: Follow these steps:

1. Log in to Epsilen.
2. Select **Epsilen Mail > Options** in the left menu.
3. Select the **Mail Forwarding** tab to enable or disable all mail forwarding to your e-mail address or cell phone.

Q: How do I manage my Epsilen Mail?

A: Use Epsilen Mail to send and receive messages to and from members of the Epsilen community, your institution, groups, courses, and networks.

To manage your Epsilen Mail:

1. Log in to Epsilen.
2. Select **Epsilen Mail** from the left menu.

On the **Inbox** page, your messages are separated by mail type. You will see tabs for:

- All Mail
- QuickNotes
- Epsilen Mail
- Institution Mail
- Course Mail
- Group Mail
- System Mail

You will also see tabs for:

- Archived messages
- Sent messages
- Alerts

When viewing a list of messages, you can select multiple messages at a time to delete, archive, or mark as read/unread.

You can also sort the list of messages by using the **Sort By** pull-down menu in the upper-right corner of your inbox.

Q: How do I manage and share my files?

A: Use the **Files/Folders** tool to upload documents, pictures, schoolwork, and other objects. You can share them publicly or privately.

To manage your files, follow these steps:

1. Log in to Epsilen.
2. Select **Files/Folders** from the left menu. Follow the directions that state: "To work with your files, start by selecting a folder from the list of folders on the left or

create a folder by clicking **Create Folder.**” (The Create Folder button is to the right below the directions.)

3. Use the icons on the page to complete the following actions:

Upload File (looks like a green arrow pointing upward)

- Upload up to three (3) files at a time to the selected folder.

Create Folder (looks like a file folder with a plus sign in the corner)

- Create a new folder inside the selected folder.

Share Folder (looks like a hand holding out a folder)

- Share this folder with others.

Edit Folder (looks like a pencil)

- Edit the name and description of the selected folder.

Delete Folder (looks like a trash can)

- Delete the selected folder.
- Note: You cannot delete a folder if it contains any files or subfolders.



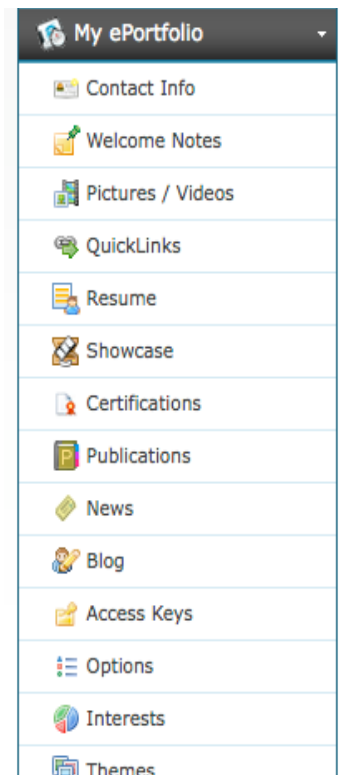
Creating an ePortfolio

Your ePortfolio is your self-representation in Epsilon. After you become comfortable with the Epsilon environment, you will want to build an ePortfolio so that other members can find you and begin to connect with you. An ePortfolio may sound like a personal page on Facebook or MySpace, but there are big differences between Epsilon and social-media sites:

- Since Epsilon is built around online learning, the standards for what should be posted on an ePortfolio are quite a bit higher than the anything-goes looseness predominant in social media.
- An ePortfolio is not a way for your family and friends outside the teaching profession to keep up with your activities.
- Epsilon is about education, and your ePortfolio should reflect that emphasis.

That said, many of the components of an ePortfolio will seem familiar to users of other social-media platforms. First, setting up your ePortfolio and making changes to it is done with a set of tools called *My ePortfolio*. With these tools, you can do all of the following:

- Publish **contact information***
- Post a **welcome note** to briefly introduce yourself and greet visitors to your page
- Include a **picture** of yourself or an avatar (image) to represent you
- Insert **hyperlinks** to your school, organizations, or other things you wish to highlight
- Upload your **résumé***
- Display your achievements and accomplishments through a multimedia **showcase***
- Post your credentials and **certifications***
- List your **publications** (books, journal articles, conference presentations, etc.)*
- Keep a **blog***
- Specify your professional **interests** so that Epsilon can connect you with those who share your interests



By the same token, you can remove any of these tools from your

ePortfolio by using the **Options** feature in the **My Portfolio** menu.

Epsilen recognizes that you probably will not want all potential visitors to your ePortfolio—students, other teachers, other Epsilen members—to have access to all parts of your ePortfolio.

- Therefore, built in to each of the features marked with an asterisk (*) in the above list are **access keys**, which give you the power to limit who can see the information included in the feature.
- For example, you might allow fellow teachers to read your blog postings, which could deal with things like classroom-management techniques, but be less inclined to give students the same access.

In addition, you can customize the look of your ePortfolio (change background and border colors, configure your ePortfolio menu) with tools called **themes** and **options**.

Important: To see the current state of your ePortfolio, select **My ePortfolio > Preview ePortfolio** from the left menu. (The symbol ">" means "then click on.")

One of the best ways to get an idea of ePortfolio possibilities is to browse sample portfolios made public by their owners.

- On the **My Portal** page, click the tab labeled **ePortfolio Examples** (under My Network Channel).
- You will see a gallery of Epsilen members whose ePortfolios are public and available for you to view.

A good ePortfolio to view is that of Ali Jafari, the developer of Epsilen.

- Click on Jafari's name or photo, and a window called **Ali Jafari's Corner** pops up.
- To see his ePortfolio, click the third icon to the right of his name and photo (the icon looks like a sheet of paper with an e on it).

Jafari's ePortfolio includes:

- A short biography (**About Me**)
- A welcome note
- Links to his upcoming talks and recent publications
- **QuickLinks** (on the right side of the page) to his professional affiliations, his Epsilen groups, courses he teaches, shared objects, and recent blog postings
- A photo album of images of himself, his ideas, and his publications

As Jafari's ePortfolio demonstrates, an ePortfolio can be developed into a very detailed, complex self-portrait. The extent of that detail and complexity is up to you.

It is important to remember that your district or open enrollment charter may have guidelines about what may be added to your ePortfolio and what may be open to public view. Please consult local policy before building your ePortfolio.

And as mentioned earlier, your ePortfolio is yours for life, even if your sponsoring institution ends its relationship with Epsilen. This makes it an invaluable way to present yourself and your education interests to colleagues, institutes of higher education, and future employers.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How do I create my ePortfolio?

A: Personalize your ePortfolio by adding your résumé, pictures, blog, shared files, QuickLinks (bookmarks), contact information, and more.

1. Log in to Epsilen.
2. Select ***My ePortfolio***.
3. Select a tool from the list to edit that piece of your ePortfolio.

Q: How do I create my Showcase?

A: Use the ***Showcase*** tool to display examples of your best work and accomplishments in a multimedia format on your ePortfolio.

1. Log in to Epsilen.
2. Select ***My ePortfolio*** > ***Showcase*** in the left menu.

Q: How do I add pictures and videos to my ePortfolio?

A: Follow these steps:

1. Log in to Epsilen.
2. Select ***My ePortfolio*** > ***Welcome Notes*** in the left menu.
3. Click ***Add New Welcome Note*** on the ***Welcome Notes*** page.
4. Enter the content of your welcome note and include any of the following items:

Web Link

- To insert a web link or hyperlink, select the icon that looks like a three-link chain.
- Once the pop-up window appears, enter the URL/web address and select **OK**.

Picture

- To insert a picture, select the icon that looks like a picture of mountains.
- Once the pop-up window appears, click the circle next to **Select existing picture**, then click the **Select Existing** box to insert a picture from your Epsilen Files/Folders.

OR

- Click the circle next to **Upload new picture**. Then click the **Upload Picture** box to upload a picture from your computer.

File Link

- To insert a file link, select the icon that looks like a piece of paper with the corner folded down.
- Once the pop-up window appears, click the circle next to **Select existing file**, then click the **Select Existing** box to retrieve a file from your Epsilen Files/Folders.

OR

- Click the circle next to **Upload new file**. Then click the **Upload File** box to upload a file from your computer.

YouTube Video

- To add a YouTube video, select the icon that reads **YouTube**.
 - Once the pop-up window appears, paste in the HTML code provided by YouTube for the video.
 - Select **Insert**.
- * Please keep in mind that your district or open enrollment charter may have guidelines about what may be added to your ePortfolio and what may be open to public view. Please consult local policy before building your ePortfolio.

Q: What is QuickNote?

A: A QuickNote is a form appearing at the bottom of your ePortfolio home page. It permits visitors to quickly and easily send you messages via the Epsilen Environment. Senders must provide their name and e-mail address along with their message. Quick-

Note messages will appear in your internal Epsilen Mail and may also be forwarded to any e-mail address designated within *Epsilen Mail > Options > Mail Forwarding*.

Q: How can I hide the QuickNote form on my ePortfolio home page?

A: Follow these steps:

1. Log in to Epsilen.
2. Select *My ePortfolio > Options* in the left menu.
3. Click the *QuickNote Hiding* tab on the page.
4. Check the box to hide the QuickNote form on your ePortfolio home page.

Q: Why might I want to hide the QuickNote form on my ePortfolio home page?

A: While the QuickNote form requires the sender to provide a name and e-mail address, there is no guarantee that the name or e-mail address used is accurate or legitimate. Thus, there is the possibility of misuse of the QuickNote form by anonymous senders.

Q: How do I delete my Epsilen ePortfolio?

A: Your Epsilen ePortfolio may be “parked,” or hidden from public view. Parking your ePortfolio will not cancel your Epsilen account, but your site will not be visible. You can still access your account and “un-park” your ePortfolio website at any time.

To park (hide) your Epsilen ePortfolio website:

1. Log in to Epsilen.
2. Select *My ePortfolio > Options* in the left menu.
3. Select the *ePortfolio Parking (Hiding)* tab.
4. Check the box next to *Park my ePortfolio website*.



Joining a Group in Epsilen

Joining an Epsilen group could not be easier.

- Select ***My Portal*** > ***Groups*** from the left menu.
- Since you want to join an existing group rather than start a new one, click the ***Search Groups*** box.

On the search page, you can look for groups by:

- The groups' names (if you know them)
- A short description
- Keywords

For example, to see all groups related to the teaching of English, type *English* in the keywords search box. The accessibility icon (a handshake) means that the group is open to the public, so you can join right away.

That's really all there is to it.

If the accessibility icon looks like a person reading a document, you will need to request membership in the group in order to join it. Clicking the icon will take you to a ***Request Group Membership*** form, which allows you to e-mail the group's owner.

In addition, a member of a group can invite you to join (unless membership restrictions, such as enrollment in a particular course, would exclude you).

One of the main goals of the TEA-Epsilen partnership is to promote the formation of professional learning communities (PLCs). These groups will allow teachers to

- Share their expertise with one another
- Collaborate on teaching strategies and classroom projects
- Discuss matters of professional interest
- Maintain ongoing professional-development (PD) relationships

PLCs will also be formed between PD participants and Education Service Center specialists.

As an example of how PLCs will make it easy to maintain ongoing PD relationships, consider the following example:

- At the end of a face-to-face PD presentation, a group of teachers who have worked together throughout the training decide to exchange e-mail addresses so that they can keep in touch about what they have learned. Pieces of paper are passed around, and everyone writes down his or her e-mail address. Then, each person has to carefully enter those addresses manually into an online address book, knowing that even one wrongly typed letter or symbol will make the address unusable. The possibility of frustration or disappointment is high.
- By contrast, with an online PLC in the Epsilon platform, PD participants will immediately be able to exchange e-mail messages, photos, video links, and other types of electronic files.

In fact, participants in a PD course delivered through Epsilon may be invited to join a PLC organized around that particular training. They can send and receive updates related to the training, ask questions of the group, and maintain relationships that will make PD an ongoing activity.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How do I create a group?

A: Epsilen Groups is a tool that allows Epsilen members with mutual interests to communicate and network online. Members of a group can:

- Send messages to one another using **Group Mail**
- Engage in discussions using **Forums**
- Use **Drop Boxes** to share files
- Communicate live with the **Chat** tool
- Collaborate on editable web documents using the **Wiki**

Epsilen members who are given the necessary permissions may create groups.

To create a group:

1. Log in to Epsilen.
2. Select **Groups > Create Group** in the left menu.
3. Enter at least a Group Name and Description. Your district may want to standardize group names for easy identification. (Note: Entering a few keywords will make it easier for prospective members to find your group.)
4. Set the registration requirement.
5. Click **Create**.

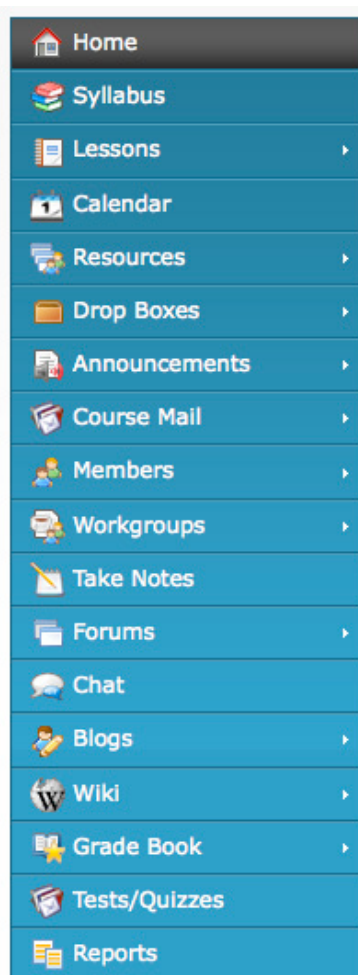


Taking a Course in Epsilon

Perhaps the easiest way to get a sense of what it is like to take a course in Epsilon is to watch a demonstration. The School of Continuing and Professional Studies (SCPS) at New York University uses Epsilon for some of its coursework, and students and teachers at SCPS have made a series of YouTube videos that show how to get the most out of the Epsilon website.

A four-minute SCPS video about taking a course in Epsilon (“Online Course Overview for NYU-SCPS Students”) is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYIp0oD70WQ>

While each course will be different in its specifics, the Epsilon Environment is the same for all courses. When you log in to a course, the left-hand menu will contain some or all of the following tools:



This should be a complete list of all the resources needed for a course. Navigate with these features just as you do with those under ***My Portal*** or ***My ePortfolio***.

Important: To leave a course, click **Exit Course** either in the left menu or in the upper-right corner.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How do I join a course?

A: Follow these steps:

1. Log into Epsilen.
 2. At the top of the **My Portal** page, select the **Courses** option from the pull-down menu to the left of the **Search** button.
 3. Enter text related to the course in the **Search for** box, then click **Search**.
 4. On the search results page, click on the title of the course to view its public Home page.
 5. On the public Home page pop-up, you will see “This course is accessible by [invitation only, everyone in an institution, all Epsilen members, etc.]” in the left menu.
 6. To join a course, refer to the course’s registration settings to determine how to join.
- * After teachers complete state-sponsored face-to-face training, they will receive additional information regarding future online modules, when they will be made available, and how to join. This information will be provided through education service centers and/or approved content development partners.

Q: How do I log in to a course?

A: Follow these steps:

1. Log in to Epsilen.
2. Select **Courses** in the left menu.
3. You will see a list of courses that you are a member of.
4. Select the title of a course to enter it.



Course Tools

From the course features listed in the previous section, we are going to concentrate on **forums**, **blogs**, and **chat**.

Forums are discussion threads, of the type that may be familiar from other online discussion groups and Usenet groups. For example, an instructor of an online course might want to follow up on a topic that seemed to generate a lot of interest. The instructor could:

- Post a discussion topic
- Ask or require participants to contribute to the conversation about the topic
- Use their contributions as the basis for a participation grade

As in all your Epsilon activities, forum participation should be professional:

- Stay on topic (if you want to change topics, start a new forum).
- Keep your comments concise.
- Build on—do not just repeat—what others have said.
- Avoid using Internet slang and acronyms (LOL [laughing out loud], ROTFL [rolling on the floor laughing], etc.).

Blogs are like online journals or diaries. Unlike handwritten journals, blogs can contain videos, links to websites, and other interactive features. An instructor can require participants to keep a blog for a particular course, or participants may keep a course blog on their own initiative.

If you have the necessary permissions (or are required) to keep a course blog:

- Feel free to be informal—but stay within the bounds of professionalism.
- Enhance your blog with pictures, videos, and hyperlinks as appropriate.

If blogging becomes something you enjoy, you might consider writing a public blog—one available to anyone on the Internet—on a topic you feel passionate about. Note: To do this, you would not use the Epsilon blogging tool, but a free blogging website (such as WordPress, Blogger, BlogSpot, or LiveJournal).

Chat, as the name suggests, is the least formal type of class interaction. Course chats, which take place in chat rooms, are often informal and loosely organized collections of comments and musings.

Chats, which are less structured or formal than forums, can be:

- Quick conversations
- Opportunities to informally discuss matters related to coursework
- Conducted in real-time with other participants

Despite this informality, chat participants should always remain professional in their exchanges.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How do I create a blog?

A: Follow these steps:

1. Log in to Epsilen.
2. Select ***My ePortfolio > Blog*** from the left menu.
3. Click the ***Add New Entry*** box on the Blog page.
4. Provide an ***Entry Title*** and type the ***Entry Body*** in the given space.
You can also select an ***Entry Icon*** from the array of icons below the text box.
5. To display the entry on your ePortfolio site, click the circle beside ***Show***.
To hide the entry from others, click the circle next to ***Hide***.
6. If you would like to start a conversation with your readers, check the box next to ***Allow visitors to add comments***. Unchecking this box will mean that readers cannot add comments to your blog.
7. Click ***Save***.

Q: How do I copy a blog entry from my ePortfolio to a course blog?

A: Follow these steps:

1. Log in to Epsilen.
2. Select ***My ePortfolio > Blog*** from the left menu.

3. In the list of your blog entries, click the **Copy** icon (looks like two sheets of paper) to the right of a blog entry.
4. On the **Copy Entry** pop-up, check the box beside each course to which you wish to copy the blog.
5. Click **Copy**.

Q: How do I copy a blog entry from a course to my ePortfolio Home page?

A: Follow these steps:

1. Log in to Epsilen.
2. Select **Courses** from the left menu.
3. Enter the course that contains the blog entry you wish to copy.
4. Select **Blogs > My Blog Entries** in the left menu of your course.
5. In the list of blog entries, select the **Copy** icon (looks like two sheets of paper) to the right of the blog entry you wish to copy.
6. On the **Copy Entry** pop-up, check the box next to **My ePortfolio website** (and any other courses you wish to copy to)
7. Click **Copy**.