Chapter XI

ePortfolios: Pathway from Classroom to Career

Eleanor J. Flanigan
Montclair State University, USA

Susan Amirian
East Stroudsburg University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter includes three main themes, answering basic questions of “Why,” “Where,” and “How” that are asked when discussing the development of career portfolios during a student’s academic program. The reasons why portfolios in general should be created are discussed primarily in the Rationale section. Following this is a description of ongoing programs at two universities where portfolios are an integral part of the curriculum for students in two diverse departments: Media Communications in a School of Professional Studies, and Management Information Systems in a School of Business. Finally, there is an outline of the portfolio development process with concrete suggestions on the steps to follow, the design process, and modes of distribution. The authors hope that their experiences in helping students to compile their electronic portfolios will encourage other educators to engage in this creative process, smoothing the pathway from classroom to career.

RATIONALE FOR DEVELOPING ePORTFOLIOS

One of the greatest challenges faced by educators on all levels from pre-K through adult education programs is the attempt to ensure that students gather the knowledge building blocks they need in order to provide a solid base for new learning. This accretion may be compared to the construction of the great pyramids of Egypt. A huge base of separate blocks provided the foundation, and the structures gradually rose with one layer of block at a time. Students build their knowledge by attaching new learning to old. In the process, relationships are made and links are connected. Or at least that is what is supposed to happen!
Students are sometimes oblivious of the structured paths that lead them from one level of knowledge to another. Unless they are unusually reflective and deliberately trace their intellectual growth, most students, particularly in higher education, move ahead according to the required curriculum, taking prescribed courses as directed. Somehow the parts are supposed to congeal into the whole, and students are expected to emerge as educated people able to do self-appraisal, having absorbed and connected all of those separate learning experiences.

Rather than waiting until the end of their academic careers, it may increase the students’ ability to comprehend the path of learning if they had to do a continual formal assessment of their work. Developing portfolios serves this purpose and can be started at any point along the educational continuum. Students are directed to collect and preserve their work in creative accumulative projects, reflecting and assessing their learning during the process. The more traditional paper-based portfolios have given way to digital portfolios, using students’ technological skills to gather and preserve artifacts in more permanent forms. Students may create individual course portfolios as well as an academic career portfolio as they move through their educational programs.

Digital portfolios provide a connection or a pathway, moving the student along from the classroom environment into chosen careers. According to Confucian teaching, learning without thought is labor lost. Developing an innovative and original professional digital business portfolio constitutes a lasting comprehensive experience for the students, adding to their professional development. Continual reflection upon their work arms them with more confidence in their own competence and worth as they embark on their professional careers. Business schools in particular strive to develop students into sophisticated knowledge workers, able to analyze processes. Examination of their work in the portfolio enables students to “re-calibrate” (Poore, 2001) and to enhance their growth by analyzing their work objectively.

As university graduation nears, students find that preparing a comprehensive career résumé summing up their achievements and experiences is not an onerous task, as they are prepared to show concrete examples of their competencies in their electronic portfolios. According to Williams and Hall (2001), students can start “interesting conversations” in employment interviews that would not be possible without a portfolio in hand.

Digital career portfolios are basically collections of artifacts used to validate claims made by the creator. These artifacts are in a creative variety of formats: text documents, Web pages, presentations, research papers, assessment instruments, original projects, academic or external teamwork, internships, presentation videos, certificates of achievement, spreadsheets, databases, digital images, and multimedia demonstrations. These digital portfolios serve the career student population, particularly information technology (IT) professionals, encouraging them to develop technologically creative résumés. The artifacts support the students’ statements of proficiency in their chosen fields. Prospective employers, especially those in information systems (IS) recruiting, look for technical knowledge and proof of technical competence. Portfolios in digital form showing creative technical projects aid the student-interviewee to both tell about and show competencies.

In short, a portfolio is a demonstration of skills and abilities, containing evidence of growth and competence. Satterthwaite and D’Orsi (2003) state that a portfolio is a collection of easily portable artifacts that serve to validate claims people make about themselves. Portfo-