Chapter XXXV
Implementing Electronic Portfolios at Bowling Green State University

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines the implementation of electronic portfolio technology as part of a university initiative to improve learning. The implementation of electronic portfolios, via Epsilen Software, is discussed in terms of key features deemed necessary by Bowling Green State University’s assessment committee. One of the key features of the software is the matrix. This matrix is discussed in terms of its use for documenting student learning on the university’s learning outcomes. Reactions from current users are also provided. The chapter concludes by providing the current status of electronic portfolio usage at the university and a discussion of future plans for the software.

BECOMING A PREMIER LEARNING COMMUNITY

Bowling Green State University (BGSU) is a large and complex doctoral research-intensive university, with about 21,000 students at associate degree through doctoral levels; nearly 900 full-time faculty; and over 200 baccalaureate degree programs, 65 master’s degree programs, two specialist programs, and 16 doctoral programs in seven academic colleges plus the Graduate College.
Implementing Electronic Portfolios at Bowling Green State University

In 1998 we adopted this goal: Bowling Green State University aspires to be the premier learning community in Ohio and one of the best in the nation. The goal sparked many initiatives, and the implementation of electronic portfolio technology is one of them. Many other initiatives, such as the development of learning communities and enhanced first-year programs, a redesign of our general education program, and a signature student learning experience concerning critical thinking about values, are being carried out as a result of this focus.

In this chapter we tell the story of the electronic portfolio initiative in the pursuit of this goal, discuss its current status, and close with some reflections on what we have learned so far. But before doing so we give a brief sketch of the context in which this work is taking place.

Even before the “premier learning community” goal was adopted, it was clear that assessment of student learning outcomes was an important driver for assuring the quality of student learning. Using a decentralized approach beginning with undergraduate majors, we asked faculty members to define the learning outcomes that students were to demonstrate in each degree program. Analysis of these several hundred outcomes identified seven underlying skills that are now known as the university learning outcomes: inquiry, creative problem solving, valuing in decision making, writing, presenting, participation, and leadership (see http://www.BGSU.edu/offices/provost/Assessment).

The university learning outcomes give us a shared framework and vocabulary for describing student learning and development. With it, we are transforming our general education program from one based on a content distribution requirements model to one that emphasizes the intellectual skills identified in the university learning outcomes. Other programs that connect directly to the university learning outcomes include piloting an initiative on critical thinking about values and a systematic approach to undergraduate research. We created several first-year experience programs and also residential learning communities that have succeeded in improving student retention. Initiatives like these are turning our aspiration and the academic plan devised to implement it (see http://www.BGSU.edu/offices/provost/BGSUAcademicPlan1.PDF) into reality.

In this institutional context, electronic portfolio technology is highly attractive because it enables students to document and reflect on their learning, and to prepare showcase portfolios. It also gives faculty a tool to learn much more quickly and directly about what is working well and what needs more attention. We saw great potential for supporting and documenting student learning in early software releases, and we are convinced that electronic portfolio technology is one of the major enabling forces that will make us a premier learning community.

With that potential in mind, the assessment committee enumerated the features it saw as needed in any electronic portfolio system:

- Easy use (especially adding new materials and new users)
- Access anywhere, anytime via a Web connection
- Include audio and video files
- Under joint control, and in institution’s possession
- Sophisticated security and access permissions
- Search by title or any indexed attribute
- Trace cumulative patterns of learning
- Compare portfolios of many students
- Scalable

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