Chapter LI

ePortfolio Thinking: The Challenge of the Public Research University

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the trajectory of electronic portfolio development and adoption at large public research institutions. The author frames her research with her own attempt to implement a program-level portfolio for undergraduate majors in her own department. Her investigation of 59 institutions suggests that our largest campuses face unique challenges that may limit the extent to which they adopt electronic portfolios. While some of these challenges are practical and logistical, the more significant barriers seem to be related to campus culture, particularly faculty engagement in undergraduate education.

INTRODUCTION

Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.
—Zora Neale Hurston

Researching this chapter has been an exercise in academic excavation. The top layer, whose odd contours first piqued my curiosity, consisted of my own experiences with student ePortfolios. The second layer was the public record of ePortfolio initiatives at institutions like mine: large public research universities. The deepest layer, obscured by the other two and yet somehow still revealed in them, were the untold stories of trial and error, of disappointment, and perhaps even failure. In this chapter, I propose to examine all three layers in order to illuminate the special challenges posed in introducing student ePortfolios at a large public research university. I have drawn on published reports, conference presentations,
and interviews with faculty and administrators at a number of institutions, but my interest in these questions began with my own foray into electronic portfolios for majors in my home department, American Studies.

Because this inquiry grew out of and is still shaped by my own experience, this chapter takes the form of a personal narrative, punctuated by the deeper research findings discovered during the process. To clarify the flow of ideas, the portions relating to my own experience are italicized.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH PORTFOLIOS

It helps to remember that portfolios existed for generations before the digital revolution. Painters, photographers, architects, and writers gathered and displayed their work in portable exhibits that comprised a reflection-informed narrative. The experiential trail that has brought me to ePortfolios reaches back to my undergraduate years, struggling on my own to create a major in theater costuming where it didn’t really exist, by combining coursework in design and textiles with a work-study position in the university’s costume shop. As I discovered when I graduated, the one thing missing in my preparation was proof that those pieces had actually connected: I had no portfolio, and it was too late to compile one. As a graduate assistant teaching apparel design, I made sure that every student knew what a portfolio was and developed one in my class. In making the transition to teaching history of costume and later, American Studies, portfolios gave way to term papers and essay exams.

This personal history is mirrored in the stories behind many ePortfolio projects. Some practitioners come from programs where student writing or design had traditionally been collected, defended, and assessed using physical compilations of their work. Some come from disciplines which had tended to favor other forms of assessment. Some, like me, have experience in both traditions. Whichever the case, portfolios represent a form of assessment outside mainstream academic practice at large institutions, either an accepted mode within an “exceptional” discipline or an experimental mode in more traditional ones. This essentially marginal existence is the backdrop for the introduction of portfolios at large public research institutions: first, they must be explained for those for whom they are foreign.

PORTFOLIO THINKING: COURSE-LEVEL INNOVATION

The emergence of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s coincided with a pedagogical experiment and a paradigm shift in my own view of student learning. The experiment was the return of the portfolio, this time in a discussion-intensive course, Diversity in American Culture. In this course, students kept journals and wrote a series of short essays about various aspects of diversity; their final assignment was to incorporate these written materials into a Web-based portfolio and add a reflective essay about their own learning. Soon, I was incorporating electronic portfolios into all my classes.

Although I developed this approach independently, it is clear from the number of course portfolio Web sites that my efforts were echoed on campuses, large and small, around the globe. Love, McKean, and Gathercoal, in their 2004 article on levels of maturity in ePortfolio development, posit a trajectory from “scrapbook” to “authentic evidence,” but omit the course portfolio as a common entry point for many institutions (Love et al., 2004). While a few ePortfolio initiatives at large research insti-
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