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Using the E-Portfolio to Validate Student Learning

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Too often our students consider their work in the classroom as required assignments—not work that has anything to do with what they will be doing in the real world. Oh, maybe they are picking up some skills they might use in their future employment, but that’s about it. As teachers, how do we get students to understand that the work they do in our classes—such as team projects, community service, technical papers, and even research—is relevant to what they will be doing after they graduate? How do we encourage them to keep their materials and use them to validate their work as students? I think I have an answer. Teaching an e-portfolio capstone course for several years has given me a perspective that I believe should be the framework for validating student learning outcomes across all institutions of higher education.

I see the need for students to understand that the work they do has value-added merit as part of their overall repertoire of academic preparation and social contributions. It has become increasingly clear to me that if students realize they need to validate what they are learning for future use, they are more likely to produce a level of work that looks to future application in the workforce rather than just another required assignment.

For example, when I begin the e-portfolio class, I ask students to compile a list of items they would want to use as samples of actual work accomplishments: community service participation, papers written, projects developed, presentations, poster sessions, conferences attended, professional development, and the like. Once this list is compiled, I instruct them to create an outline indicating how these materials might be organized in an e-portfolio that they could use in a job search. The problem, of course, is that these students would have been better prepared to accumulate their materials had they been aware of this need long before they are enrolled in my e-portfolio class.

In our media-hyped, socially networked, information-at-your-smart-phone-apps world, why have we in higher education not capitalized on this process? Won’t our students need e-portfolios to be globally competitive in the job market? You might disagree, arguing that skills of the brightest and best will be clearly visible during interviews. Yes, but give me someone who can validate his or her technical, communication, and critical-thinking skills with samples of work completed previously and I will give you an individual with a distinct competitive advantage.

Recently, I attended an Oracle workshop at a neighboring university. Oracle is the largest relational database organization in the world. As part of this workshop, the speaker told students that to get a job at Oracle, they must have technical, communication, and critical-thinking skills and those skills needed to be documented in an e-portfolio! I breathed a sigh of self-validation after so many years of striving to inform

students to treat this e-portfolio development process as a vital part of their overall educational experience.

E-portfolios can be handled as if they are just another one of those required assignments, without the students ever realizing their potential. Those of us who help our lifelong learners develop e-portfolios must ensure that they understand that an e-portfolio is as close to the “real world” as they will ever realize. Moreover, the content of the e-portfolio has life-changing potential. If a student becomes fully aware that a project he or she is part of or leads will be reviewed by prospective employers as integral to the hiring process, I believe that this knowledge will impact the student learning outcomes tenfold. Our colleges and universities need to recognize the importance of e-portfolio development. They should be created, reviewed, assessed, and revised across a college experience, not just in a capstone course as an afterthought to education.

My e-portfolio students leave the class with the knowledge that they didn't just do an assignment for me. What they prepared in this class will help them achieve their future dreams. Their e-portfolios validate their past successes and demonstrate how well prepared they are for future employment.

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