

# Chapter 21

## ePortfolios as a Tool for Integrative Learning: Building Classroom Practices that Work

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### ABSTRACT

*ePortfolios are being used throughout the world as a way to engage students more deeply in their learning, encourage integrative learning, and provide more authentic assessment for courses, programs and institutions. While ePortfolios have great potential, instructors need to provide opportunities to create meaningful products. This chapter describes a model that provides a framework for developing classroom practices that promote integrative and deep learning. Four practices, reflection, making connections, life-long learning, and communication, serve as the base for a successful course ePortfolio assignment. Recommendations about how to introduce ePortfolios into courses and programs are offered. The chapter concludes with a discussion of recommendations for practice.*

### INTRODUCTION

Today, ePortfolios are becoming more common in education mainly for the opportunities they provide for promoting and assessing student learning (e.g., Stefani, Mason & Pegler, 2007; Chen, Penny Light & Ittelson, 2012). Through ePortfolios, students have the opportunity to discover and explore their

role as a learner, make connections, and more intentionally integrate their learning. ePortfolios are also a plus for administrators and faculty as they provide a more authentic way of evaluating student and program success. While ePortfolios have been used more heavily to date in such areas as writing, art, and graphic design, students and educator can benefit from ePortfolios potentially

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in all subject areas. For example, in math, students can use ePortfolios to not only show the correct to certain math problems but also the critical process used in solving the math problems. The promise of ePortfolios is great; the promotion of learning and the assessment of learning can happen with one tool. However, as the means to create an ePortfolio becomes more available and accessible, it threatens to make the process too easy. Instead of providing enriched opportunities for students to learn and for program coordinators to use for assessment, ePortfolios can become no more than electronic depositories of information, especially if attention is on providing the technology or on creating easy-to-assess ePortfolios. Students need only take a few minutes to download some assignments, write a short reflection and add a picture or two with no significant learning involved. ePortfolios can meet the goal of advancing and documenting student learning well *if* instructors provide the necessary classroom supports for this to happen.

Creating deep and meaningful ePortfolios means managing the tension between teaching the technology of the ePortfolio tool, program assessment opportunities, and promoting integrative and deep learning. Making learning the center of the ePortfolio creation can be transformational for the student and faculty. When learning is at the center of ePortfolio creation, it can actually help assessment efforts by providing opportunities for authentic assessment of courses and programs, providing insight into students' learning and guide improved practices.

The use of ePortfolios has been touted as a potential tool for integrative learning (e.g., Chen, Penny Light & Ittelson, 2012). Integrative learning has been identified as an important university learning outcome by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2007). These organizations are exploring how integrative learning can be used on college campuses to help students make more intentional connections

within their learning rather than expecting it to happen on its own. This work came from an understanding that at least from high school on, students are taught that knowledge is in discrete packages called a *subject* or a *course*. Institutions of higher education teach students to learn facts, ideas, and skills associated with a course and then test them. As Huber and Hutchings (2004) note, "The very structures of academic life encourage students to see their courses as isolated requirements to complete" (p. 1). However, in this increasingly complex world, segmented and compartmentalized learning is insufficient because students will need to connect the knowledge they have learnt and apply it to solving the problems of the day.

This chapter will describe the use of ePortfolios in higher education, explaining their use in promoting student learning and for student, program and institutional assessment. It will also describe the growing interest in and literature on integrative learning. The main focus of the chapter will be on the need to develop specific pedagogical strategies for the classroom to help ensure that ePortfolios provide the opportunities for students to experience integrative learning. A framework for and examples of such strategies will be shared. Finally the chapter will discuss recommendations for the future, including the need for ongoing research on ePortfolios and integrative learning.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **ePortfolios**

Hard-copy portfolios have been used for quite some time in education particularly in such areas as writing, visual arts, architecture and graphic design. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the use of portfolios went beyond these areas in higher education to address pressures by outside constituents to demonstrate the value of students' education and to create a more learner-centered environment. This was coupled with the desire to promote more

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