ePortfolios: Online Tools for Critical Reflection

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ePortfolios are web-based, student-generated collections of their work and reflections on their learning and growth. They are tools for students to synthesize and integrate their learning, inside and outside of the classroom, by critically reflecting on their academic and co-curricular experiences. I first learned about ePortfolios from George Kuh who visited our campus in the fall of 2016 and mentioned that they were the latest addition to the list of High Impact Practices that deepen student learning (https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips). As Bret Eynon and Laura Gambino note, ePortfolios can facilitate student inquiry into their own learning, reflection on their development and growth, and integration across disciplines, as well as curricular and co-curricular contexts (2017, 20).

As repositories of student work, ePortfolios allow students to reflect on their academic learning at various stages of their undergraduate development. They facilitate critical reflection which has been theorized as a four-stage reflective cycle (presence in experience, description of experience, analysis of experience, and experimentation; Rogers 2002) or a three-step sequence (describing experiences objectively, examining experiences in light of learning goals, and articulation of learning that includes goals for future action; Ash & Clayton 2009). In ePortfolios, students can describe their work (research papers, leadership positions, etc.), analyze how it has contributed to their growth and development, and experiment with various

future possibilities by tailoring their ePortfolios for different career paths and job opportunities.

I have used ePortfolios in several different courses: first year seminars, upper-level seminars, directed individual study, and capstone courses. ePortfolios allow seniors and recent graduates to showcase their work, and they have been shown to improve performance in job interviews because students can readily recall what they have done over the course of their undergraduate career and cite specific examples of their transferrable skills. In my capstone course, I had students create a type of ePortfolio that included pages about themselves, their signature work, their co-curricular activities, their resume, and their contact information. On their signature work page, I had them describe their capstone project for the general public and reflect on what they had learned in their program.

ePortfolios can be powerful for first year students as well. Some institutions, such as Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) include ePortfolios within their first-year-experience programs. They have students create ePersonal Development Plans (ePDP) that enable students to increase awareness of themselves and others, set self-concordant goals, develop hope, and shape education and career plans (https://eportfolio.iupui.edu/). When students create ePortfolios in their first year, they can build on it over time, reflect on what they have learned at various points in their undergraduate career, and chart different pathways when their personal and professional goals change. They can generate robust repositories of what they have learned in their academic and co-curricular experiences.

Not unexpectedly, the ePortfolios from my first year seminar were less developed than my capstone course. First year students, navigating new terrain and trying to get their bearings, reflected on what they did in high school and what they hoped to pursue in college. Some had clearly defined goals and career aspirations, while others were uncertain and open to various trajectories. But I think the ePortfolio served two important purposes: first, it clearly demarcated their new identity as a college student, and second, it allowed them to reflect on what they wanted to get out of their college experience in a private forum.

Although most free ePortfolios–such as Weebly, Wix, and Wordpress–are public, subscription ePortfolio platforms such as Digication, Pebble Pad, and Taskstream allow students to keep their ePortfolios completely private, share with particular individuals (such as their instructors or classmates), share it within their university, or make it publicly accessible. Many students find such privacy to be novel. When I asked my first-year students if they kept journals or did any reflective writing, I was surprised when only one student raised her hand. The rest said that they used social media such as Facebook, Instagram, or Finsta (a hidden Instagram shared among friends). Instead of engaging in private reflection, they were posting and performing on public or semi-public websites. As a result, many found ePortfolios to be unfamiliar territory, because there was no clearly defined audience, with the exception of myself, who would check to make sure that they were completing their pages, awarding all or no credit.

For upper-level seminars and directed individual studies, I have had students create ePortfolios

that were more closely tied to the course content. A student researching Aikido created one as a public website with an introduction to Aikido, an annotated bibliography of scholarly resources, and reflections on his personal experience. For my Buddhism course, they reflected on what they learned in the course, uploaded their scholarly review paper, and also wrote about their research for a more general audience.

Questions to consider:

- Do you feel familiar with and comfortable using the ePortfolio platform? What campus resources and support are available for you and your students?
- For what purpose do you envision using the ePortfolio–for students to reflect on a paper/project, learning process, or academic development?
- Does your course seek for students to integrate their learning across various contexts or over time? If so, how might you use ePortfolios for this integrative learning?
- What prompts might you include in your ePortfolio to encourage the kind of integration, reflection, and synthesis that you would like to see? For example, you might ask what insights they gained from an assignment, how it connects to other goals, or how it contributes to their understanding of the discipline or their career development.

References:
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