Putting E-Portfolios at the Center of Our Learning

Laura M. Gambino, professor and faculty scholar for teaching, learning, and assessment, Stella and Charles Guttman Community College, CUNY

Stella and Charles Guttman Community College, formerly the New Community College, is the first community college to open in the City University of New York in over forty years. When we welcomed our inaugural class in August 2012, Guttman introduced an innovative educational model that brings together multiple high-impact practices (Kuh 2008) such as first-year experience, learning communities, and experiential learning. As Tom Bailey, director of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, said, The important thing about the New Community College is not any one thing they’re doing, but that they’re doing all of them together. All the research shows that if you do them alone, for a modest amount of time, they have a modest positive effect, but it doesn’t last. This will be a chance to see what happens if you do them together, consistently, over a longer period of time (in Perez-Pena 2012).

Guttman’s goal in transforming the traditional model of community college education is to significantly increase student engagement, success, retention, and graduation rates.

E-portfolios are central to this transformation. They enable us to connect our high impact practices into a holistic, integrative learning environment for students. E-portfolios also serve as the primary vehicle for assessment at Guttman, using authentic student work to create a culture of learning and continuous improvement. Guttman is the first college in the country to be built with e-portfolio as the centerpiece of learning, connecting curricular, cocurricular, and institutional structures. Our vision statement reflects this:

As an institution focused on learning and improvement, e-portfolio is an integral and integrating component at the center of Guttman Community College. The use of e-portfolio spans the breadth of our work and organization from students, faculty and staff, to programs, from academic and curricular to administrative and institutional functions. E-portfolio is an environment in which we showcase our work, articulate and reflect on our learning, assess our outcomes, document improvements and change, and communicate to each other and the larger communities we are a part of” (E-portfolio Task Force 2013)

While we acknowledge that it is rare to have the opportunity to build a new college from the ground up, we believe there is much to be learned from our experience. Generating a “vision of the possible,” Guttman has the freedom to experiment, demonstrate, and share what it means to build e-portfolios into virtually every aspect of campus life, creating a multi-layered e-portfolio culture. We are also interested in identifying the transportable processes and elements of this model and sharing our lessons learned. We hope our work will help demonstrate the transformative potential that e-portfolios offer higher education.

BACKGROUND

The planning for Guttman’s e-portfolio initiative predates the opening of the college. The initial concept paper proposed that we adopt a portfolio system for assessing student learning, growth, and mastery of core competencies (The City University of New York 2008). A working committee for assessment and portfolios recommended “the use of portfolios as the core of the assessment system” (The City University of New York 2010, 55). It also recommended that students create an e-portfolio during their summer bridge program and add to that e-portfolio during their time at the college, culminating in a graduation portfolio where they “demonstrate mastery of critical skills as well as reflect on growth during their college experience” (65).

Moving from concept to practice is always a challenge. While ideas from the concept paper and working committee report have been modified and adjusted as needed, we remain true to many of the core
recommendations. We use e-portfolios "at scale"; they are a critical connector for every student's Gutman experience and serve as a catalyst for learning—for students, faculty, and the institution. Our e-portfolio philosophy, developed in 2013 by a college task force, articulates this concept:

We believe e-portfolio can serve as the conversational centerpiece and clearinghouse for institutional learning and change. E-portfolio catalyzes learning, assessment and communication in proportion to its use. As a community of learners, we use e-portfolio to define and shape integrated curricula, advising programs and career preparation through asynchronous exchanges of knowledge, culture, and experience. (E-portfolio Task Force 2013)

In addition to the task force's work, a faculty team participates in the Connect to Learning (C2L) project, based at LaGuardia Community College (see the related article on page 8). C2L's Catalyst for Learning framework (Catalyst 2014) helps structure the complex nature of our e-portfolio implementation. Many of our e-portfolio practices are influenced by what we have learned from partner campuses in the C2L network.

As a result of these efforts we have a burgeoning e-portfolio culture. By focusing on integrative, reflective, and social pedagogy, e-portfolio use helps create a holistic learning experience linking teaching and learning, assessment, and professional development.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

At Gutman, students' e-portfolio experiences begin in the summer during their mandatory bridge program. Using Digication, Gutman's e-portfolio and assessment platform, students create their learning e-portfolio. They author a "Who Am I?" essay and begin to customize their e-portfolio. E-portfolio use is integrated throughout the summer bridge curriculum and cocurricular activities, including a group research project focused on a New York City neighborhood. At the conclusion of the bridge program, students submit their e-portfolios to Digication's assessment system; these portfolios are used to assess the program and serve as a baseline measure of our Gutman learning outcomes (GLO)—the college's five institutional core competencies (see below).

Student use of e-portfolios helps unif Gutman's required first-year curriculum, which consists of courses such as City Seminar, Ethnographies of Work, Composition, and Statistics. Our faculty and first-year advisors (termed "student success advocates" at Gutman), engage students in activities that use reflective and social pedagogies to connect and support our integrative curriculum. For example, at the mid-point of our twelve-week fall and spring sessions, students engage in a community-service experience. Through an activity in City Seminar, students use the e-portfolio to reflect on their experience and link it back to their course-based learning. In Lori Ungemah's class this past fall, students composed a self-reflection letter after being prompted "to explain how your experience connected to ideas you had already learned in City Seminar this fall. Where did you see overlap? How did your experience affect your thoughts on our City Seminar topic? What resonated with you most?" (Ungemah 2013).

In addition to course-based applications, e-portfolios are used in our academic support structures, helping students develop the skills and persistence needed to be successful. According to Ariana Gonzalez-Stokas (personal communication), "Our academic support space, known as Studio, seeks to support students in their development of academic competencies and cultivate a sense of ownership over their learning and identity as a college student." In this support context, scaffolded reflective journaling and project-based activities connect with the bridge program and first-year coursework, enabling students to gain a better understanding of themselves as learners.

Through deliberate weaving of e-portfolios across the curriculum, experiential learning opportunities, and academic support, the Gutman model creates a connective space for learning in the first year. Students can see their own growth and learning over time; e-portfolios facilitate their ability to grasp how each individual component fits into a holistic, integrative learning experience.

As we begin our second year at the college and develop our upper-level courses and degree programs, we are working with faculty to extend the connective role of e-portfolios. In our human services program, for example, Nicole Saint-Louis developed a template that provides opportunities for students to connect their second-year coursework, fieldwork, and a capstone project with the GLOs. In addition, our second-year career strategists work with students to develop showcase e-portfolios. The strategists also developed a comprehensive resource e-portfolio that serves as a virtual hub for second-year students to communicate with their strategist and to find information about their advising and transfer processes.

Our pedagogical uses of e-portfolios center on improving learning through careful attention to the curricular, cocurricular, and affective dimensions of the student experience. We want students to become reflective practitioners with an understanding of the...
learning process and who they are as learners. One student, Sam van der Swaagh, articulated this in a reflection he authored. For Sam, “The e-portfolio platform provides an area to display ‘how I arrived here,’ which is much more interesting than merely showing the final products. The reflective nature of [an] e-portfolio provides me with a professional website to showcase who I am as a person and displays how I became who I am... [it] essentially profiles me as a student and presents my narrative” (2013).

OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT
Guttman has a strong commitment to ongoing, comprehensive assessment that examines student learning at both the individual and aggregate levels. This commitment is centered on the concept of using assessment for learning (Barrett 2004) across the various layers of the institution—students, faculty, and programs—with the ultimate goal of improving student learning, persistence, and success. Since our assessment structures were constructed with a strong emphasis on examining student learning via e-portfolios, we did not encounter faculty “buy-in” issues and were consequently able to move quickly into practice—examining work, reflecting on findings, and identifying and implementing changes.

Our assessment of student e-portfolios began last year when we examined portfolios from the summer bridge program. Based on that evaluation, we found the majority of students were not comfortable using e-portfolios and that the bridge program experience was fragmented. We revised the curriculum and created a more cohesive experience, integrating e-portfolios into each component of the program.

Ongoing assessment is essential to our work; coordinated by our Center for College Effectiveness, dedicated assessment days are scheduled into the mid- and end-points of each twelve week fall and spring session. While a variety of assessment and professional development activities take place on these days, the primary goal is for faculty and staff to work together assessing first-year student work and reflections from their e-portfolios.

Instructional teams, which include faculty and student success advocates, conduct an assessment of each student. Teams then identify any individual interventions and action plans needed to help students succeed academically.

E-portfolios allow us to focus our institutional assessment on authentic student work and reflections connected to real classroom, experiential, and cocurricular activities. A team of faculty and administrators attended AACU’s General Education and Assessment Summer Institute last spring and, informed by the work of our colleagues at LaGuardia Community College (Arcario et al. 2013), developed a comprehensive GLO assessment plan. Teams of faculty, staff, and students at the college will engage in a three-year inquiry, reflection, and integration cycle, examining snapshots of student e-portfolios collected at various milestones: the conclusion of the bridge program, the end of the first-year experience, and graduation. These snapshots will allow us to look longitudinally at how students are learning and growing in relation to the GLOs, identify any needed curricular improvements, and implement changes.

We envision our assessment work as an ongoing, action-research process—planning, evaluating, reflecting, and implementing changes in a cyclical process over time. Our work will mature and deepen as our students move through their programs. Our goal is to become a learning organization, where faculty, staff, programs, and the institution learn and grow as our students learn and grow.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
Given the pervasiveness of e-portfolios across the student learning experience and its central role in Guttman’s institutional model, professional development is critical to our work. Our challenge in this area is two-fold. We are bringing many new faculty members on board each year, the majority of whom are not familiar with e-portfolios. We also are still building our professional development structures, working to integrate e-portfolios into them.

Our initial professional development work focused on introducing e-portfolios. Throughout our first year, faculty and staff participated in e-portfolio workshops and activities. Participants were learning “on the fly;” leaders helped them work with the technology, design integrative assignments, and develop reflective prompts. This year we developed a comprehensive professional development plan to introduce e-portfolio pedagogy and practice to our new hires. We also worked closely with our peer mentors and graduate coordinators.

E-portfolio leaders work to integrate e-portfolios into our professional development practices, using e-portfolios to “practice what we preach.” For example, we developed professional development e-portfolios for our E-portfolio and the Arts and E-portfolio Peer Mentor/Grad Coordinator Bootcamp workshops. In addition to sharing materials, participants engage in social pedagogy, commenting and engaging with each other via e-portfolios, both before and during workshops.

While workshops are beneficial, we know and see from our C2L colleagues that successful e-portfolio-related professional development activities utilize a sustained seminar approach. We are exploring ways to integrate this type of approach into our college structures. This spring we will pilot communities of practice, engaging small groups of faculty and staff with e-portfolio pedagogies. Connecting with our outcomes assessment work, our GLO teams will participate in sustained professional development. As we launch our degree programs, we will offer ongoing professional development with faculty to integrate e-portfolios into the second-year curricula.
CULTIVATING AN E-PORTFOLIO CULTURE

For many e-portfolio leaders, the phrase "scaling up" refers to growing or broadening an e-portfolio initiative. Having started "at scale," we understand the phrase to refer to the deepening of our e-portfolio use, finding ways to further integrate it into Gutman's learning culture. We have taken several steps this past year to cultivate that culture. At the same time, we see innovative uses for e-portfolios emerging from our faculty and staff.

Gutman does not use a learning management system. E-portfolios are the vehicle through which we deliver course materials to students. Each instructional team develops an e-portfolio that contains syllabi, assignments, videos, or other instructional materials that are shared with students and updated regularly, providing them a single space to find what is needed for courses.

In addition, almost every faculty member and advisor has his or her own e-portfolio where they share information about themselves, their teaching and research, and outside interests. Karla Fuller, for example, developed an e-portfolio for reappointment where she shares a narrative curriculum vitae and reflections on her growth as an academic and scholar. Fuller explained the value of this exercise in terms of both pedagogy and professional development. When she saw How artfully one can present information as evidence through this venue, I decided to create my own e-portfolio for two main reasons: (1) to model curricular of an effective e-portfolio for my students and (2) to document my own professional growth and development as an early-career faculty member. After working very hard on my e-portfolio for months, I really liked the interactive way I could share my professional life with others. (personal communication)

We also see uses for e-portfolios that have evolved "organically" from faculty and staff. The City Seminar committee created a curricular e-portfolio that provides a wealth of resources including curriculum and learning outcomes, sample syllabi, videos, and assignments. Other groups followed its lead and we now have portfolios for each of our first-year courses. They are dynamic resources; faculty continually update and add to these repositories, creating a rich library of shared instructional materials accessible to all faculty and staff.

Our peer mentors find creative uses for e-portfolios. They develop resource e-portfolios that provide academic support materials for students. They also created an e-portfolio for our bridge program's commonly assigned reading. This e-portfolio, accessed by students before the bridge program began, contained videos in which mentors discussed the book along with questions for students to respond to via the e-portfolios.

These examples, which emerged both from the innovative thinking of our faculty, staff, and peer mentors, and from our curricular, cocurricular, and institutional uses of e-portfolios, combine to demonstrate the transformative potential of e-portfolio use. Through careful planning and deliberate implementation we see an e-portfolio-based learning culture developing.

CONCLUSION

Gutman's e-portfolio work will allow us to see a "vision of the possible," the value of using e-portfolios while persistently combining multiple best practices, as scholar Tom Bailey reminds us, over a substantial period of time (Perez-Pena 2012). While we cannot yet examine the long-term impact of e-portfolios on learning, our preliminary findings suggest that:

- e-portfolios help students unify and make meaning out of their educational experience;
- thoughtful and deliberate integration of e-portfolios into any one aspect of college life can make a difference, having a positive impact on students, faculty, and the institution. Connecting e-portfolios across multiple structures has an even greater impact on a college culture;
- a deliberate and intentional approach to professional development is key to e-portfolio pedagogy and outcomes assessment; going forward, more sustained work in this area will be vital to our success.

At Gutman, we are privileged to have the unique and challenging opportunity to build an institution with e-portfolios at the center of our learning. We know there is more to be done to fully realize the promise of our vision and the integration of e-portfolios into our college structures. We hope by continuing to share our practices and findings that we can contribute to the broader e-portfolio field and demonstrate e-portfolios' potential to catalyze learning and change for students, faculty, and the institution as a whole.

REFERENCES


