

Subject: TP Msg. #1195 Engaging Today's Learners: Students and ePortfolios

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To: tomorrows-professor

In order to effectively frame the purpose of using ePortfolios to students, you must have a comprehensive understanding of who your learners are. The goal for any instructor is to make the case for ePortfolios with a compelling argument that specifically addresses students' needs and concerns. In other words, the message should be about the ways that ePortfolios are personally significant and relevant to students both in the context of the course, program, or institution but also to their overall learning, individual goals, and identity development. This chapter discusses some strategies to foster student buy-in and provides several examples of activities to engage students in the folio thinking process.

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Folks:

The posting below looks at some strategies to foster student buy-in for the use of ePortfolios.. It is from Chapter 4, Engaging Today's Learners: Students and ePortfolios, in the book Documenting Learning with ePortfolios: A guide for College Instructors, by Tracy Penny Light, Helen L. Chen and John C. Ittelson. Published by Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint. One Montgomery Street, Suite 1200, San Francisco, CA 94104-4594 www.josseybass.com Copyright © 2012 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

Regards,

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UP NEXT: A Win for the Robo-Readers

Engaging Today's Learners: Students and ePortfolios

For faculty instructors, the benefits of ePortfolios for students are often easily recognizable: at a very basic level, they allow learners to make connections among varied learning experiences and transfer knowledge and skills to new contexts and situations. This approach, particularly when it capitalizes on the features of ePortfolios together with a culture of folio thinking, can promote deep and integrative learning. For students, however, the value of ePortfolios and folio thinking may be unclear. Students may initially assume that the use of ePortfolios in a course or program is simply a new and faddish approach to teaching and learning. Indeed, without effectively communicating the purpose of ePortfolios and the benefits that ePortfolios are intended to produce for them, students may resist the approach, thereby making it challenging for them to really capitalize on those benefits. In order to effectively frame the purpose of using ePortfolios to students, you must have a comprehensive understanding of who your learners are. The goal for any instructor is to make the case for ePortfolios with a compelling argument that specifically addresses students' needs and concerns. In other words, the message should be about the ways that ePortfolios are personally significant and relevant to students both in the context of the course, program, or institution but also to their overall learning, individual goals, and identity development. This chapter discusses some strategies to foster student buy-in and provides several examples of activities to engage students in the folio thinking process.

Understanding Today's Students

Whether the students are adult learners returning to school to prepare for a career change or traditional 17- to 22-year-olds who exemplify the qualities of the Net Generation (Educause, 2005; Oblinger, 2003; Pew Research Center, 2010), Digital Natives (Prensky, 2001), and Generation M(ultitasking) (The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010) learners, having a sense of students' characteristics, priorities, and lives both inside and outside the classroom is critical to the design of any ePortfolio initiative. The following is a summary of some of the perceptions of ePortfolios that may be held by students. These questions have been gleaned from "anti-ePortfolio" opinion pieces written for student newspapers.

- Will anyone look at this? Will employers and graduate schools actually read my ePortfolio? Will they care to read a paper that I wrote in a freshman philosophy course?
- Why is the ePortfolio now considered evidence of my learning? Aren't my degree and my grades enough?
- Why do I need to share what I do? Why should there be a "social" aspect to my academic efforts?
- Who is reviewing what is in my ePortfolio? How rigorous is the evaluation process?
- Why should students who are not in fields that require ePortfolio keep and update an ePortfolio?
- Why should this be a requirement of all students? Why can't there be a choice?
- It's a lot of work. Why is this worth my time?

It should be noted that some of these concerns are expressed by some faculty instructors as well, particularly with respect to perceptions of what typically constitutes evidence of learning, namely test scores, grades, diplomas, and degrees. The vocabulary used to describe ePortfolios to students is an important consideration—in one of the editorial pieces, the author expressed sarcasm towards terms such as "learning outcomes," "core competencies," and "mastery." For many students, these phrases represent academic jargon and are not very helpful as they struggle with real-world concerns of figuring out how to pay for their college degree and what kind of job they will be able to get after graduation. In many ways, this disconnect parallels ongoing debates about the value of a liberal arts education, particularly for students who are increasingly vocationally oriented in their goals for their undergraduate education and who often see this period as merely a stepping stone to their future profession. Given this careerist mindset, many of these students may find the idea of developing "core competencies" not overly helpful to them and their future. The challenge is ensuring that learners understand how, why, and where the ePortfolio process and

product will be useful. Careful thought must be given to how to communicate the value of this new approach in a language that is meaningful and relevant to students and their needs at the various milestones in the learning career that begins in college or university and beyond.

Strategies to Frame ePortfolios for Students

Given students' concerns about the value of ePortfolios and their "return on investment," the following are some strategies for addressing and responding to some of the questions posed above.

- Will anyone look at this? Will employers and graduate schools actually read my ePortfolio? Will they care to read about a paper that I wrote in a freshman philosophy course?

Although the one-page résumé will undoubtedly still be what employers will want to look at first when narrowing down their candidate pool, the ePortfolio is something that would be of interest when prospective employers are trying to decide which applicant to hire among their top three finalists. Increasingly, the first thing recruiters do is google applicants; it can be quite valuable to have their search bring up a formal ePortfolio that carries the credibility of an academic institution. Florida State University's Career ePortfolio sponsored by their Career Center has conducted surveys of employers who indicate that online career ePortfolios are useful in the recruiting process. Though employers and graduate schools may not care about any individual paper or product, they are interested in students' ability to demonstrate written communication skills with actual writing samples and being able to see growth and improvement over time, for example, from first-year writing to a senior honors thesis.

- Why is the ePortfolio now considered evidence of my learning? Aren't my degree and my grades enough?

As the official record of the educational experience, a student's academic transcript simply lists the classes taken and grades received. It represents the education that was defined by the institution and delivered to the student but does not always acknowledge what the student got out of his or her classes and other kinds of cocurricular and extra-curricular experiences such as studying abroad, community service, co-ops, and internships that might have occurred on and off campus. The ePortfolio platform offers an opportunity for students to include and share these informal experiences and achievements that might otherwise have been overlooked but which are often quite significant and memorable in influencing students' personal interests and growth, and in defining their passions. Thus, the degree and grades are not enough because, frankly, they are incomplete and limited in their ability to fully represent the holistic picture of an undergraduate education as it develops both inside and outside the classroom.

- Why should students who are not in fields that require ePortfolio keep and update an ePortfolio?

Though some fields such as teacher education, architecture, graphic design, and writing and rhetoric have a culture of portfolios and reflection, the concept may be unfamiliar to professions such as engineering and the social sciences. However, increasing external pressures related to accountability and institutional accreditation have instigated the development of a culture of assessment where more authentic evidence of student learning is not only expected but actually mandated by the institution, the system, and often the state. For example, ABET, the accrediting body for engineering programs, has also defined a set of program educational outcomes that includes both technical and nontechnical (or "soft") skills that faculty are expected to teach and measure. It is often difficult for students to understand how these kinds of ePortfolios can be of use to them and, as a result, they simply treat it as another requirement to check off and "get out of the way." However, students can benefit from an ePortfolio requirement in multiple ways as a product (to show prospective employers as discussed) and also a process for understanding and gaining practice articulating and reflecting upon their achievements and how they fit together, as they might be asked to do in a job or graduate school interview. The following example from Clemson University illustrates how Jennifer Johnson, one of the winners of their annual ePortfolio contest in 2011, describes the rationale behind her ePortfolio:

My ePortfolio site is a varying collection of artifacts demonstrating the skills and knowledge I have gained while attending Clemson University's College of Engineering & Science. Within my ePortfolio, you can track

my academic development by exploring such links as my freshman General Engineering project, my senior Civil Engineering Capstone Design Project, and even my General Education Competencies highlighting my entire educational experience. Throughout my site, you will also find clear evidence of why I believe I have developed into a competent Transportation Engineering professional. As a senior with graduation quickly approaching, I have submitted my ePortfolio to possible employers for them to review such artifacts as my technical research papers, AutoCAD and GIS software skills, past internship and professional organization experiences, and other valuable resources like resumes, references, and honors/awards that are beneficial in “selling” myself throughout the interview process. My ePortfolio has received an exceptional amount of positive feedback from both professors and industry leaders as I have used it as a primary source of reference in applying for graduate school fellowships and even full-time jobs in Transportation Engineering. [<http://www.clemson.edu/academics/programs/eportfolio/news.html>]

The ePortfolio as a "Cabinet of Curiosities"

The concept of a “learning career” introduced in Chapter Two provides an overall perspective of where ePortfolios could be implemented within the existing educational trajectory. It is also entirely reasonable to consider experimenting with ePortfolios in an individual course, workshop, or program as a strategy to engage learners in a more meaningful way. As an instructor, you may consider how the learning experience you are designing fits within the student learning career at your institution and how an ePortfolio component can take advantage of existing milestones where students may already be documenting and reflecting upon their learning. In short, consider what value an ePortfolio can bring—whether it’s streamlining and increasing the efficiency of activities that are already ongoing or contributing an innovative perspective and opportunity that will provide new insights, knowledge, and understanding of students’ learning careers within the context of their broader educational and vocational goals.

Documenting a Learning career in a “Cabinet of Curiosities”

Inevitably, students will compare the learning ePortfolio to their Facebook or LinkedIn accounts. Though it is possible to create an ePortfolio within these popular social networking platforms, it is important to reiterate that the focus of the learning ePortfolio is to document the development of an intellectual identity, not a social identity. Macaulay Honors College of the City University of New York system uniquely characterizes the student’s learning career and the ePortfolio as a “cabinet of curiosities” by framing these concepts in the following way:

Think of all the work you do while you’re a student at Macaulay. Assignments for classes, projects, a thesis, essays, photography, videos, musical performances, websites, blogs, wikis, mathematical formulae, scientific research or experiments, short stories, poetry ... even more. Then think beyond that. Think of the other kinds of work you also do, that might be less formal, or less “official.” Conversations with friends, interesting websites that have influenced your thinking and learning, books you’ve read on your own, places you’ve visited, souvenirs, emails ... and even more than that, too.

All of these are “artifacts” of your thinking, your learning, yourself while you’re a Macaulay Honors College student. If you could put it all together, in a cabinet, or a room (or a huge building!), you would have a cabinet of curiosities (a wunderkammer). It could be the museum of you—and you could invite people in to take a look. You could decide which rooms in your museum would be good for showing to which audience, depending on what you wanted them to know about you. You could keep some rooms private, only for you, and you could have other rooms that you showed only to special people.

Even better, you could spend some time by yourself or with a few friends or colleagues, walking through the rooms, looking over all your artifacts, and thinking about what they mean to you, what they show about you. And as time goes by you might have different thoughts about each artifact, because when you learn more, you see things in a different way. And when you show your artifacts to friends and colleagues, they might be able to point out things that you missed yourself—things you didn’t know you were learning. Then when you show the rooms in your museum to other people, you could tell them some of what you thought—you could guide them through your museum, explaining why you chose to include the artifacts, describing how you got them, and how they relate to other objects. You might even want to move things

around, or make new rooms, or make a new map that shows how different rooms or shelves relate to each other.

And in a way, that's what an ePortfolio is. It's a digital representation of your cabinet of curiosities, your wunderkammer, your museum of you. You get to build it, put your artifacts into it, design it, redesign it, think about it, show it to other people, get their comments, and tell them what you think.

The analogy of the student as a curator of a collection of digital artifacts is a useful framing to communicate to students their critical role in selecting, preserving, certifying, and presenting these assets.

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