Evolving ePortfolio Use in the Applied Administration Program

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This case study outlines the eportfolio implementation in the Business and Economics Department at Blue Ash College, a regional campus of the University of Cincinnati. This program presents how they began with LiveBinders and then moved to WordPress to create portfolios that document mastery of program outcomes. The eportfolios are developed in several courses to document the students' progress throughout the program as well as give them opportunities to reflect on their own learning.

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Introduction

This case study reviews the evolution of eportfolios as an assessment tool in the Bachelor of Technical and Applied Studies (BTAS), Applied Administration (APPA) program at the University of Cincinnati, Blue Ash College (UCBA). UC Blue Ash College is a regional campus of the University of Cincinnati. The Applied Administration program is an interdisciplinary degree program covering topics including business, communication, e-media and statistics. The program was designed as a collaborative program with another regional campus of the university and began in fall 2011. The curriculum design allows students with an applied or technical associate degree to complete their bachelor's degree with an additional two years of academic classes. When the means for program assessment was chosen, the organizing team chose eportfolio as a tool that could be used both to showcase work and to document student learning for program assessment. This created challenges because the tool was selected, but specific assessment methods and criteria were defined later. This case study focuses on the evolution of eportfolio use in the UCBA program and courses, and the impact on eportfolio use from the first Applied Administration assessment cycle. Due to a lack of clearly defined strategies for the use of eportfolios in the beginning, it is not surprising that our initial implementation had difficulties. We have found that as we have continued to develop and refine our goals and related processes, the eportfolio is better serving our needs. It now acts as of repository of work that can be used for program assessment and a showcase of artifacts students can use as they leave the college.

Background of ePortfolio use in the UC Blue Ash Applied Administration Program

After the initial launch of the program in fall 2011, discussion quickly turned to assessment. Although the organizing team had decided to use eportfolios as the primary source of assessment to demonstrate progression of student work, the format, content and relation to outcomes had not been defined. During the first year of the program, the topic of eportfolio and retaining program work for use later in the program was not included in courses. The initial identification of required artifacts along with a content management system (CMS) application

for the eportfolio was agreed on by the organizing team in fall 2012. The first eportfolio CMS application used was LiveBinders.

When eportfolios were initially considered, the organizing team was focused on selecting an assessment tool. The general concept of eportfolios seemed clear, but the practical local context issues turned out to require more planning than initially considered. The intent was students starting in the program needed a tool to collect work – but assessment could be defined later. As we started down this path, we found that the term eportfolio meant different things to different faculty. Also, there was confusion of which artifacts to collect and the role those artifacts would play in assessment. Without a clear plan for use of the eportfolio, the early eportfolios were simply a compilation of assignments and often viewed as extra work.

At about the same time the APPA program launched, increased use of eportfolios began on the UCBA campus, primarily driven by the English Department. Faculty were encouraged to attend eportfolio workshops offered on the Blue Ash campus, both to understand and apply pedagogy and to learn the software applications. The Bridging and Capstone faculty attended an eportfolio workshop based on WordPress trainings and found that this was both a more aesthetically pleasing option and easier to navigate and build than LiveBinders. An increasing number of students entering the program had been exposed to WordPress in their associate degree English courses, and that discovery, coupled with the use of WordPress in the English and Communication program, supported the decision to begin using WordPress in the APPA program. In 2013-2014, two APPA faculty participated in an academic year Faculty Learning Community (FLC), and used that opportunity to collaborate with leaders at UCBA and their peers to further define the eportfolio used in the APPA program. By working with other faculty who were using eportfolios, along with those who were considering it, it provided a rich environment for brainstorming and refining our processes. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the APPA program, the perspectives and feedback from colleagues in other disciplines was extremely helpful. The FLC also provided us an environment to better learn and practice with the application.

ePortfolios and the Applied Administration Program Outcomes

The program learning outcomes for the Applied Administration Program are that students will be able to:

- PLO 1: Demonstrate leadership skills in his/her field.
- PLO 2: Apply team building and decision making skills to class projects.
- PLO 3: Evaluate the implications of emerging media trends in communication and workplace practices.
- PLO 4: Communicate effectively both orally and in writing.

Students complete learning activities and projects in Applied Administration courses which support the outcomes. By introducing the use and purpose of the eportfolio during their first course in the program, students include artifacts that are required, and are encouraged to select additional artifacts they believe provide additional evidence of meeting the outcome(s). Communicating this consistently with all faculty has proven to be a challenge for a variety of reasons. These reasons include change in faculty assigned to the courses and individual faculty assigned to teach a course who are not familiar with the overall program. We are taking several approaches to address this situation. We meet regularly with program faculty teaching in current semesters and we have invited faculty to join the assessment team. In addition, we have developed a one-page summary that is distributed to all students during their first course – instructing them to select materials that showcase their work and that support the program outcomes. This latter approach will ultimately create a culture of students taking responsibility which will ultimately help them build a more relevant eportfolio for their work.

Demonstrating outcomes for assessment

Four courses were originally defined as requiring artifacts to be part of the assessment; Bridging, Applied Writing, Interpersonal Communications, and Capstone. These four courses were labeled the touchstone courses, with the Capstone course being the culmination of all program work. These courses remain the key touchstone courses for the eportfolio. Students are asked to archive coursework from these courses at specific points in the program to effectively illustrate the learning outcomes. In addition they are informed during the Bridging course to

select and include work from other courses that support the outcomes or that they would like to use to demonstrate their professional skills. In this way, only specific faculty who have experience in teaching with the eportfolio are responsible for coaching the students to collect artifacts. One example is that students take a Teambuilding course which often results in relevant artifacts. The Teambuilding professor does not need to deal with the eportfolio, but the Bridging professor can coach students to add artifacts from that class to the eportfolio. The culmination of all program work in the Capstone course is intended to allow students to demonstrate that they developed and achieved mastery of the program learning outcomes. Students submit their final eportfolio during their last term in the program in the Senior Capstone course. The artifacts in the eportfolio should demonstrate mastery of the program learning outcomes. The academic learning achievements students have showcased in the eportfolio are then assessed by the faculty review team using a rubric.

 In fall 2016 a team of faculty, consisting of faculty who teach in the APPA program and volunteered to assist, completed the first formal assessment by reviewing the fall 2015 and spring 2016 Senior Capstone eportfolios.   In the Capstone course, students provided the instructor with the URL link to their eportfolio. Each eportfolio was assigned two faculty reviewers, and then the faculty compiled their rankings for each eportfolio in a Google Doc Spreadsheet. We were able to average rankings by student eportfolio and total averages of all rankings per learning outcome. The faculty assessment team then held a review meeting to discuss the qualitative findings and feedback based on their assessment of the eportfolio evidence.

 One of the outcomes from this first assessment was clarifying the artifact purpose to students. Although the intent was that the artifacts in the eportfolio would demonstrate the program learning outcomes, this purpose was not clearly or consistently communicated to the students. When the artifacts appeared without student reflection, the purpose of the artifact was unclear to the reader of the eportfolio. The reason for the inclusion of the artifact was also often unclear to the student. An immediate change implemented in fall 2016 was students were directly asked during Capstone to reflect on artifacts and how the included artifacts demonstrate the program outcomes. In addition, program outcomes are now introduced during the introduction to the eportfolio in the Bridging course.

Folding the ePortfolio into a course

The Bridging course, which is taken the first semester a student enters the program, is a mid-collegiate course intended to ensure students have the correct technical tools to be successful and to provide an orientation to the program. This course is taught by a faculty member who has participated in professional development concerning the use and development of eportfolios. In the Bridging course, students are introduced to eportfolios, including the academic and professional use of eportfolios, and how to build an eportfolio online. When the eportfolio is initially presented in Bridging, students are also directed to watch for, select, and archive at least three artifacts from three other program courses to showcase their work.

The culture of eportfolios needs to be more integrated into the time frame between Bridging and Capstone. This is a challenge of professional development for faculty who teach in the program. The intent is as students move through the program, APPA faculty either assign or encourage them to archive coursework which will demonstrate their skills, knowledge and abilities learned in the program. For this implementation to be successful, the faculty who teach these classes need to understand the purpose of the program eportfolio, how it relates to the course they are teaching, and the role of reflection to contextualize the pieces added from their courses. At the end of their program, students complete the Capstone class in which the eportfolio is required and students must showcase work from previous courses and the current class. The Capstone eportfolio is the eportfolio that is reviewed for program assessment.

ePortfolio platforms and support

Although our learning management system, Blackboard, has an eportfolio feature, it was not considered as an option because it is in a closed system and not accessible anywhere anytime. The decision to use LiveBinder and subsequently WordPress, was influenced by the ability to download and use it for free, accessible online tutorials and ease of use. Initially students were instructed in Livebinder, but beginning in summer 2015 students began receiving instruction to develop a WordPress eportfolio.   In the Bridging course several "workshop" hands-on computer sessions are held to create the initial eportfolio and then later to update it. Students are provided support through the use of online videos, references, and the Bridging and

Capstone professors. Because occasionally students come into the program with an eportfolio created in another course, they may use alternative platforms but then are limited to their own support.

In the Bridging course, students are required to archive their initial resume and goals and to set up a defined structure of menus and pages. Capstone course students are required to archive a current resume, reflective essay, final case analysis, and a final project report. The resume is archived with a reflection of how it has evolved from the document created at the beginning of the program to their current version. The Program Reflective Essay requires students to reflect on where they were personally, professionally, and academically when they started the program and where they feel they are personally, professionally, and academically at the end of the program. All of these documents and learning achievement samples are archived and used to assess to what degree students achieved the program learning outcomes.

Most support and training for learning WordPress for faculty was obtained by participating in workshops and Faculty Learning Communities held by UCBA Learning and Teaching Center, and through online tutorials and WordPress help functions. While participating in the eportfolio Learning Community, faculty from the Applied Administration program also agreed on and defined an initial structure of menus and pages for the eportfolio. The eportfolio that is created in the Bridging course follows that structure.

Faculty and student attitudes toward the ePortfolio

In the beginning faculty, especially those not teaching Bridging or Capstone, had a hard time identifying the eportfolios' usefulness to them and application to their course content. This was especially true for faculty who had never used any type of eportfolio in their work or discipline. Bridging and Capstone faculty collaborated on introduction instruction and completion expectations. These faculty members have shared how they are using the eportfolios to encourage other members of the APPA faculty team to incorporate its usage in their classes. The English and Communication faculty members of the APPA team had already embraced the use of eportfolios in their discipline, so their attitudes were positive. Their positive experiences reinforced the practical application for eportfolio in individual courses. After participation in the team program assessment, the APPA faculty who participated experienced how the eportfolios

demonstrated the program learning outcomes. This practical, hands-on experience was the most effective form of professional development for those faculty who needed more persuasion concerning the usefulness of an eportfolio. Formalizing the process and providing resources to those instructors will further help implementation.

Students also were initially confused and saw the eportfolio as something separate and were unclear on its purpose. They considered it additional busy work. This confusion generated little motivation for students to archive evidence by their own choice. This ambivalence was reinforced because, although students were informed in Bridging that this was a program eportfolio, faculty in other courses did not refer to it. Often, the eportfolio was not referred to again until students reached the Capstone course. This lack of reinforcement is improving as instructors understand the intent of the ePortfolios. Faculty in all program courses can now better identify appropriate assignments for students to use as evidence in their ePortfolios and help students incorporate these assignments into the eportfolios. Students are also instructed in the Capstone course to consider setting up professional showcase eportfolios separate from the learning eportfolio for program assessment. In the professional eportfolio, the student selects the artifacts to demonstrate their most marketable learned skills to share. The professional eportfolios are not evaluated for program assessment, but provide a purpose that many of the students can easily relate to and in which they perceive the personal value.

How ePortfolios have changed the Applied Administration Program
and what the future might bring

Over the five years of the program, the utilization of ePortfolios has morphed from a glorified digital filing cabinet in Livebinder to an ever changing reflection of experience in WordPress. Occasionally students use a different platform such as Google Sites or Wix. Students who began with paper or Livebinder often transition to WordPress because they like the appearance of the site better. Students now look to create something that employers can view in their professional ePortfolio and that faculty can use to assess the program. Our first program assessment was enlightening to the team of faculty since the practical experience of assessment clarified specific points of implementation that they had not previously considered. From this implementation experience, faculty are now looking for projects that can be used as evidence in

the eportfolios to incorporate into their existing courses. Faculty have a better understanding of how the platform is used for assessment and what types of evidence students need to archive.

The faculty team also noted that the importance of the eportfolio needs to be emphasized early and throughout the program to the students. During the entire program students need to archive artifacts and write reflections on their experience and the learning activities they complete. As faculty conducted that first assessment, menu tabs were often empty, many eportfolios did not have clear navigation, and appropriate evidence to adequately determine if the student understood the desired learning outcomes was missing. Several eportfolios in the assessment session turned out to be empty because students had either deleted content or moved the content to another location. This was related to lack of direction as they moved through the program rather than "errors" on the part of the students.

We were also concerned about where we could store eportfolios if we wanted to access them online, but we decided that it would be explained to students that they need to leave the eportfolio intact in order for it to be reviewed. Going forward, we plan to review our rubric and develop more defined criteria with more specific examples of evidence. The rubric is intended to parallel what students are asked to archive. We are also considering formally separating the assessment eportfolio from the professional showcase eportfolio. For example, the program assessment eportfolio could be used as a starting point and saved for assessment – while students could use that assessment eportfolio as a source of artifacts to create a new, professional, eportfolio emphasizing artifacts relevant to their career.

The journey began precarious and unclear, but as faculty have become more educated in the use of eportfolios themselves, the process has evolved into a much improved practice. In the beginning we were simply asking students to save assignments in their portfolios. Now we have implemented a process that begins in the first class and follows to the Capstone class. Students archive work and reflect on how that work demonstrates the program learning outcomes. After students submit their final eportfolios in their Capstone class the Applied Administration faculty assess the artifacts archived in the eportfolio to analyze whether students are learning the intended material. In addition we assess not only whether they learned the material but can they reflect on the learning and show through the artifacts what they learned and how they can apply the learning to the artifact. This process is still evolving into a positive and productive practice.

Advice for implementing ePortfolios

The faculty team met after the first assessment of the eportfolios to discuss the process used and how to improve instruction and assessment of eportfolios. We learned much from the practical application of the assessment process. When implementing eportfolios it is important to share Program Learning Outcomes in the beginning of the eportfolio experience so students know what to archive in their eportfolios. Faculty teams, departments, and colleges need to agree on a basic structure – or key components and platform (or functions of platform if students self-select) for students to use. It is important to define common terminology and be sure this terminology is shared with all faculty to use with students. All program instructors should be encouraged to include a statement in syllabi for all courses in the program that explains the role of the eportfolio in both the course and the program. For example, there needs to be a statement indicating students are expected to select artifacts to keep in the eportfolio and that these artifacts should be available at the end of the semester in the eportfolio. If a learning management system, for example Blackboard, is used for courses in the program, it is helpful to students if the instructor would embed a link that leads to an eportfolio resource inside the course.