

### **Centering the Center in New Technology Initiatives: Integrating Communication into ePortfolios**

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An ongoing trend in higher education curriculum is a push for more active and holistic learning. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), for example, designates and promotes High-Impact Practices (HIPs) that facilitate engaged learning across student experiences ([www.aacu.org](http://www.aacu.org)). Such integrative learning initiatives empower students to both experience and articulate their educational journey, as a holistic endeavor, rather than a list of discrete and disconnected courses that add up to a degree. Threaded throughout the discourse on HIPs and integrative learning, is the idea that students should develop certain competencies, such as written and oral communication, through situated learning and practice throughout and across the curriculum.

Digital technologies also play a significant role in changing the way educators approach learning and in implementing new learning practices. ePortfolios are one way that campuses are working to shift away from traditional, stimulus-response models (e.g. reading, lecture, exam) that emphasize teaching to situated and transformational models that emphasize student learning (Batson, 2011). ePortfolios are “digital representations of students’ work and accomplishments along with their reflections on their learning” (Reynolds & Patton, 2014, p. 12). They are used in integrative learning initiatives to promote learning as a process that is connected across courses and to experiences outside of courses. Ultimately, ePortfolios

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are both a communicative process and product. They allow for students to reflect critically upon their learning and create a digital persona using multimodal channels of written, oral, and visual communication (Ramirez, 2011).

ePortfolio technologies offer powerful multimodal communication and content creation capabilities within a context that enables the integration of all learning (Buente et al., 2015). Yet, many ePortfolio initiatives to date center textual representations of learning and sometimes integrating visual representations. The purpose of this article is to make the case for incorporating oral communication into ePortfolio initiatives, and to position Communication Centers as an invaluable resource in providing campus support for such initiatives. We argue that collaborating with campus partners engaged in ePortfolio work can position Communication Centers as a leading resource for faculty and students and further the connections between oral communication, critical thinking, and student learning Atkins-Sayre, 2012; Carpenter, Apostel, & Hyndman, 2012). To do so, we first provide a brief overview of literature on connections among the development of oral communication competencies, critical thinking, and integrative learning. Next, we outline the philosophical foundations of portfolio teaching, focusing on critical thinking, reflection, and communication. In so doing, we highlight the unrealized potential for oral communication to be an integral part of portfolio teaching and to provide students

with multimodal learning experiences that complement the text-centered reflection assignments common to most portfolios. Finally, we outline suggestions for connecting Communication Centers to ePortfolio work.

### **Communication Competencies, Critical Thinking, and Integrative Learning**

Incorporating communication competency into higher education is crucial for the overall development of students during their college career (Fleuriet, 1997). “Communication competence can be defined as the ability to use language to communicate within a specific situation” (Rubin, 1982, p. 19). Therefore, if students lack communication competency, they will not be able to sufficiently communicate the knowledge that they have, articulate questions about material, or even verbalize frustrations or misunderstandings. Integrating opportunities for students to develop communication competencies throughout their college career has taken on increasing importance as the centrality of communication. First, as both technology and theories of learning evolve, it is becoming clearer that deep learning and critical thinking are connected to and developed through communication. Second, the ability to communicate effectively remains a top sought-after skill set by employers across sectors (Ortiz, Region-Sebest, & MacDermott, 2016).

Critical thinking is a tool that helps students grasp new material in a way that challenges them by discussing and questioning ideas in order to solve problems (Dewey, 1922). Critical thinking requires students to evaluate and adequately articulate those thoughts. Doing so promotes deeper engagement with the subject. In recent years, emphasis on both critical thinking and oral communication has

increased in college curriculum. Both are seen as valuable skills that should be integrated throughout the curriculum. However, connecting critical thinking and oral communication has proven more difficult. There remains longstanding bias against oral communication as primarily about “packaging,” whereas ““real thinking” happens through learning course content and writing” (Atkins-Sayre, 2012, p. 16). ePortfolios, as part of efforts to create integrative learning experiences, provide a unique opportunity to make explicit the relationship between critical thinking and communication.

### **ePortfolios, Integrative Learning, and Communication**

Although portfolio teaching and learning have long been part of the college experience, the evolution of digital technologies has renewed interest in these practices through ePortfolios. ePortfolios employ portfolio teaching and learning in digital platforms that allow for more robust and dynamic connections to be made within, and across courses, as well as the incorporation of multimedia. In their ideal form, ePortfolios promote critical thinking and self reflection, integrative learning within and across courses, multimodal forms of communication, and a personalized learning experience that helps students enact agency and take ownership of their individual learning process (Light, Chen, & Ittelson, 2012).

The philosophical foundation for adopting and implementing ePortfolio initiatives in higher education rests on their ability to facilitate integrative learning. As Reynolds and Patton (2014) point out, integrative learning is about making connections across contexts and time so that we are able to apply what we learn to different situations. Integrative learning is

also connected to deep, engaged learning rather than surface learning. In theory, integrative learning is the goal of higher education. In reality, though, many practices thwart creating truly integrative learning experiences for students that they experience their education holistically rather than a discrete set of disconnected courses. The gaining popularity of ePortfolios is based, in part, on their capacity to facilitate integrative learning by asking students to make explicit connections across their education through reflective writing and to take ownership of communicating their identities, goals, and the impact of their educational experiences.

Beyond facilitating integrative learning in general, an ePortfolio curriculum is designed with distinct purposes. Most common are:

- a). learning portfolios that emphasize the individual learning process discussed above;
- b). showcase portfolios that are designed to help students translate their college learning experiences for external audiences, such as career portfolios; and
- c). assessment portfolios that serve as a primary means for gathering data for program and/or course level educational assessment (Reynolds & Patton, 2014).

In all cases, the digital platform of choice is a tool that invariably both enables and constrains teaching and learning. ePortfolios can also be scaled for implementation at the level of the course, or even at the institutional level. For example, some programs design their curriculum with a culminating capstone experience in which students create portfolios representing their academic careers. Alternatively, courses can be designed around a culminating portfolio project that promotes integrative learning within that course.

No matter the scale of use or implementation, the foundation to portfolio teaching and learning is the process of reflection, critical thinking, and communication (Cambridge, 2010). Reflection is a communicative, meaning making process that occurs in social interaction and is oriented toward personal and intellectual growth (Reynolds & Patton, 2014). In ePortfolio work, the reflection process is often represented by a series of prompts that the student then responds to through written communication. For example, students can be asked to identify and reflect upon a memorable learning experience connected to a specific course or program learning outcome. ePortfolios also engage students in critical thinking as they are asked to select examples of learning artifacts (e.g. assignments) to represent their understanding of how they developed particular competencies within and/or across courses and experiences.

A rhetorical approach to ePortfolios reveals the interconnectedness of critical thinking and communication in developing reflective work. Specifically, audience and purpose are central concepts to the design of ePortfolio projects by faculty and to the creation of individual ePortfolios on the part of students (Carpenter et al., 2012). Faculty make choices about the purpose and audience of ePortfolios when deciding if the projects are showcase oriented (i.e. for external audiences, real or imagined), learner centered, and/or for institutional purposes such as program assessment. Students must then choose among available communicative resources to articulate their reflective thought processes and craft a portfolio narrative.

To date, much ePortfolio learning is constructed with the implicit idea that competencies are captured primarily, if not exclusively, in written assignments. Advances in ePortfolio platform

technologies enable text, audio, video, and other visual media to be included. Yet, little has been explored on the potential to integrate written, oral, and visual forms, or genres, of communication in meaningful ways even when different forms are required within a course or assignment. Anson, Dannels, and St. Clair (2012) found that students often experience assignments as distinctly written or oral products rather than part of the process developing communication competencies. As such, “students clearly need to be more fully supported in their acquisition of strategies and skills for communication in an increasingly complex world of discourse” (p. 416). With the advances in the multimodal capabilities of ePortfolios and their emphasis on critical thinking, communication, and learning as a rhetorical process and product, it makes sense to incorporate speaking competencies in portfolio initiatives. Below, we offer suggestions for how communication centers can begin to think about how to support students, faculty, and broader campus initiatives on integrative learning.

### **Connecting and Centering the Communication Center**

Communication centers are public, collaborative spaces that have the potential to be “integrated tightly into the fabric of communication across diverse campus communities” (Carpenter & Apostel, 2012, p. 173). Efforts to collaborate with campus integrative learning initiatives can benefit faculty and students as well as enhance curriculum across disciplines. It makes sense for communication centers to pursue points of connection and collaboration with ePortfolio efforts because communication is central to the process and product of portfolio learning. Following the lead of Fairchild and Carpenter (2015) who

demonstrated the capacity for communication centers to provide ePortfolio design workshops, we outline potential avenues for collaboration.

*First, communication center directors can develop in-depth knowledge about the scale and scope of current ePortfolio use and their relationship to integrative learning efforts on campus.* In some cases, communication center leaders are tuned in, and participating in, conversations about ePortfolios and how to foster integrative learning. However, in our experience on a large campus, it often requires active research in order to understand the institutional priorities, key participants, and the history and future goals of such initiatives. In order to develop communication center support for such initiatives, it is essential to take time to understand how ePortfolios are evolving locally and to establish presence in the conversation through building relationships. The research should seek answers to such questions as:

- a) Who is promoting ePortfolio use and why?
- b) Is there a centralized initiative, or a collection of departments and enthusiastic faculty users on campuses?
- c) Are there external (e.g., accreditation bodies) expectations for ePortfolios?
- d) How are ePortfolios being described and promoted?
- e) Who is currently providing faculty and student support and what type of support is offered?

Searching for opportunities to participate in conversations about ePortfolios can be crucial for advocating for the centrality of communication - including oral communication - to such initiatives. Moreover, many campuses have or will

explore ePortfolio platform products such as PebblePad<sup>1</sup> or Digication<sup>2</sup>. At our own campus, for example, a task force of faculty and staff representing programs interested in or already using ePortfolios, convened to review and recommend a platform for centralized use on campus. Center directors can be an invaluable resource in such conversations and gather useful information about campus support needs.

Moreover, by participating in campus conversations about ePortfolios, center directors are well positioned to advocate for the centrality of communication in integrative learning efforts broadly and ePortfolios specifically. One way directors can do this is by making explicit connections between communication competence, learning, and critical thinking. In other words, communication competencies are essential to moving toward more integrative learning models. In our experience, this point can often be overlooked or left implicit if communication scholars are not at the table.

*Second, once the institutional needs are understood, communication centers can develop targeted ePortfolio support for faculty.* Our experience in working with faculty on incorporating oral communication into multimodal projects reveals several opportunities to offer support. One way is to educate faculty on how ePortfolios can integrate different communication modalities and make explicit the different ways that students develop communication competencies. For example, if a campus, program, or course has organized a curriculum around learning outcomes that include communication - one of the goals of

the ePortfolio can be to ask students to articulate their growth and development as a communicator. Another way to design ePortfolios with communication in mind, is to include, not only text and image-centric artifacts, but oral communication-based learning artifacts as well. For example, Hickerson and Preston (2006) explain how an ePortfolio initiative at Virginia Tech University included plans for capturing student speeches through video and including them in the ePortfolios.

Communication centers can create support systems to help in achieving either or both of these goals, but ideally they work together.

Working with faculty to design ePortfolio assignments that integrate oral communication can be essential to avoid an oral “add on” component that is disconnected from the rest of the portfolio work. We suggest offering examples of portfolio assignments that integrate oral communication and prepare students for complex, digital communication situations (see Appendix for one example). One of the most common obstacles for faculty in working with multimodal portfolios is assessment of oral and performative work. Ideally, portfolio assignments are approached from a communication design perspective, meaning the assessment of ePortfolio work aligns with the overall goals (Carpenter et al., 2012). It is important to work with faculty on ePortfolio assignment design that involves both formative and summative feedback. As with other communication assignments, incorporating self, peer, and instructor feedback is a strategy that facilitates student ownership of

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<sup>1</sup> PebblePad is an online learning space accessible to students and staff where students can build ePortfolios, track academic progress, and obtain feedback. See: <https://www.pebblepad.co.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> Digication allows students to create ePortfolios through active learning by connecting the specific needs of an institution and the goals from faculty all in one place. See: <https://www.digication.com/>

the learning process. More specifically, working with faculty to create opportunities for students to practice and develop as oral communicators is vital to the ePortfolio process. We have guided many faculty in thinking through how to incorporate student recordings of presentations as a practice for self and peer feedback. In ePortfolio assignments, these checkpoints can be part of the assignment's design just the same as drafting and receiving feedback on written reflections. And, of course, an important consideration in designing a process-oriented ePortfolio, is to encourage use of the center through individual consultation and/or ePortfolio workshops as a way for students to engage in peer feedback.

In addition to offering support for designing assignments, we suggest offering "how to" support on working with video technology. Most ePortfolio platforms allow for video, audio, and narrated slide presentation files to be uploaded. Moreover, major platforms such as PebblePad and Digication offer ample online support for how to use these tools. We are not suggesting that communication center staff become the primary technological support for using such tools, rather that they become familiar enough with the tools and resources at hand, to guide faculty through the process and guide to further resources when needed. For campuses that have purchased a platform license and are committed to a single product, communication centers should be familiar with the technological support offered on campus. At our own campus, the Center for Teaching and Learning offers technological support for using the portfolio tool, but they do not, for example, support the design of assignments. Therefore, when working with faculty on the design of assignments that incorporate oral communication, we are often asked questions about how to use such tools.

Knowledge of the platform is essential to answer these questions.

*Third, communication centers can develop models for ePortfolio consultations with students.* As a first step in this direction, we advocate that student consultants create ePortfolios for themselves as a way to understand the process of designing ePortfolios and to become comfortable with the multimodal technologies. For example, an ePortfolio project for student consultants can have the purpose of reflecting upon their role as a consultant in developing their own and others' communication competency. The outcomes of this approach include a meaningful learning experience for the consultant, enhanced understanding of ePortfolio platform technologies, and possibilities for integrating oral communication, and a digital showcase for centers to use in promoting their services.

Once consultants have experience designing their own ePortfolios, they can then collaborate on developing best practices for ePortfolio student consultations. As with all consultations, students can guide the conversation to facilitate a rhetorical approach to ePortfolios that fosters critical thinking (Atkins-Sayre, 2012). For example, questions about audience, purpose, and context for the overall ePortfolio should shape the consultation and precede any single component such as a video presentation. Once invention has started, consultants can guide students through a communicative decision-making process that aligns with the purpose, audience and context. By asking students to explain their organizational and design choices, consultants can help strengthen the integration of multimodal communication within the ePortfolio (Fairchild & Carpenter, 2015). This is in contrast to creating an ePortfolio class and then adding on a video or even in a class

presentation that is conceived of as separately from the reflective process of developing the ePortfolio.

Centers should also emphasize the value of peer review of ePortfolio presentation when developing student consultation models. As mentioned above, ePortfolio projects often involve an in-class presentation or a video presentation embedded within the ePortfolio. Consulting with students on the public presentation of ePortfolios involves empowering students to make the best use of the technologies at hand. In other words, an effective and impactful public presentation of an ePortfolio project involves careful attention to choosing which parts of the ePortfolio to use as visual aids in support of the presentation. We have observed quite the opposite in some classroom presentations of ePortfolios wherein the end product (the ePortfolio) is displayed for the audience. In such cases, students lack guidance on distinguishing the rhetorical purpose, context, organization, and audience for a public presentation of an ePortfolio from completing the actual ePortfolio assignment. We argue that understanding the rhetorical context of a public presentation of an ePortfolio is another way to promote and fully realize the impact of integrating oral communication competency (Whitfield, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

In sum, we advocate for centering communication centers in ePortfolio initiatives. Doing so highlights the centrality of communication to integrative learning across courses and contexts. Moreover, communication centers can play a vital role in providing faculty and student support necessary to realizing ePortfolio goals. Communication centers can become a leading resource in forward thinking,

integrative learning initiatives by embracing ePortfolio technologies and collaborating with others to create plans for support for the institution, faculty, and students. We look forward to future research and praxis in this area.

### **Appendix**

#### Organizational Communication Course Learning ePortfolio Project

For this assignment, you will create an online portfolio as a space to curate and reflect upon on your learning journey and of examples of your work and participation in the class. Portfolios will be submitted for peer and instructor feedback at the mid-semester point and for final evaluation at the end of the semester. Portfolios are required to have the following elements:

- An introductory presentation of the portfolio
- Responses to three reflection prompts, one for each learning unit in the course
- Examples of learning for each course student learning outcome

Please save all of your reflective writing drafts and your introductory presentation prior to composing the final portfolio. We will review instructions and do a “how to” session in class on putting together the Canvas portfolio.

#### Introductory Presentation

For the introductory presentation, you will prepare a 3 - 5 minute video. In the video, you should address the following:

- Name, major, minor, and any certificates or extracurricular highlights of your college career
- Response to the prompt: How has this course learning experience built

upon what you have learned from your educational experiences in the classroom and your life experiences outside the classroom?

The introductory presentation should be composed after you have completed the unit level reflections. This is an informative presentation and thus should be well organized with an introduction, clear main points, and a concluding statement.

### Unit Reflections

For each unit, you will write a reflective response to the prompt. Reflective writing is a rigorous learning process and you will have opportunities to receive formative feedback and make revisions prior to turning in the final version. Responses should be:

#### Unit 1 Reflection Prompt:

How would you describe the value of using different approaches to organizational communication to a potential employer in a way that synthesizes the knowledge and skills covered in unit one?

#### Unit 2 Reflection Prompt:

In what specific ways has learning about 21st Century Organizations increased your curiosity or awareness about organizational life?

#### Unit 3 Reflection Prompt:

What potential connections are you seeing between this unit and your career path?

### Examples of Learning

For each course learning outcome, you will provide examples of assignments and in-class activities that you see as evidence of engaging with each of the following course learning outcomes:

- Apply organizational communication theories to contemporary organizing practices
- Propose, develop, and analyze an organizational communication issue using a case study approach
- Develop, reflect upon, and assess individual communication competencies including writing, interpersonal, team, and public speaking abilities

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