ePortfolios at NIU

1. Overview

Recent campus developments in the area of general education, assessment, and high-impact practices dedicated to improving retention, graduation rates, and career success, give NIU the opportunity to take advantage of best practices in pedagogy, assessment, and integrated curriculum design in implementing a campus-wide electronic portfolio (ePortfolio) initiative. Other universities have used ePortfolios to deepen student learning and increase student satisfaction resulting in higher retention and graduation rates, as well as improved career placement. Asking students to keep a reflective, longitudinal ePortfolio prompts them to connect the individual pieces of their learning in a coherent narrative that provides authentic data for assessment and helps them project from that learning to career and life success. With several portfolio initiatives already in place across campus, NIU is poised to support and connect them in a larger-scale effort that integrates general education and baccalaureate goals with authentic assessment and career preparation. Further, we can work with our regional “feeder school” community colleges in an ePortfolio consortium to align our general education efforts for transferability.

2. History

In 2003, NIU competed for and won a place in the first ten-university cohort of the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research. Out of this effort emerged an ePortfolio pilot in the First-Year Composition (FYComp) program, which grew until 2010, when the entire program (roughly 120 classes serving roughly 2000 students per semester) adopted the ePortfolio pedagogy and assessment. At that time, and even now, other portfolio programs existed across campus, notably in the College of Education, College of Visual and Performing Arts, Nursing Program, and the CLAS Teacher Certification (now licensure) program. In 2005, NIU hosted a Portfolio Summit featuring ePortfolio expert Kathleen Yancey, and in 2010 hosted a faculty development workshop with ePortfolio expert Helen Barrett, which also attracted the attention of the Student Advisory Council on Learning Outcomes. Clearly, there is interest on campus, interest that coincides with the recent re-visioning of general education as well as recent collaborations between the Office of Assessment Services and core competency programs such as FYComp.
3. Electronic Portfolio Rationale

*Why portfolio pedagogy and assessment?* Since the 1980s, portfolio assessment has been widely recognized as a best practice in higher education, since it offers an opportunity for authentic assessment of student learning over time, especially for higher-order skills such as written communication and critical thinking that are difficult to assess through multiple-choice or short-answer tests. Recently, use of ePortfolios has been described as a “meta” high-impact practice.

Portfolios:

- Encourage students to collect, select, and reflect upon pieces of their work that demonstrate their learning. Thus, the students become more actively involved in assessing their own learning, and can both connect it to other contexts and project from it to future life and career experiences.
- Allow students to use writing to demonstrate and reflect upon learning. According to Kathleen Yancey, reflecting in writing “makes thinking visible,” making it possible for students to see and manipulate the words that represent their learning process.
- Help students connect their learning in a class to other classes and life experiences. They look backward to assess their progress as learners, they look around to connect their lives and the classes they are taking, and they look forward to predict and actualize career and life success.
- Have the potential to change the climate of learning on campus. Reflecting on how learning takes place is the key to dialogue, connection and integration: student-to-student, student to teacher, students and teachers to administrators, and so on.
- Are recognized by accreditation bodies and higher education organizations such as the American Association of Colleges and Universities as a best practice in integrated curriculum and authentic assessment that help assure educational and career success.

*Why ePortfolios?* Computers and the web have became sophisticated enough to allow for the easy creation and storage of new kinds of document collections, in which relationships among ideas and texts can be represented through hypertext links.

Advantages Include:

- They take up much less space than paper-based portfolios.
- They can be reproduced, shared, or sent at almost no cost (CD, email, the Web).
- They are iterative: they can be updated easily, yet previous copies can be archived.
- They can be repurposed for class and program assessment, graduation requirements, or the job search.
- They can include a variety of media.
- They are interactive; students can link from document to document, or to outside resources, to show how the learning is embedded in a social and intellectual context.
They allow for access and structure to be customized, such that students can limit access to a particular set of formative work to teacher and peers, but later share polished showcase materials with the entire class, with prospective employers, or with the whole world.

How does this work in practice?

Collect: We remind students to save electronic copies of all course work in multiple places, such as on a personal computer or flash drive, on Google Docs, and on their NIU-provided network storage space.

Select: Teachers use some of class and office hour conference time to talk with students, and have them talk with each other, about which artifacts from their learning best demonstrate both their strengths as students and their fulfillment of general education or baccalaureate outcomes. As they begin to select pieces and excerpts, students also begin jotting down reflections on these artifacts, assembling the parts of the story of their growth as learners throughout the semester.

Reflect: Research has shown that students who reflect on their own learning not only learn more deeply, but are also able to transfer the procedural knowledge they gain in our classes to other tasks in other domains. Thus, reflection should be part of every assignment sequence, even if some reflections are less formal and ungraded. If we build reflection into early assignments, the overall reflection for the ePortfolio does not come as a surprise; instead, it is a natural outgrowth of the class’s dual focus: 1) doing the class assignments, and 2) telling the story of their learning process and growth as learners.

Connect: One of the biggest complaints from both students and their teachers is that they don’t see how the work they do in our classes connects with the writing, reading, critical thinking, and problem-solving they do, not only in the context of their other classes, but also in the context of their lives and work. Ideally, the ePortfolio should be a space in which students can identify patterns in their writing, learning, and expression that extend outward from an individual class into other domains. Some teachers also encourage students to link to examples of their work outside the particular class, particularly when those examples demonstrate how the student is meeting program outcomes.

Project: We can also ask students to look forward to their future professional identity. This process extends the students’ reflective practice to envision the future. We can ask questions about how they see themselves growing and changing as lifelong learners and critical thinkers, not only at NIU, but in their future lives and careers.

What difference can ePortfolios make for an institution? Findings from the recent AAC&U Electronic Portfolio Forum and Catalyst for Learning, a consortium of 24 institutions with exemplary ePortfolio practices:

- They can improve retention and graduation rates
  - San Francisco State reported increased one and two-year retention and graduation rates among “at risk” students to levels that surpassed other first year students
  - LaGuardia Community College found that retention and graduation rates were higher among students who use the digital portfolio.
Tunxis Community College reported increased retention as exposure to courses using digital portfolios increased. Portland State University has seen similar successes.

- They can support reflection, social pedagogy, and deep student learning
  - Helen Chen, Stanford University noted that when students saw that other people were looking at their digital portfolios, the more they learned and grew as learners.
  - LaGuardia Community College reported that course completion and “high pass” rates were increased within classes that used a digital portfolio.
  - Alex Ambrose, Notre Dame University noted the success of an advising ePortfolio to complement face-to-face student advising efforts.

- They prompt connections across departments and divisions that can catalyze institutional change
  - They help colleges and universities develop as adaptive learning institutions and spread ideas across campuses.
  - They connect diverse campus groups in shared conversations about student learning. For example, LaGuardia Community College restructured advisement, assessment, and professional development to support the whole student.
  - They provide learning analytics that allow us to use “big data” to design better learning, and to put together a picture of the whole learner.
  - They provide a vehicle for helping students integrate high impact learning practices -- such as co-curricular activities, first year seminars, Themed Learning Communities, writing intensive classes, capstone courses, and service learning -- into their curricular work.
  - They can help us prepare our students for productive careers and meaningful lives

- An AAC&U survey indicates that employer interest in ePortfolios is skyrocketing; employers preferred that job applicants submit ePortfolios in conjunction with a resume.

- “I believe that this portfolio was the winning factor in her decision to hire me” -- Kristina Rangel, Nursing graduate.