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Frequently Asked Questions about Electronic Portfolios (e-Portfolios) and Student Success

By Dr. Vera Campbell and Dr. Francis McDonald

Colleges and universities today are exploring a number of ways to measure student learning. At Hampton University, administrators and assessment coordinators are tasked with identifying and documenting evidence to understand the learning process and are very familiar with terms related to assessment – e.g., intended learning outcomes, key performance indicators, and program plans -- and use the TracDat system to manage all sorts of information or data. As our “Home By the Sea” continues to refine its University-wide assessment plan, the e-Portfolio is one of the tools under consideration for institution-wide use in measuring the achievement of student success across diverse disciplines. A recent Academic Excellence Workshop for Spring 2015 addressed the topic, “*Electronic Portfolios and Student Success*.” Guest speakers, Drs. Vera Campbell and Francis McDonald, shared valuable information about e-Portfolios and their use in their respective disciplines. The purpose of this article is to respond to frequently asked questions regarding the use of e-Portfolios.

What is an e-Portfolio?

An electronic or “e” portfolio is a collection of artifacts – text-based, graphic, or multimedia elements -- including demonstrations, resources, and accomplishments that represent an individual and are archived on a Website or stored on other electronic mediums to include DVDs, CD-ROMs, and flash drives. Artifacts or examples of an individual’s work can include writing samples, layout designs, videos, presentations, reports, references, resumes, cover letters, and the like, that demonstrate what an individual –student or instructor – has developed to reflect their skills and/or capabilities. An “academic ally,” the e-portfolio can support student advisement, personal and professional career development goals, and provide documented evidence of what individuals have achieved.

What are some of the ways an e-Portfolio may be used?

The uses of e-Portfolios can vary depending upon its user. In academic institutions of higher learning, e-portfolio users may include students, faculty, and institutions. For all users, as noted above, e-Portfolios provide electronic storage of information. Students and alumni, for example, typically will collect examples of their work during their time in school and later as they begin their career to document their experiences. They can then submit their e-Portfolio as evidence of what they have learned to prospective employers. Similarly, faculty members can also use e-Portfolios to archive their work, but also to share their teaching philosophies. For the institution, e-Portfolios can be used as evidence to support a program's self-study and accreditation.

How is an e-Portfolio beneficial to students, faculty, and the institution?

A significant advantage for incorporating an e-Portfolio in a program of study is primarily the benefit offered for users, especially students. The final product itself is clearly a reflection of learning, however, the thinking, formatting, use of the digital technology, making meaning of and the overall framework personalizes the creative experience. Students are able to capture their learning, reflect on their experiences and incorporate feedback from their instructors. Faculty members are able to assess what their students are learning by tracking a student's development over time and understand better how to and what to focus on based on observable strengths and weaknesses. Faculty can more precisely advise students and help prepare them to meet career goals. For institutions, e-Portfolios can contribute in the planning of educational programs, documenting credentials of students and alumni, and better preparing for institutional and program accreditation.

Are e-Portfolios in current use on our campus?

According to a survey of school deans and department chairs, nearly half (46%) of the departments/schools on campus use a student portfolio as evidence of learning. Those not using portfolios expressed a strong desire to incorporate them into their programs. There are schools on campus that require students to complete a regular portfolio or e-portfolio as a graduation requirement and have incorporated the portfolio as an assessment measure in their TracDat Student Learner Outcomes.

What are some of the possible challenges faculty may face in implementing and administering e-Portfolios?

1. Challenge 1: Creating a culture in which educators facilitate the development of an effective student portfolio.

Since faculty "own the curriculum," they should be involved in determining what constitutes good work and which artifacts should be included in the portfolio. One solution to this issue is to ask faculty what class assignments can be included in the portfolio. The information provided by faculty can then be

developed into a list of suggested artifacts to include in the portfolio. You may also decide that there are certain assignments that all students must include in the portfolio; these are “embedded assignments.” Communication is key, and faculty who teach a course that has “embedded assignments” should be informed of this and it should be clearly communicated to students in the course syllabus.

2. *Challenge 2: Ensuring the portfolio is evaluated in a valid and reliable manner.*

Developing a rubric for evaluating the portfolio is instrumental to ensuring that they are evaluated equitably, especially if they are being evaluated by a team of reviewers. Providing students with a standardized portfolio template assists reviewers in providing students with proper feedback and guidance on the artifacts that are included or need to be included. For example, the portfolio template may require students to include proof that they have attained the program competencies (written and oral communication skills), self-assessments, reflective essays as well as the faculty review of attainment of educational outcomes.

3. *Challenge 3: Ensuring that the Work of the Student is Authentic.*

Students may include group assignments in the portfolio. Students should include a short description of what they contributed to the assignment. Since most documents included in a portfolio have been graded by an instructor, the work has already been checked for authenticity. However, the reviewer should also check the work since documents included in the portfolio may not be the original work that was graded by the instructor.

4. *Challenge 4: Acquiring Enough Individuals to Evaluate the Portfolio.*

If the portfolio is required for all students in the department, then you will need many individuals to review them and provide feedback. Portfolios can be reviewed by the entire faculty body as well as external stakeholders (experts in the field). If a strong rubric is provided to the reviewers, the portfolios will be evaluated consistently.

How can I implement e-portfolio use in my department?

The departmental student learning outcomes or competencies can be used to develop a list of artifacts that students should include in their portfolio to document attainment of knowledge, skills, and abilities. If you do not have an assignment that addresses a departmental learning outcome, you can develop one. Having course assignments or activities that can be included in the portfolio ensures that your course is in alignment with the student learning outcomes of the department. In addition, remember to provide the list to students as a guide for what they should include in the portfolio.

References

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Ten Tips for More Efficient and Effective Grading

By Victoria Smith, Ph.D. and Stephanie Maher Palenque

From FacultyFocus.Com

Many instructors dread grading, not just because grading takes up a sizable amount of time and can prove itself a tedious task, but also because instructors struggle with grading effectively and efficiently. However, effective grading does not have to take inordinate amounts of time, nor does one need to sacrifice quality for speed. The following tips can help instructors grade more effectively while enhancing student learning.

1. **One and Done:** Mention the error and explain how to correct it once. If the error occurs subsequent times, highlight the word(s) or sentence and/or use the comment balloon in Microsoft Word's Track Changes to draw attention to the error succinctly. For example, if a student uses second person in an essay, the instructor might compose the following comment the first time the error appears:

Avoid addressing the audience directly as it can come off as accusatory. Use words like "one," "individual," etc.

If the student repeats the error in the assignment, highlight the second-person usage (the word "you," for example) and add a comment bubble stating "Avoid second person." This method not only saves time, but it also explains and reinforces the concept to the student.

2. **Bank Comments:** Keep a bank of comments about frequent errors students make and organize them in groups for easy access. Consider grouping comments according to module, assignment, and chapter, or grammar, content, and organization. For example, if an instructor sees frequent errors regarding point of view, keep related comments grouped in the same area to access them easily.
3. **Frontload Feedback:** D. Royce Sadler (2010) argues that feedback, though often retrospective, also has a prospective element or "feedforward" (p. 539), meaning, instructors need to write comments students can apply to future assignments. If teaching a class in which students submit both a first draft and a final draft of an essay, focus on providing more detailed

feedback on the first draft. This method should help save time later and will hold the student accountable for reading and applying their first draft feedback. Also, in the final draft one can point out errors rather than explaining them again in-depth to the student. If it is evident the student has not revised his/her final draft according to first draft comments, refer students to the first draft.

4. **Global Comments vs. Local Corrections:** If a student has written the paper in the incorrect genre in his/her first draft, comment minimally on local-level issues—grammar, format, etc.—and instead focus comments on global issues. For example, if the student writes a summary of a work, and the assignment asks for an analysis instead, then it is best to comment globally. If the student needs to rewrite the entire essay, it is fruitless to provide copious commentary regarding grammar and mechanics.
5. **KISS (Keep It Simple for Students):** When making grading a teachable moment, be sure comments do not become so convoluted and esoteric so as to impair learning. Keep the language academic, yet accessible to the student.
6. **Attitude and Approach:** Make student learning the primary goal. According to Getzlaf, et al (2009) effective feedback is a mutual process involving both student and instructor. The students' involvement in learning is at least partially dependent on their perception of their instructor's interest and friendliness, as well as their instructor's engagement and communication about their performance and their grades.
7. **Conscious Use of Comments:** According to Getzlaf et al (2009), effective feedback is applicable to future situations. Comment only when there is still something the student can do to improve the grade on a live assignment, unless they can use the comment on a final product to enhance learning and the quality of a subsequent assignment.
8. **Avoid Surprises:** Publish or distribute rubrics well in advance of assignment due dates so that students know how their papers will be evaluated.
9. **Less is More:** Instructors should avoid the temptation to respond to everything that calls for adjustments or changes. Brookhart (2011) reports, many struggling students need to focus on just a few areas or even one item at a time. If a student backs off from his or her paper because he or she is intimidated by the number of instructor comments, then all is lost. It is better to target two or three areas that need to be addressed for the student's success on future papers.
10. **Questions for Reflection:** Consider inviting reflective, critical thinking and further conversation in a productive, scholarly exchange with the student. Instead of telling students what they did "wrong," ask them to rethink their approach. For example, consider using a phrase such as "What is the most interesting aspect of your essay?" Or "What would draw your attention to this topic, as a reader?" This way, the student is not only prompted to make more thoughtful revisions, but also is given tools to use when considering how to write a hook for future essays.

Douglas B. Reeves, author and educator, said, "Technology sometimes encourages people to confuse 'busyness' with effectiveness" (Reeves, 2010). Instructors sometimes equate certain grading practices such as an authoritative tone, strong criticism, or copious comments with being effective. In fact, the more conscious and deliberate an instructor is when delivering feedback, the better that feedback tends to be. Instructors often feel as though they must sacrifice effectiveness for efficiency, or efficiency for effectiveness. By honoring these guiding principles, instructors will realize that they do not need to make a choice between the two.

References

Brookhart, S. M. (2011). Tailoring feedback: Effective feedback should be adjusted depending on the needs of the learner. *Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed For Quick Review*, 76(9), 33-36.

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Reeves, D. (2010). *Transforming professional development into student results*. Alexandria, Va.: ASCD.

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Announcements

Diversity, Learning, and Student Success: Assessing and Advancing Inclusive Excellence

**A Network for Academic Renewal Conference
March 26-28, 2015
San Diego, California
Register by March 4, 2015 for reduced conference rates**

As AAC&U marks its Centennial Year, it is focusing urgent attention on the Equity Imperative—calling on higher education to more intentionally advance equitable access to a quality college education for students who have been historically underserved—and to reverse the disparities that impair our educational systems and threaten our democracy's promise of equality for all. With students of color, students from low-income families, and first-generation students soon to make up the majority of the nation's college-eligible learners, their academic, professional, and personal success are essential to America's economic, social, and global future.

Faculty, administrators, student affairs educators, and students are invited to participate in AAC&U's 2015 Conference on [**Diversity, Learning, and Student Success: Assessing and Advancing Inclusive Excellence**](#)—both individually and as teams—to help design and promote educational strategies and pathways that ensure all students succeed and thrive in college and beyond.

If you are working to understand, to define, to develop, or to implement plans for Making Excellence Inclusive and for committing to equity, attend this conference to learn about theoretical, practical, campus-based and system-level strategies for ensuring that high-quality learning experiences are embedded across all programs, including general education, the majors, co-curricular and community-based activities.

Hear from experts and practitioners from across the nation and learn from evidence on effective approaches to promote campus climates for diversity, equity, and success so that we all can work individually and collectively to improve access, retention, and graduation for all students—especially those historically underserved.

Featured Presentations Include:

Keynote Address:

Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete
Jeff Duncan-Andrade, Associate Professor of Raza Studies and Education Administration and Interdisciplinary Studies, San Francisco State University

Plenary:

Student Voice, Student Empowerment, Student Agency

George Sanchez, Professor of American Studies and Ethnicity and History, and Vice Dean for Diversity and Strategic Initiatives and students—all of the University of Southern California

The LEAP Challenge Forum: Preparing Students to Create Solutions for Our Future

Geoffrey Chase, Dean of Undergraduate Studies, and Director, Center for Regional Sustainability; and a Panel of Undergraduate Students—all from San Diego State University; and Leigh Ann Litwiller Berte, Associate Professor of English, Margaret Davis, Professor of English, and Student—all from Spring Hill College

Plenary:

Intentional and Strategic Connections Among Diversity, Learning, and Student Success

Johnella Butler, Professor, Comparative Women's Studies, Spelman College

In addition to a full roster of concurrent sessions and plenary presentations, AAC&U also offers practical [Pre-Conference Workshops](#)—three hours of active learning with some of higher education's leading innovators in developing strategies, practices, and policies that lead to student success.

Learn more about this [conference](#) and [register online](#).

For more information, please call 202.387.3760, or write to Siah Annand at network@aacu.org.

2015 Network for Academic Renewal Conferences

[From Mission to Action to Evidence: Empowering and Inclusive Counsel](#)

[Education Programs](#)

February 19–21, 2015—Kansas City, Missouri

[Diversity, Learning, and Student Success: Assessing and Advancing Inclusive Excellence](#)

March 26–28, 2015—San Diego, California

[Global Learning in College: Defining, Developing, and Assessing Institutional Roadmaps](#)

October 8–10 2015—Fort Lauderdale, Florida

[Crossing Boundaries—Transforming STEM Education](#)

November 12–14, 2015—Seattle, Washington

**AAC&U's Institute on Integrative Learning and the Departments:
Applications Due March 16**

Institute on Integrative Learning and the Departments

July 14–18, 2015

University of Delaware

Newark, DE

[Apply](#) through March 16, 2015

The [Institute on Integrative Learning and the Departments](#) is intended for colleges and universities interested in developing faculty and departmental leadership for advancing programs and curricula for integrative learning. Such programs and curricula build students' capacity to integrate their learning—across general education, majors, and the co-curriculum, as well as prior professional, academic, and life experiences inside and outside the classroom.

Teams applying to the Institute each propose an educational change project specific to their individual institutions, and commit to develop and support faculty leadership for student learning. Teams will leave the Institute having developed action plans for achieving their specific goals. Expert faculty and other teams will provide initial feedback on the plans at the Institute.

Learn more about the Institute on Integrative Learning and the Departments at www.aacu.org/summerinstitutes/ild.

For additional information, contact Elizabeth Dickens at 202.884.7438 or e-mail dickens@aacu.org.

2015 Summer Institutes

[Institute on General Education and Assessment](#)

June 2–6, 2015

University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, Oklahoma

[Institute on High-Impact Practices and Student Success](#)

June 9–13, 2015

University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison, Wisconsin



Institute on Integrative Learning and the Departments

July 14–18, 2015

University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware

PKAL Summer Leadership Institute for STEM Faculty

Institute I: July 14–July 19, 2015

Institute II: July 21–July 26, 2015

The Claggett Center, Adamstown, Maryland

Institute III: July 25–30, 2015

The Baca Campus of Colorado College, Crestone, Colorado