Holistic Higher Education through ePortfolios:

What (Else) Do We Learn about Students from Their ePortfolios?

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ePortfolios at the College of General Studies (CGS), Boston University (BU):

- CGS is a 2-year, interdisciplinary, team-taught general education program within BU
- 1,050 combined freshmen and sophomores
- All students maintain an ePortfolio, starting in freshman year, on the Digication platform
- We adopted ePortfolios for assessment but have learned they have much more to offer
- Funded by the Davis Educational Foundation
Yabsera. In Amharic it means *gods work*. Gods work has been present throughout my life as I made my journey from Ethiopia to America. I was born in Ethiopia and came to the United States when I was eight years old. Soon after, I entered a private school and...
London Reflections

Cheers
What X Will Be Like In 10 Years
The Lake District
My 10 hours layover
A hint of every flavor
Million Dollar View
Adventure of a lifetime
Skills
Limits? What is that
Take out the Trash!
Health Science Practicum'13

EDUCATION

Boston University, Boston, MA

2014
Bachelor of Science in Health Science
Study Abroad: London, Turkey,
Belize

RELATED PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

New England Health Care Institute, Boston, MA

Marketing Intern
- Support NEHI’s communication team in its day-to-day activities by conducting media outreach
- Work on web and collateral development and contribute to NEHI’s social media platform

ReSPECT Registry, Boston, MA

September 2013-Present
Eportfolios Reveal Students Are Learners and People in Progress; We See This Progress within and across Courses and Disciplines

I. Within our courses we can determine whether and how our students are progressing as learners and people.

II. We can determine how students incorporate what they have learned in one course or discipline into another.
1. **Early in a course**, home page posts reveal our students to be people with varied interests and aptitudes.

A woman who appears shy in class posts a photo of herself dancing in front of a large crowd.

A seemingly uninspired writer suggests his real passion: painting.

As an instructor, I can use these interests to engage my students.
2. In our course and for other courses, a student’s writing can indicate personal and intellectual growth.

students identify moments when they learned something about their strengths or hidden talents; they are less comfortable recognizing or admitting possible deficits.

In an essay about her experience volunteering in the Dominican Republic, Lily wrote about the limits of her empathy:
Example #1: In Rhetoric 101 Lily recognizes the limits of her empathy.

“I’m not going to sit here and say that my one-week immersion into extreme poverty and squalor has drastically changed my day-to-day life. Because that would be a lie. I only lived in the DR for a week while the people do it for their entire lives with a very slim chance of ever changing their social standing. This experience might not have greatly affected all my actions and thoughts afterward, but it did cause me to stop every now and then and appreciate everything that I have in life simply because of my luck of being born into it . . . . [Now] the only thing I know for certain is that the gratitude and hospitality that these people showed us made me want to become a better person - or at least try to be a better person.” (emphasis mine)
Example # 2: In Social Science 101 Lily grapples with ideas.

“The American Dream still persists because it inspires the working poor to keep going to a dead end job where it could take years before they make even the slightest headway up the ladder. In my personal experience of working in a coffee shop for three years with illegal immigrants, I can say with the upmost confidence that The American Dream can get a worker through the day . . . . My coworkers were cashing their checks to pay for their utility bills, rent and childcare. . . . The chance someone will work his way all the way up the ladder is possible but very unlikely. The American Dream has persisted and will continue to persist, because it is necessary to inspire the good ole hard working Americans to keep on working.”
II. Students incorporate what they have learned from one course or discipline into another.
Learners incorporate skills and knowledge from one course into another.

When we read what students have posted in other courses, we can see students’ thinking in ways that would not otherwise be revealed to us. We can also determine whether what they learn in one course carries into their other courses. This information is very important for assessment purposes and because it can inform our curricula.

When I study Andrea’s ePortfolio, I can see how she uses what she learned in our RH 101 course to inform our RH 102 course. I can also determine whether and how this learning carries over into her other courses (e.g. HUMS 102).

As an aside, for our RH 102 course it is easy for Andrea to refer directly to what she learned in RH 101, because she has carefully archived her papers in her ePortfolio.
In a Rhetoric 102 research paper Andrea writes about why college freshmen need to learn about incorporating appropriate sources into arguments and research papers. She uses a paper from Rhetoric 101 to show how she has grown as a writer. Below are excerpts from her 102 research paper:

“During the first semester of my freshman year, my Rhetoric 101 professor would give instructions to use four or more sources as support in my writing. Inexperienced in the area of academic writing, I thought to myself, ‘no problem, I can find four sources in five minutes using the Internet, this is so easy’.
Immediately, I would open a Google search bar, type in my topic, such as ‘racism in American ballet companies’, and within seconds I would have over one thousand “sources” at my fingertips. Little did I know, however, that my findings were inadequate for the academic writing I would be doing that semester and throughout my college career.

“In order to clarify how these two common mistakes [students’ failure to find and evaluate good sources] are made and how they hinder the writing of incoming university students, this paper will now analyze one of my own papers from my first semester freshman year writing class. Below is the list of the sources I used as research for my academic argument paper about racism in American ballet companies.”
Example #1: Andrea’s Rhetoric 101 Works Cited page

Works Cited


Andrea’s analysis of her RH 101 assignment

“If we look at the second source, “Why Are There So Few Black Ballet Dancers,” we can observe that there is no author given. I should have realized that since we do not know who wrote this article, we cannot determine the author’s expertise on the subject . . . .

If I were to rewrite this paper I would use significantly better research skills. For instance, instead of going straight to an Internet search engine for sources, I would access my school’s library databases. In terms of this paper’s topic, I would most likely start by using a database that would allow me to do an advanced search, such as Academic OneFile.”
Andrea’s RH 102 Works Cited page

Works Cited


II. We see how students learn across disciplines.

Example 2: Andrea’s HUMS 102 Paper

Works Cited


II. We see how students incorporate what they learn across disciplines.
For her Humanities 101 course, Kara must visit a local landmark and write about how it helps her understand a poem. When I read her post, I see Kara has visited a local landmark, incorporated some analysis into her reflection, and used appropriate bibliographic format. The following year, when I read her Natural Science 201 posts, I see Kara continues to use what she learns in Rhetoric (i.e. writing for the disciplines; bibliographic format); engages in field work; and collaborates with her classmates.
Example #1: Kara’s analysis for HU 102

“Visiting the King’s Chapel Burying Ground strengthened my appreciation of the poem . . . [the visit put] historical figures into a new context. At the cemetery I learned about John Winthrop the Elder; what I learned reminded me of Edward Taylor’s poem . . . . The writing on [Elder’s] grave focuses largely on the positive and powerful impact people had during their lifetime rather than on a sorrowful explanation of their deaths. I think that Taylor would have appreciated this and that the family remains together in one tomb. Taylor described marriage as “Weddens Knot, that ne’re can be unti’de”, and Winthrop most likely felt the same way since he is buried with his wife and their children. Visiting the King’s Chapel Burying Ground helped me to understand that Taylor’s views remained true for many people throughout history.”

Works Cited


Kara's photographs
Example # 2: Kara’s NS 201 posts (bibliography, collaboration, field work)

Bibliography


Zhang, Mi, Xuelian Zhang, Shuqing Song, Qiwei Zeng, Lei Hou, Demou Li, Juan Zhao, Yuan Wei, Xianbi Li, Ming Luo, Yuelua Xiao, Xiaoying Luo, Jinfu Zhang, Chengbin Xiang, and Yan
Area 1: Hall Pond

The major abiotic components of the pond are the water, the sunlight and the air. All of these components provide vital nutrients to the organisms that dwell there. The water gives a place for the turtles and the heron we observed to live. It also provides a home for the aquatic flora as well as the cattails and lily pads. All provide the means of photosynthesis. **Human intervention can be clearly seen by the bridge and lookout point as well as the litter, pictured in the final photograph.** We also noticed more subtle human influences as well; fertilizer can be an issue for aquatic life for instance and there is no doubt that the adjacent athletic fields have had an effect on the environment.
Using ePortfolios in Advising:

• FULL NAME: _______________________________ DATE: _____________________________

• **Eportfolio Exercise #1: Contemplate and Reflect**
  • “During periods of relaxation after concentrated intellectual activity, the intuitive mind seems to take over and can produce the sudden clarifying insights which give so much joy and delight…”
  • —Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*

• Taking time to contemplate and reflect leads to a more satisfying college experience. It helps develop your decision-making and communication skills, improves your focus, creativity, and insights, and reduces stress. Over the course of the semester, we will give you reflection questions that you will post to your eportfolio. Your responses will help us work in partnership with you toward your academic and personal goals.

• So let’s get started!

• Please answer the questions on the other side of this sheet. They will serve as a starting point when we have our first individual advising meeting this month.

  • And guess what? It’s ok and normal to say, “I do not know.”

• PLEASE then post the questions and your responses in your eportfolio. Create an ADVISING tab and post this as “Exercise #1: Contemplate & Reflect” by **Friday, January 31st**. The following link will give you instructions on setting up your eportfolio.

  • [https://bu.digication.com/cgs_eportfolio_instructions_for_students/Creating_an_ePortfolio/](https://bu.digication.com/cgs_eportfolio_instructions_for_students/Creating_an_ePortfolio/)
1. College is a transformative experience. Describe the ways in which you hope and anticipate you will grow (e.g., interests, abilities, goals).

2. What are your areas of interest, aside from academics (e.g., sports, music, art, theatre...)?

3. What areas of study or possible majors are you considering or want to explore? What is it about these areas that you find interesting?

4. What career paths are you considering or want to explore? What is it about these areas that you find interesting?
If we want to further a more holistic higher education, we should study students’ ePortfolios. These portfolios can reveal what and how students have learned, how they have progressed as individuals and learners, and whether and how students incorporate what they have learned from one course or discipline into another.
The College of General Studies:

www.bu.edu/cgs/