Chapter XXIII

How “White Papers” in ePortfolios Document Student’s Learning Skills

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the “Undergraduate ePortfolio Project” used in the Department of Communication, University of Toledo. The author argues, from a constructivist perspective, that the success of an ePortfolio project lies in its content, not its form. Included are the theoretical underpinnings of this project, the pedagogical design, and the assessment rubrics. The pedagogical section describes how the department revised its writing assignments for the portfolio, offers suggested writing projects, describes the generic assignment sheet used by the department, and offers sample student papers. The assessment section presents specific rubrics for evaluating the practical nature of portfolio writings.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the “Undergraduate ePortfolio Project” used in the Department of Communication (600 undergraduate majors) at the University of Toledo, installed in Academic Year 2000-2001. The description below contains the theoretical underpinnings of this project, the pedagogical design, and the assessment rubrics applied to students’ portfolio submissions. We found the success of an ePortfolio project lies in its content, not its form.

THEORETICAL MODEL

At the heart of the ePortfolio is the end user; the faculty envisioned two: students and employers. We wanted students to enjoy using their ePortfolios to publish, manage, and display their
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academic projects. But in a larger sense, we wanted students to begin a lifelong habit of displaying portfolio projects to document their professional development as their careers unfolded (Jafari, 2004).

Also, we wanted employers to enjoy reading students’ documents. A prospective employer would probably prefer to read entries like “Communication and Management Errors: Animal Deaths at the Toledo Zoo” or “A Critique of Trade Publications of the Public Relations Profession” rather than ubiquitous academic topics: “My Merit Scholarship Essay” or “Diversity and Women’s Sports at Enormous U.” Focusing on these two end users, we asked students to fill their ePortfolios with real-life narratives revealing students’ depth of professional interests and their abilities to link class constructs to professional problems (Fritz, 1999, 2003). These narratives began life as class writing assignments.

To avoid charges that such assignments were nothing more than “creeping vocationalism” (Folsom & Reardon, 2001; Goldstein; Reardon, Zunker, & Dyal, 1979), our faculty asked ourselves: Would any educational theory support this “practical” approach? Our project was informed by two educational theory models and focused by one educational action research project.

The first theory family was social constructivism. For constructivists, knowledge is not demonstrated by replicating professors’ lectures on exams. Instead, knowledge is built when students identify examples of lecture constructs in their social contexts, communicate the meaning of those phenomena, imagine the future, and act according to what they think might happen (Bandura, 1977; Brown et al., 1979). Students take in (assimilate) new experiences, and using schema (learning styles) they render the unfamiliar familiar and (accommodate) that new information in line with others’ expectations (Piaget, 1970; Gagnon & Collay, 2001; Shulman, 1979). We argue that students create knowledge by applying lecture “constructs” to actual contexts outside the classroom and constructing plausible explanations and solutions to realistic communication problems.

A second family of theory, often called cognitive experientialism, sharpens the constructivists’ focus: how do students transform their experiences into knowledge that others can use? Students group and transform information in social contexts by their information processing styles (schemata). Heavily influenced by Manturana and Varela’s (1987) concept of “autopoiesis,” Kolb, Baker, and Jensen, (2002) argue that students transform their experiences by lifelong dialogues which differentiate contradictions between the “real” world and their own experiences. Students use four types of experiential skills: affective complexity (convergers), perceptual complexity (divergers), symbolic complexity (assimilators), and behavioral complexity (accommodators). They use these preferences to develop profession-specific vocabularies (Vygotski, 1986), to structure explanations (Norman, 1980) and develop “deep learning”—knowledge that links assertions to specific contexts (Weigel, 2002). The faculty designed assignments where students would plunge into professional contexts outside the classroom, and analyze these experiences using not only their own dominant learning and communication styles, but also the learning styles of their readers. These writings become a type of field research for the portfolio content.

Our project was further guided by a seven-year action research project in Boston. Twenty public school teachers, together with Harvard education professor, Martha Stone Wiske (1998), discussed the topic “What Is Worth Understanding?” Emerging from those discus-