ePortfolio Implementation One Person at a Time:

The power of personal connection

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This case study outlines the eportfolio implementation in the Department of English and Communication at Blue Ash College, a regional campus of the University of Cincinnati. This program gives students and instructors the choice to use whichever Web 2.0 platform they prefer to create portfolios that document mastery of course objectives. In addition the eportfolios are an essential part of the pedagogical process of the courses which help students cultivate reflection on their progress over time.

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Introduction

ePortfolios have been advanced by the American Association of Colleges and
Universities as a high impact practice, and there is a wealth of literature that discusses the merits
of eportfolios in supporting integrative learning, student authorship, and metacognitive skills. At
the Association for Authentic Experiential Evidence Based Learning annual conference
international presenters discuss their successes with eportfolios, but there is a consensus that
eportfolio implementation is not an easy task. There are many challenges facing faculty, staff,
and students in learning to use eportfolios. These challenges must be addressed in order for
learners to benefit from the use of eportfolios. How best to address the various challenges can
heavily depend on institutional context and practices. In this case study of eportfolio
implementation, we present how our English department has begun to adopt eportfolios, given
our situation as a two year regional campus of a larger institution. The study also includes how a
grass roots implementation from the bottom up aided in dealing with limited resources and made
it possible for our department to implement eportfolios with very little institutional cost all while
finding evidence of the benefits of eportfolios.

Background of eportfolios at UC Blue Ash College

The English and Communication Department used paper portfolios throughout the 1990s
in first year composition modeled on Peter Elbow's "writing for learning" concept. These
portfolios were binders or folders of student's work that included multiple drafts of essays and a
final reflection on the whole portfolio. The portfolios were used for final grades and first year
composition program assessment. Instructors in the first year composition courses received a
handout that explained what a "process portfolio" was and how to incorporate it in teaching first
year composition. For composition assessment, in the 1990s, the composition coordinator
collected essays from all first year composition student portfolios, and a statistical sample was

collected from these portfolios. A group of faculty met over the summer to read the essays and assess how well students were meeting the learning outcomes of first year composition.

In the early 2000s, free online tools began to appear, and in 2009, the first eportfolios were used in first year composition using Wikispaces. These eportfolios were an electronic form of the paper portfolios and only included text based assignments, although they did include multiple drafts and reflections on the material, organized by a menu. These early eportfolios were only used for course assessment. The instructors printed out the essays required by the program assessment. By 2010, instructors were using Google Sites for eportfolios, and some had begun to experiment with Weebly. The Learning and Teaching Center at the college also began using eportfolios in Google Sites and Weebly to showcase faculty work in faculty communities of practice. By 2013, a greater number of instructors in English Composition and in literature courses were using eportfolios in Google Sites, Weebly, and increasing in WordPress. By this time, the eportfolio assignments included graphics, video, and informative websites for multiple audiences.

In 2013, the Learning and Teaching Center began the first ePortfolio Faculty Community of Practice where faculty gathered once a month over the course of a year to learn about portfolio pedagogy and eportfolio creation. Each year a new group joins the community of practice and past participants present their progress. As of 2016, this group is going into its fourth year. Also, from 2013-2016, the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs supported a team of three English and Communication Department full-time faculty members to participate in the International Coalition for ePortfolio Research, facilitated by Kathleen Yancey and Barbara Cambridge. The participation of these faculty members was influential in the development of eportfolios in the English and Communication Department by providing participants with the most recent developments in eportfolios across the United States and in Australia.

As eportfolios have begun to have a higher profile due to the faculty community of practice group, at least one other program has decided to use eportfolios for program assessment, and other programs have demonstrated interest in learning more about their usage. To date, there is no college wide, institutional level recognition of eportfolios. Due to severe financial issues, there is no institutional technology support for eportfolio platforms, but the instructors using eportfolios have indicated that they prefer to use the free platforms due to the flexibility of application and the fact that students have full ownership of their work. The Learning and

Teaching Center of the college regularly offers workshops in eportfolios for course and program assessment, and the community of practice continues. The slow expansion of the use of eportfolios is due directly to the personal relationships and communication that result from these efforts.

ePortfolios and Learning Outcomes

The learning outcomes for our English composition courses, from our developmental writing courses through our second year writing course, include different levels of mastery of the following general outcomes:

- Rhetorical Knowledge (writing that appropriately addresses situation and audience)
- Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing (evaluating and using sources to develop ideas)
- Processes (drafting, peer review, editing)
- Knowledge of Conventions (formatting, citation, language structure)
- Digital Literacy (composing and sharing work in a digital environment)
- Reflection (describing and evaluating one's own writing and experiences)

These outcomes have been easily documented through paper portfolios since the 1990s. As of 2016, there are still courses that demonstrate student development and mastery of these outcomes in paper portfolios. In addition, as space has become more constrained, the amount of paper required for program assessment became more difficult over time. During the time that paper portfolios were the norm, an entire wall of filing cabinets was required to hold the paper portfolios required for program assessment. As eportfolios have become more common, the storage space for paper has been able to shrink along with the smaller spaces allocated to the program director for such storage. Also, as faculty offices have become smaller, and larger offices become shared, the stacks of binders and folders that contain paper portfolios have become more difficult to store. Many faculty have commented that the mere fact that eportfolios take up no physical space is a strong recommendation to use them. In addition, faculty members

observe that few students come to pick up their paper binders, filling bookshelves in faculty offices. The eportfolios remain accessible to students after the course is over, and do not require a special trip back to campus to retrieve the work.

More importantly, the learning outcomes for digital literacy skills is a recent addition to our course and program outcomes. As digital composing, digital texts, and digital sharing has become more common, eportfolios facilitated the move to more varied types of text, including multimedia presentations. In fact, a recent revision to one composition course's digital literacy outcome reads, "Students will be able to use digital tools to create assignments and manage documents to be used in creating a portfolio." ePortfolios are the most convenient way for students to demonstrate mastery of this outcome.

Demonstrating outcomes for assessment

Students must demonstrate mastery of course outcomes to move on to the next level of English composition. This demonstration of mastery is presented through the construction of a portfolio as well as the content of the eportfolio. For progression from developmental English courses to First Year Composition courses, a committee from the English and Communication Department meets to review the portfolios of students ready to move to the next level. Both eportfolios and paper portfolios appear in these reviews, according to the instructor's preference. The eportfolios are presented as an online page with hot links available for the reviewers to follow. Paper portfolios are passed from person to person. A rubric is used to evaluate both types of portfolios, electronic and paper. The focus of the assessment is each assignment as a demonstration of reading, writing, and information literacy; therefore, the medium of the portfolio is not important. However, the types of documents that can be included in an eportfolio can include posters, graphics, videos, and slide shows. The paper portfolios are mostly text based artifacts. However, with the new learning outcomes that specify digital literacy through the construction of a portfolio, the eportfolio has become an important artifact in and of itself in this assessment.

Folding the eportfolio into a course

In a given English course, the eportfolio is generally introduced in the first or second week of the course. For face to face classes, a class session is devoted to creating the eportfolio site; in online courses, it is a specific assignment early in the course. Some instructors specify a particular platform, and others offer students a choice of platforms. The most common platforms that are used in our department are Google Sites, Weebly, and WordPress. Individual instructors often make their own videos on how to create a basic site, and these videos are also shared on a department site.

Once the basic site is constructed, instructors will ask students to regularly post their work to their portfolio sites. For example, a writing assignment might require a summary of an article, an outline the piece of writing based on that article, a rough draft, a peer review, a final draft, and a reflection on the writing process. All these pieces may appear on the portfolio site. In some cases, a video is the rhetorical situation, or a poster presents the argument. In most cases, these are learning portfolios that show the students' progress throughout the course. There is general consensus among our instructors that introducing the portfolio as a final project is generally not as successful as working on building the portfolio over course of the semester.

There are two types of assessment that use portfolios. When students move from basic writing courses to first year composition, a committee of basic writing and first year composition instructors read the portfolios to establish if the student is ready or not ready to move on. In this assessment, the eportfolios are read as digital documents. There is a mix of paper and electronic portfolios in these assessments. In assessment of first year composition, the assessment artifacts include a sample of essays. Instructors using paper portfolio submit paper copies of the essays, and instructors who use eportfolios, download the essays into individual files which are printed out for the assessment committee. The irony of this process is not lost on the department assessment committee, many of whom use eportfolios for course assessment. At present, the department assessment committee is working to create a process where eportfolios can remain intact as digital documents for the purposes of program assessment.

ePortfolio Platforms and Support

Due to the wide variety of audiences and purposes of eportfolios at our university, there has been general agreement among eportfolio users that an eclectic approach may serve our efforts best. At our college, there was some movement to standardize the eportfolio platform, but it eventually gave way to the eclectic approach due to administrative technology issues. At this point in time, eportfolio users at our college use Google Sites, Weebly, or WordPress. These are free platforms, vary in ease and power so that instructors at different levels can choose the one best suited for their purposes, and the portfolio that the student builds remains owned by the student and accessible after graduation.

Students are instructed in use of the platform through the classroom experience. Often the instructor is able to instruct the class in the basic skills of setting up an account, adding pages, and uploading content. However, instructors report that students often help each other, and equally often discover short cuts or functions that they can share with the class. For support with the platforms, these three have good online support, help forums, and many YouTube videos associated with them. In addition, the tutors in our Writing and Study Skills Center are experienced in Google Sites, Weebly, and WordPress, so students can get help not only with the content of the portfolio, but also with building the portfolio.

Instructors are trained in use of eportfolio pedagogy and technology both through formal professional development, but also through personal connections. The early adopters in our department learned through conference presentations and personal trial and error. These early adopters became our principal resources for training and support in our department and at the college. The early adopters offered workshops and local presentations that introduced the idea of eportfolios to the college. Luckily, in the English and Communication Department, the idea of portfolio pedagogy was not new, although the idea of moving to the electronic environment was new for many. Those who were interested in the electronic portfolio, attended the workshops, and those who were interested were able to join the year-long Faculty Learning Community devoted to eportfolio pedagogy and technology. In this year long professional development opportunity, instructors learned a platform that they felt comfortable with, created a basic portfolio, and designed the type of portfolio they wished their students to create in a coming class. In some cases, having department eportfolio users continued to serve as personal support

for those new to implementing eportfolios. As a result of the workshops and learning communities, ten more instructors have begun to use eportfolios in our department, and at least 10 more have begun to use them in other areas of the college. Personal contacts have been important in supporting instructors and staff who are interested in using eportfolios. Quite simply, people hear it is a good idea through the grapevine, and then they talk to someone they know to find help.

There has been no formal funding for these workshops and learning communities. The early adopters who offered these opportunities count this effort at service to the department. Nevertheless, the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs did provide significant funding for three faculty members from the English and Communication Department to participate in the International Coalition for ePortfolio Research (INCEPR) from 2013-2016. This support for the three early adopters who participated in the INCEPR project contributed greatly to the expertise these instructors were able to bring back to the department.

Faculty and student attitudes towards the eportfolio

For the innovators and early adopters, the move from paper to electronic portfolios was exciting and opened up new avenues for teaching different rhetorical situations, finding new authentic audiences, and using multimedia in composition courses. Part of what contributed to these instructors being early adopters was a personal confidence in learning new technologies as well as a confidence in dealing with unknowns and the special complications that come with new technology. These instructors were willing to collaborate with students in coming to terms with the changes eportfolios brought to teaching and learning in composition.

Nevertheless, the majority adopters were more cautious about adding a new layer of technology into their courses. Many instructors cited a lack of comfort with the technology and a concern for students having to learn the technology as a barrier to adopting eportfolios. In addition, folding the technology into the classroom was a concern since not all students had laptops.

For some of these majority adopters, the workshops, the faculty learning communities, and the personal contacts in the department were very helpful in the long decision to try eportfolios. One instructor commented, "I had heard good things about them, and then I decided

to just make the leap of faith to try them out in my course." For majority adopters who decided or are still deciding to use eportfolios, an important part of feeling supported was having an individual, in the department who they knew, available for immediate help when there was a difficulty.

How eportfolios have changed English courses and what the future might bring

A very basic change that eportfolios have brought to many instructors is that we no longer have huge piles of binders sitting around in our offices. Sometimes they sit in our offices for years before we can make ourselves shred student work that we labored on with them. In addition, for assessment there are no longer filing cabinets full of paper for assessment.

At a more abstract level, we find that teaching with eportfolios have given students clearer ownership of their work and a wider audience. As the students have greater ownership of their work, guided sometimes by reflective exercises, they are able to make connections between the work they do in English and the work they do in other courses. The eportfolio is also available online, and students share the work with each other, with family members, and sometimes with interested readers on the internet. One student was surprised and thrilled to discover that an essay she had written on an obscure short story was getting a great number of hits from interested readers. With this greater audience comes the teachable moment of how to deal with a public readership, how to manage comments, and what it means to be part of the community of ideas.

ePortfolios have also expanded the rhetorical situations available for assignments. We can make an assignment to explore the genre of viral videos, arguments through public service announcement posters, online reviews, and informative websites or blogs. These are all spaces for digital rhetoric that are becoming more common in the professional world. Students can appreciate the importance of learning these skills, and often this argument of gaining professional skills easily persuades them to engage in building an eportfolio.

Assessment at the program level has also become easier. Since eportfolios are easy to share, often through a page of links, or an instructor's website that collects eportfolio links, committees can do collaborative assessment together or asynchronously without limiting access to any of the material being assessed. Also, the new learning outcomes in courses that specify

digital literacy being demonstrated by creation of a portfolio further promotes the use of eportfolios for both course and program assessment.

Nevertheless, our department embraces the idea of "go with what works for you" and "many paths can lead to one goal". To that end we require portfolios for program assessment, but paper is still fine. As the ease of the electronic version becomes apparent, the paper is slowly giving way to electronic portfolios, but it is a personal choice. The majority adopters can feel supported to adopt eportfolios at their own pace with whatever level of support is comfortable for them. If there are instructors who will always prefer paper, accommodation can certainly be made such that eportfolios can remain a choice and not a fiat.

Advice for implementing eportfolios

As general advice for implementing eportfolio, the professional development specialists of our Learning and Teaching center recommend talk about portfolios first, for instructors of disciplines that do not use portfolios, and then after portfolio pedagogy is clear, talk about how they can be electronic. Often, at our college, these conversations happen in workshops and personal support in learning the eportfolio platform. Our college offers short workshop series that first introduce the idea, and then a following workshop where participants build their own portfolio in a platform of their choosing. In addition, we have found it very helpful to have samples of portfolios available for others to see. These are posted on our Learning and Teaching Center college webpage along with a college eportfolio handbook to serve as a resource for faculty, staff, and students.

As advice for using eportfolios in a course, our instructors recommend introducing the eportfolio early in the course, with constant reference to the eportfolio throughout the course. It is helpful to ask students to be adding to the portfolio throughout the course so that it does not become a panic inducing project at the end of the course. In addition, a midterm peer review and a final peer review of the eportfolio seems to help students be aware of how they might revise their eportfolio to be more reader friendly. Both the student doing the review and the student receiving the review benefit from this process. Instructors have also found that students are able to more successful reflect on the entire portfolio building process if they have been doing periodic short reflections throughout the semester.

In our experience, the personal, informal process of grassroots development of eportfolios has worked well for our college. The implementation costs have been supporting the participation of the three faculty members in the INCEPR group, and the personal time these people have devoted to workshops and communities of practice. The strength of this approach is the gentle buy-in and the personal support of those who may initially resist and then later become interested. The weakness of this approach is that it is slow. The strength of our approach to platform choice as personal choice of free Web 2.0 platforms is the personal flexibility of choice for both instructors and students. In addition, students have full ownership of their work. The weakness of this approach to platform choice is the challenge of collecting and assessing the eportfolios in multiple cloud based platforms. These weaknesses notwithstanding, and due to the fact that we are a small college, we believe we can find creative solutions to the assessment issues as well as nurture the slow adoption of eportfolios across the college through personal support of both those who wish to use electronic portfolios and those who wish to continue with paper.

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