

Electronic Learning Portfolios and Student Affairs

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In the last couple of years, learning portfolios have garnered interest from administrators, faculty, staff, and students as one possible solution to an important challenge faced by today's colleges and universities. The challenge that we refer to is developing a better understanding of how students learn and finding the means to provide richer evidence of this learning beyond the usual grades, units, and class titles found in academic transcripts (Cambridge, 2001). This challenge must be addressed while taking into account the rapidly changing demographic, economic, global, and technological conditions influencing higher education (Kuh, et al. 1994).

We define learning portfolios as purposeful collections of artifacts that characterize the learning experiences of the portfolio owner. These artifacts may include items that were created by the student in the context of the learning experience, such as a paper or a drawing, or the artifacts may otherwise represent the student's learning experience, such as a brochure or photo. Reflection, the process of thinking about something from a new perspective in order to understand that thing more deeply, is an essential part of creating a learning portfolio. The products of this higher-order thinking are also important components to be included in the portfolio. The portfolio owner might be an individual or a group of individuals—teachers, learners, a program or institution. The set of artifacts contained in a portfolio together with reflections, tell a unique story about some aspect of the owner, and can help the owner share his or her story in greater detail. In this respect, learning portfolios can be one method for providing a richer assessment of student learning.

Benefits of Learning Portfolios

Student Affairs practitioners may take advantage of the potential benefits afforded by both the portfolio itself—the *product*—and the creation of the portfolio—the *process*.

The portfolio product offers a rich picture of student work that can be helpful in assessing student achievements and development within a certain period of time. The portfolio contains multiple pieces of work, the context in which that work was completed, as well as student reflections on their learning experiences. This collection of work and reflections permits the reader of the portfolio to see change in student work and thinking over time. Moreover, the portfolio product can serve as a communication tool that allows a student to tell the story of his or her learning experiences and how they are related. The story can be told through the portfolio product itself or with the portfolio at the center of a conversation. In this latter case, having the entire portfolio or some portion of the portfolio as an artifact to refer to in a discussion may facilitate deeper conversations between the student and another person concerning various aspects of his or her work and learning.

The student process of creating a portfolio offers a concrete context and a language in which students can think and talk about their experiences in new and meaningful ways. Thus, creating a portfolio is a uniquely valuable context for prompting student self-assessment; for

engaging in formative assessment with a student attempting to make informed personal and academic decisions that contribute to the development of an intellectual identity; and for supporting students in making meaningful connections between their work and learning across courses and co-curricular activities.

A learning portfolio that is electronic also offers additional benefits. Electronic portfolios can make easier the tasks of organizing and sharing collections of artifacts over time. A portfolio might be, or might draw from, a large collection comprised of various media gathered from a wide range of learning experiences. Electronic portfolios offer their owners the ability to easily organize and reorganize the artifacts in an electronic database in order to create different views of one's portfolio that can be tailored to specific audiences. There is also a social aspect to electronic portfolios in that they facilitate the sharing of experiences and dialogue among students, faculty, and advisers who are either face-to-face or at a distance (Yancey, 2001).

Learning Careers Project and Folio Thinking

Our experiences with electronic portfolios at the Stanford Center for Innovations in Learning have largely stemmed from the Learning Careers Project, a five year longitudinal study investigating how a cohort of thirty undergraduates from the Class of 2002 acquires, maintains, and employs the knowledge and skills they accumulate during the course of their undergraduate college careers. Supported by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Learning Careers Project has encouraged student integration of experiences from inside and outside of the classroom, on-campus and off-campus, in face-to-face and virtual environments, and during and after students' time at Stanford. We have worked towards this objective by designing and implementing five community activities encouraging reflection on learning: explicit conversations about the development of a lifelong learning career, involvement in a supportive learning community, individual and group interactions with instructors and peers, training and practice in the skills of self-coaching (a working model of learning through experience), and experimentation with a prototype of an electronic learning portfolio (*E-Folio*).

Our observations of the Learning Careers students with the E-Folio prototype and our collaborations with various national and international portfolio researchers have contributed to an approach we refer to as *Folio Thinking*, a reflective practice that situates and guides the effective use of learning portfolios. Drawing upon the literature in experiential learning, metacognition, reflective and critical thinking, mastery orientations to learning, and of course learning portfolios, Folio Thinking aims to:

- Encourage students to integrate discrete learning experiences
- Enhance students' self-understanding
- Promote students' taking responsibility for their own learning
- Support students in developing an intellectual identity

Typically, portfolio assessment refers to the assessment of the body of student work contained in the portfolio which in turn offers a picture of student work that is richer than test grades or transcripts. The Folio Thinking approach represents a different perspective in its emphasis on formative assessment during the process of portfolio creation. In other words, we value the artifacts within the portfolio as tangible points of entry into conversations that might

otherwise be too abstract to be effective. These representations of experiences in the portfolio that are immediate in the students' minds help facilitate their conversations with others while having these artifacts handy allow the students to communicate their thoughts in ways other than using words alone.

Benefits to Student Affairs Practitioners

To illustrate the potential benefits of portfolios to Student Affairs activities, we offer a few examples of how portfolios and Folio Thinking might meet the needs of Student Affairs practitioners in various contexts.

STUDENT ADVISING

Portfolios can be used to accomplish core goals of student advising including: providing students a context and a language to talk about learning strategies as they relate to specific personal learning experiences, fostering student self-assessment with respect to their short-term and long-term academic and professional goals, engaging students in formative assessment of self-reflection and development, and helping students choose courses and a major and to otherwise develop an intellectual identity that reflects their personal interests and passions.

RESIDENTIAL EDUCATION

Portfolios can be used to help students extend their learning outside of the classroom to more informal environments such as residences and eating clubs. A portfolio may be owned by all of the residents in a dormitory and contain artifacts and reflections from present and past residents. This kind of portfolio can be used to develop a community of learners and can represent the learning and development of that extended community. We know that a great deal of learning during the undergraduate experience occurs outside of the classroom and the portfolio of a residential community can offer administrators and staff greater opportunities to explore and learn about ways to support this kind of informal learning.

COMMUNITY AND PUBLIC SERVICE PROGRAMS

Portfolios can also be used to help students make important connections among their passions and interests, the learning that they do in the classroom, and the work that is needed in the community at large. Portfolios may be a vehicle by which a university shares with a stakeholder community off campus the knowledge gained from research conducted on campus. The portfolio of public service programs containing artifacts and reflections on various students' service learning experiences can be used to facilitate outreach to help broaden the students' perspectives of service as well as provide valuable feedback and data for program evaluation.

Although the potential rewards of electronic learning portfolios are still being understood and realized by students, faculty, administrators, and staff, our experiences suggest there is both interest and opportunity on the part of Student Affairs practitioners seeking out innovative approaches to support and assess student learning activities and evaluate co-curricular programs. The Folio Thinking approach presents one such opportunity to closely partner with students in an

assessment effort that will engage students, faculty, and advisors in a process that, like the final product, is personally meaningful, beneficial, and easily shared and disseminated.

For more information about the Learning Careers Project, Folio Thinking, electronic portfolios, or other related research at the Stanford Center for Innovations in Learning, please contact the authors by email at hlchen@stanford.edu and cmazow@stanford.edu, or visit <http://scil.stanford.edu/>.

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