

Chapter 30

Using ePortfolios to Integrate and Assess Learning across the Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Students who are able to make connections across academic courses and co-curricular activities are often excellent students. They use skills to transfer knowledge from one context to another and benefit from this integration. Not all students do this without being taught. Using ePortfolios allows for learning to become visible across time and learning situations. This benefits students by allowing them to see and reflect on learning over time. And, because student learning and the resulting reflections are documented, others can see the student learning as well. Faculty mentoring can influence this process, guiding students through the reflection process and the creation of a learning ePortfolio that is a richer and more meaningful reflection of all that occurs during a student's time in higher education. In addition to the benefit to increase student learning, the technology used in ePortfolios can provide for a better assessment of student learning across an institution.

If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea. —Antoine de Saint-Exupery

INTRODUCTION

Most institutions in higher education have broad and far-reaching mission statements focusing on goals such as “problem solving,” “critical think-

ing,” “lifelong learning,” and “global participation.” These are quite laudable and worthwhile aims, most certainly. However, knowing when and even if students reach these goals is a very difficult task. More often than not, university mission statements are seen as a philosophy or a vision of what students could and should become. And, to make matters even more difficult, many students may not even be aware of their institutional mission statements.

Added to this mix of problems, is the issue of public and legislative discontent with the system of higher education. “Colleges and universities,

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for all the benefits they bring, accomplish far less for their students than they should. Many seniors graduate without being able to write well enough to satisfy their employers. Many cannot reason clearly or perform competently in analyzing complex, nontechnical problems, even though faculties rank critical thinking as the primary goal of a college education” (Bok, 2006, p. 8). And Derek Bok is not alone in his critique of the failings of higher education. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (2011) have questioned whether or not students are really gaining much at all through their college years. How is it possible that this can be happening given higher education’s focus on these goals? Perhaps a part of this problem lies in the fact that our mission statements are grand and aesthetically beautiful, but extremely difficult to measure and to determine if the institution is truly doing what it states it will do for student learning. “Organizational inertia, the assumption that students are meeting the academic goals espoused in mission statements, and a lack of external pressure to demonstrate learning have all contributed to a failure systematically to measure and evaluate students’ gain in higher education” (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 17).

New technologies and a renewed focus on student learning can help to change this downward spiral. Indeed, accountability measures are becoming integrated into many university systems as they become essential pillars in the accreditation process of U.S. institutions. “Accreditation has long been a topic likelier to make eyelids droop than to inflame passion. But after years of quiet neglect from policy makers, it was thrust into the spotlight during the second Bush administration, when then-Education Secretary Margaret Spellings and a national commission she appointed sought to use accreditation to crank up accountability on colleges and universities” (Lederman, 2012).

With accountability and assessment becoming ubiquitous on college campuses, assessment professionals have been searching for ways to

meaningfully gather data on student learning that will not overwhelm faculty and students in terms of the time that is required to gather and analyze those resulting data.

One tool that has become increasingly popular in recent years is the ePortfolio (Nguyen, 2013). The ePortfolio provides “a scalable and comprehensive means to document individual and organizational progress towards defined goals and objectives, market talent, engage in assessment and evaluation, expand professional development, examine the efficacy of operations, support learning, supervise projects, and engage in student and/or labor management” (Buzzetto-More, 2010, p. ix). As students work through their coursework and their co-curricular activities, they can regularly compare their learning against institutional missions and goals to determine their progress. The ePortfolio offers the means to store documentation about student learning and also provides a platform for the student to reflect on what was learned. This potentially developmental approach gives students a means to recognize their own learning and to share it with others. “Portfolio advocates talked of students reflecting on their own work and thereby developing critical thinking skills. Portfolios showcased student work, making them proud of their achievement. They helped students believe that they owned their own academic work” (Batson, 2007, paragraph 1). These advantages to ePortfolio use can empower students to reflect on their learning and to better use their learning across educational contexts. In addition, institutions can use this type of documentation to understand how (and if) students are meeting the learning goals stated in institutional missions. Thus, an ePortfolio is a digitized collection of student artifacts that will represent the student’s learning and development over time (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005).

Indeed, ePortfolios are “transitioning from a three-ring binder to the computer; turning the traditional educational portfolio into an electronic one with the ability to share one’s work to a wider audience” (Chambers & Wickersham, 2007, p.

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