Chapter XLIX
Future-Focused ePortfolios at Montana State University–Northern

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the idea of using electronic portfolios for enhancing the future thinking of an organization’s learners. At Montana State University–Northern, faculty are using ePortfolios to elicit deep learning by encouraging students to reflect on their work in terms of what is possible, what is probable, and what is preferable in their professional lives as educators. By detailing the context that MSU-Northern’s ePortfolio system entails, this chapter may assist practitioners to glean some of the advantages of and the factors for getting students to think systematically about the future using electronic portfolios, and researchers to address relevant issues surrounding the application of future-focused ePortfolios.

INTRODUCTION

... Wherein while creating a portfolio system within Teacher Candidate and Graduate Education programs at Montana State University, faculty members employ the sight of three guides: the mouse, the eagle, and the spider.

Developing an electronic portfolio system that is right for your institution as well as for the professional and personal needs of your students is both a challenging and rewarding process. Making clear to all stakeholders the purpose and audience of the portfolio is essential to highlight, as there are multiple possibilities for the “what’s,” “why’s,” and “who’s” of your efforts. For example, portfolios designed for the purposes of demonstrating professional competencies are likely quite different than those with deep, integrative learning, itself, as the goal. Balancing or creating a transition from
one purpose to the other at key points within the student’s progress through the program is a laudable, though difficult solution—a design task probably better suited to a beta run, rather than the initial foray into a complicated arena with multiple objectives demanding of many areas of expertise. Even with just a singular purpose, standards-based ePortfolio implementation across a program is undoubtedly one of the more tricky and resource-taxing endeavors in the modern learning enterprise.

Education faculty and administrators at Montana State University–Northern have engaged in persistent, active, and purposeful dialogue on electronic portfolio development on and off for the last five years. Only within the last year have we determined what is believed to be a central tenet, and perhaps a pervasively held lesson in the use of these assessment instruments: juxtaposing the accreditation purposes over the deep learning capacities of the portfolio has a strong, potentially overall chilling effect upon the latter. At MSU–Northern, it has come to the question: which is more important, the learning portfolio or the accreditation portfolio?

At issue here has been the conflation of purposes due to the short period into which faculty have to work with a given student to produce a highly qualified teacher and the weighing of priorities placed upon such a timeframe. In Montana, like many other states without the fortune to have large coffers and progressive legislatures, we have a four-year teacher credentialing program: content and method stuffed into a bachelor’s degree designed to meet national- and state-developed teaching standards. Only 128 credit hours to complete the degree ...

Students thus enter into the Department of Education after their first two years of undergraduate study, having taken their general education and prerequisites for the Teacher Candidate program and deciding that this is the career choice for them. Education faculty at MSU–Northern then have two years to impress upon them the methods, practices, and arts of becoming a teacher, just two years within which to construct and implement their electronic portfolios.

The questions then become, do we use this time and effort to create a portfolio for demonstrating our worth in maintaining our hard-won NCATE accreditation? Or should we unlock the power of the learning portfolio and work with our students in a way that does not leave them all too ready to set down the portfolio for the last time on the day they cross the stage, holding the diploma in their hands, and their portfolio “completed and turned in” to a faculty member? How do we empower our new teachers with the vision of learning portfolios, eager to use them as springboards for their own personal and professional lives for years to come? Though these purposes may not be mutually exclusive, the unique combination that would bring students to create, sort, and narratively reflect upon their work in ways that satisfy accreditation needs—while at the same time drawing out the deep, integrative learning potential that ePortfolios possess—is elusive, at best.

One part of the answer to these complex questions may be to focus on the future.

Future Time Perspective

The degree and way in which people integrate their thoughts of the chronological future into their present behavior, a construct known as future time perspective, has been a subject of study for nearly a century. First coined and described by Kurt Lewin, the founder of modern social psychology (1926), statistically significant relationships that correlate to a relatively increased future time perspective have been found with positive health behaviors (Mahon & Yarcheski, 1994; Mahon, Yarcheski,