Chapter XLI

Transition to ePortfolios: A Case Study of Student Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

This project focused on student development in the freshman year as displayed in students’ ePortfolios. The experimental design allowed analysis of student attitudes about ePortfolios with results that may be useful to faculty and students at other institutions. Researchers found that careful alignment of an ePortfolio with the learning goals of a course can help students to adapt easily to the new technology and recognize it as a useful academic tool.

INTRODUCTION

The interest in ePortfolios has evolved almost intuitively as faculty and administrators across the country recognized the neat fit of ePortfolios with various academic programs. Along with other institutions across the country, Virginia Tech decided to implement an electronic Web-based portfolio system that held great potential for increasing student reflection and expanding assessment far beyond the classroom. In the Department of Communication, faculty embraced the use of this new technology for a particular course and developed an experimental design to evaluate students’ perceptions about the use of standard portfolios and electronic portfolios. This case study explores this department’s incorporation of ePortfolios at the beginning of students’ academic careers. The success of this project led to a complete transition from paper portfolios to ePortfolios in the freshman course and the implementation of ePortfolios across students’ academic careers in the department. Along with the research...
findings, this report includes a discussion of future considerations for this department, with implications and recommendations for others who may be using ePortfolios for the assessment of student growth, course design, and/or departmental objectives.

BACKGROUND

Institutional Initiative

Virginia Tech’s Office of Educational Technologies agreed to participate in the ePortfolio program sponsored by the Open Source Portfolio Initiative. Faculty in the Department of Communication participated with the initial planning of the ePortfolio project and then the pilot stage. Some faculty in this department were very experienced with traditional portfolios and excited by the possibility of a Web-based system. For years, faculty had been using portfolios successfully in their freshman classes. Additionally, upper-class students regularly created professional portfolios for potential employers since portfolios are a standard practice in many communication careers, such as public relations, journalism, and film.

Course Selection for ePortfolio Integration

The freshman sequence of Communication Skills (CommSkills) seemed the likely place to experiment with ePortfolios. The two courses were a fit for the following reasons:

- The courses already included a paper portfolio assignment to allow students to collect and reflect on their work.
- Sections of the course are standardized so that students in all sections complete the same assignments, regardless of instructor, making data collection and comparison feasible.
- The ePortfolio research team was composed of faculty who taught these two courses.
- The capacity to capture student work early in students’ academic careers was important to the department as part of ongoing assessment initiatives.

The course design for CommSkills blends a traditional hybrid communication course with a traditional freshman composition course. The result is a two-semester sequence in which students study written and oral communication in order to build personal skills and to meet a general education requirement. Students from various majors enroll in the first course in the sequence and then stay together with the same instructor and fellow students for the second semester. The sequence has been in place for seven years, so the department already had data about the success of the course, including a previous research project that had produced student feedback regarding the usefulness and importance of the paper portfolio—a component of the course that students seemed to value.

Meeting Needs with ePortfolio

The ePortfolio project had the potential to meet various instructional needs: students’ developmental needs, students’ major and professional needs, and students’ needs as related to their university experience. Of course, these student needs are echoed by departmental and institutional needs.

Student needs related to personal development. The CommSkills sequence is aimed at first-year students who need support as they transition into a new discourse community. As learners they need tools to help them reflect on
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