

Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

What Is An ePortfolio and What Does It Have to Do with My Classes? My Journey from Skepticism to Implementation

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ePortfolios are an electronic collection of artifacts and reflections collected over time to be shared with a wide audience. ePortfolios are intended to have students “collect, select, reflect, and connect” (Clark & Eynon, 2009) with regards to their learning – collecting impactful artifacts, selecting those that will demonstrate their learning for inclusion, reflecting on their learning over time and connecting the portfolio with a wide audience.

“That’s nice but it has nothing to do with my classes,” was my first thought about eportfolios. In late August 2013, I was a new faculty member in the Biology department at University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College (UCBA) and was fatigued with the number of meetings I was attending in my first week. The first time I heard the term “eportfolio” was from Ruth Benander, a faculty member in the UCBA English and Communication Department, at one of these meetings. I admittedly did not pay much attention – portfolios were things that English and art students completed and had nothing to do with me. My background in biochemistry and microbiology never included portfolios. I only had a vague idea of what a portfolio is. Science courses are traditionally more lecture-intensive, and I had previously relied on exams, homework assignments, stacks of lab reports, and presentations in assessment of students. I supposed that an electronic version of the large, cumbersome portfolios that I had seen students haul around

campus was a good idea, and I was sure other programs would appreciate this information, but it wasn't for me.

I continued to hear about eportfolios on occasion, and each time I dismissed the idea. This mentality ended in the summer of 2016. The chair of the biology department, who had recently taught the college's joint biology and chemistry majors First Year Experience (FYE) course for the first time, approached me about working to incorporate eportfolios into the class. This one credit hour course was created to incorporate the four common elements of the college's FYE program: career exploration, major/program exploration, college and university resources, and information literacy. Over seven weeks, meeting once a week for two-hour sessions, students would receive instruction in each of the four common elements as well as student success tips. Despite the excellent efforts of many faculty members, student engagement remained low. Students also struggled with tying together each class session into a cohesive experience. The chair thought that incorporating eportfolios might improve student engagement and student learning. I was skeptical that it would help, but agreed that I would look into it. I worked with Janice Denton, then chair of the UCBA chemistry department, to alter each class session by incorporating eportfolios and to develop a sample eportfolio site for instructors to show their students. The instructors for the 2016 fall semester were on board for the change, as everyone agreed that the course needed a breath of fresh air.

That fall I joined the UCBA ePortfolio Faculty Learning Community (FLC) to learn more and to ensure that we were following best practices with our FYE class. I also joined because I was considering incorporating ePortfolios into a biology department non-science majors course called Destination Disease, which focuses on diseases that one could catch when traveling. When I was asked if I wanted to teach the class (which had not been taught by any current member in

the department) in 2015 and was given the list of learning objectives, I approached my instruction with a lecture-heavy format – it was the fastest and most thorough way I knew to prepare classes for the semester. After two years, however, it became obvious that students were not engaging with the material in a meaningful way. My lectures and the accompanying documentaries that I had used to supplement instruction became a 15-week parade of pathogens – a list of diseases, the organisms that cause those diseases, symptoms, prevention, and treatment options. My personal bias was to keep things the same – partially because I liked lecture as a student and partially because I put a lot of work into the lectures, and they were already done, while redesigning the course would add a lot of work to my already busy schedule. However, the positive news I was hearing from the FYE instructors encouraged me to at least explore the idea of using ePortfolios in this class.

In the 2017 Fall semester, I redesigned my Destination Disease course to include eportfolio assignments throughout the term. I told students of how I used to teach the class and why I was trying the change. For most assignments, students would research a pathogenic organism from a list of 10-15 choices and learn how to use certain trusted resources when researching their pathogens. Each assignment included time for building the section of the portfolio in class and peer review. Not everyone would learn about the same list of pathogens anymore, but by lecturing on a few core organisms, having students research one pathogen per module and reflect on another after the peer review, students would still learn about a variety of diseases.

While the previous format covered trusted sources for research, this new format provided students authentic training in information literacy – a skill essential for life-long learning. The ePortfolio format also provided flexibility to introduce timely diseases (current to the news

cycle) without the pressure to create new lectures and find new documentaries. Still, some students did not submit complete portfolios while others seemed to remain unengaged.

Redesigning the course was a lot of work, and I was skeptical that this endeavor was worth the effort. However, in reading the final reflections of many students, this method of instruction was impactful in meeting the student learning objectives. Student comments such as, “The e-portfolio has taught me to present factual evidence that supports my claim in a readable and creative way,” and, “I learned so much more doing the independent research than I think I would if we had not done the e-portfolio...I can look up different bugs and pathogens, have a great set of ready made research sites and feel infinitely more comfortable in traveling now that I know what to look for and where to find it the easy way as well as get the vaccines and tests that I need before travel,” forced me to reconsider what knowledge and skills I wanted this student population to have at the end of our 15 weeks together. While I was initially very skeptical about eportfolio use in the classroom, these impactful reflections have led me to maintain eportfolio use in this course and to consider incorporating their use in other courses.

In the absence of the strong and established eportfolio community at UCBA, I doubt that my implementation of eportfolios would have been so successful in one semester. I likely would not have ever used this tool without a nudge down the eportfolio pathway by my department chair. A supportive community of instructors interested in this innovation was also invaluable – I was able to learn about best practices from knowledgeable colleagues, expand on that basic foundation through a FLC supported by the college’s Learning and Teaching center, and I had access to numerous resources, such as tutors experienced in eportfolios at the college’s writing center, to help make implementation easier and run more smoothly. The user-friendly free technologies for creating eportfolios such as Weebly, GoogleSites, and Wix also led me to use

this tool in the classroom. If students needed to pay a fee to build their eportfolios or if the sites were not intuitive to use, I likely would have found an alternative assessment to meet the learning objectives for the class. Still, despite strong community support at UCBA and free, easy to use tools for building eportfolios, it was the significant reflections made by students about their learning over the semester using eportfolios that has contributed the most to continuing to use this innovation in my classes.

References

Clark J.E. & Eynon B. (2009). E-portfolios at 2.0-Surveying the Field. *Peer Review*, 11(1):18-23.