

Integrative learning portfolios across the curriculum and across levels: Best practices in undergraduate and graduate programs

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The Context

Integrative learning is valued by Portland State University (PSU) and has been promoted in several departments at various academic levels through the use of eportfolios in the curriculum. Recognizing eportfolios as high impact, PSU adopted PebblePad as its eportfolio platform in 2015. While there had been pockets of eportfolio practice at the university, adoption of PebblePad enabled the university to scale-up this practice. Several projects have been developed on campus since its adoption. One is in University Studies which is the four-year general education program at PSU. ePortfolios are used extensively in the first-year course that all undergraduates take at the university. The eportfolio is used to help students explore their academic identity and provide a forum for them to explore and demonstrate their learning in the general education program outcomes. Students are guided through pedagogical practices in developing their year-long eportfolios.

Recently, eportfolios have also begun to be used in the dual credit high school program, Senior Inquiry. This program provides the first-year general education curriculum in the high school. Students receive both high school and college credit.

The adoption of PebblePad allowed for re-imagining many programs at many levels, including the use of eportfolios as a culminating activity for a Masters program in Adult Education. This portfolio assignment aids students in integrating their learning from their coursework and field experience.

With the adoption of Pebblepad, PSU has been able to scale-up their practice beyond the first-year curriculum. This case study describes two ends of student engagement – a high school program and a Masters program.

The Problem

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). 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 gained and apply it to solving the problems of the day. Students may graduate not having a chance to develop the habits of mind necessary to become life-long learners. Recognizing integrative learning as a critical part of a student’s education worthy of attention might rectify this shortcoming.

Reynolds and Patton (2014) provide the following definition, “[i]ntegrative learning is an understanding and a disposition that a student builds across the curriculum and co-curriculum, from making simple connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus” (p. 31).

The focus on integrative learning through the use of eportfolios is particularly important today on two fronts. First, it is aligned with the goals of higher education – the education of the whole person which can be lost when disciplines take precedence. For example, specialization in majors such as business, biology, and English, while important, become more important than gaining an understanding of the interconnection of disciplines and the application of knowledge. Second, eportfolios provide authentic means for helping address accountability. It is critical at this time that a reliable mechanism be developed to demonstrate student learning as colleges and universities are under increasing pressure to “prove” student learning and achievement. At a time when governments are calling for more accountability, eportfolios can provide an alternative to simple measures such as high stakes testing and degree attainment.

The Approach

This case study highlights two programs that have sought to use PebblePad to facilitate integrative learning and scale up the practice of eportfolio use on the PSU campus. The strategies used by these programs are appropriate for the developmental level, and address the learning needs, of these two groups of students. These two examples represent how the focus on integrative learning with the tools of PebblePad can be used to scale up and improve learning at various levels.

Dual Credit High School Students: Senior Inquiry

Students in Senior Inquiry are enrolled in a year long course that mimics PSU Freshman Inquiry, a theme based collaborative learning experience focused on gaining skills for critical thinking, communication, diversity and social justice, and Ethics and social responsibility. As part of the course, students create an electronic portfolio to demonstrate their progress toward learning outcomes by curating and showcasing their coursework. In addition to the self reflection about how their assignments relate to the goals of University Studies, students in Senior Inquiry are encouraged to develop digital critical thinking skills and begin to articulate a digital, academic identity. This academic identity meshes with their digital social media identity to help students engage in civil discourse in meaningful ways. In the digital age, the public voice of everyday citizens has been amplified and we have only begun to get a glimpse of that power in the wake of recent high school shootings and the “march 4 our lives” movement. As author Nancy K. Baym observes, our social media connections and ability to enter the mass media public discourse acts as a “powerful subversion of the elitism of mass media” (Baym 2015, p11). Thus, the development of a cohesive digital academic identity is central to the integrative learning necessary for intentional and powerful citizenship.

Given the developmental stage and the learning needs of the students, identity, especially academic identity, is an important task for these students. High School students are developing their beliefs and refining their ideas about themselves and the world around them. PebblePad has been used to help facilitate this discovery, asking students to engage in reflective activities that help them explore their identities in digital spaces. Assignments focus on helping them understand their current digital identity and then integrate their academic identity with their personal digital identity.

Master’s Level Students: Post-secondary Adult and Continuing Education (PACE)

Students in the PACE program are traditionally working professionals seeking to update their skills and improve their practice. They are engaged students who are eager to learn and apply new knowledge in their work with adult students. Unlike traditional undergraduate students, these students are clear that they want to make connections between what they are learning in class and in their work. In many ways, one might say the goal of their education is integrative learning.

This program has specific learning outcomes which students need to master and demonstrate to future employers. Each course and the accompanying assignments are designed to help students build competence in these areas. To help students make explicit connections, facilitating integrative learning, and to provide authentic assessment of student learning outcomes, the program decided to develop and use a PebblePad eportfolio prototype/template. A prototype/template model was chosen so that students could create unique eportfolios that reflected their

individual choices of photos and designs, helping them create a unique digital identity. Several activities occur that help students in the development of the components of the eportfolio. One activity, the Memorable Learning Experiences Worksheet asks students to review what they have learned in their classes and/or field experiences and asks them to think about why this was important and make linkages to the program's key learning outcomes. This worksheet helps students make decisions about what to include in their eportfolio in the Learning Outcomes reflection section.

The Results

Acknowledging that integrative learning is an important learning outcome for all levels in the university, PSU adopted PebblePad as a tool to facilitate this kind of learning, scaling up eportfolio practice from high school/dual credit programs all the way to graduate programs. Students' developmental tasks and learning needs were taken into consideration. The use of PebblePad has provided opportunities for students to be engaged in integrative learning. Below are some specific ways this has been exhibited in the programs described in this case study.

Senior Inquiry

Students have been able to integrate their learning in two ways: 1) through their year-long eportfolio that allows them to explore and demonstrate their learning of the four University Studies goals; and 2) through activities designed to help students integrate their personal and academic digital identities. This last area has been especially significant. Students in Senior Inquiry demonstrated integration between social media digital identity and academic identity by physically connecting the mediums – for example, by including links from their academic portfolios to social media and links from personal web pages to their academic portfolios. Some students also demonstrated this integration by reflecting in both spaces about similar topics, making adjustments in delivery style based on who their audience might be. For example, creating a much more formal reflection on the same concepts in their academic portfolio versus a more familiar and casual approach on Facebook.

PACE Masters Program

Students in program exit surveys and in focus groups report that the process of creating the eportfolio helped them connect and make sense of what they have learned in the program. Students were able to articulate when and how they have addressed the program learning outcomes as well as provide artifacts (assets) that demonstrate their learning. This integration has facilitated students' ability to discuss and describe their learning during job interviews.

Lessons Learnt

In scaling up integrative learning in a beginning level of Higher Education (Senior Inquiry) to a graduate level, we have learned that it is important to consider the developmental needs and learning goals associated with each level. The lessons from each level are described below.

Senior Inquiry

Identity development is an important aspect of a developing young adult. A focus on identity development with this population is important in helping students integrate their personal and academic sense of self. Focusing on digital academic identity has enormous potential and faculty have only begun to tap into this as a powerful tool for helping students engage in their learning process in meaningful ways. Recently workbooks have been used to surface the process in a more specific narrative form, but personal pages are also being explored in order to demonstrate student positions around a particular theory developed within the class in connection with current real-world issues that students care about.

PACE Masters Program

The creation of the eportfolio is developed in the culminating class of the program to help students look back on their experiences in the program. Students can take an elective eportfolio course but most do not take this course. Those who do report that they wish the eportfolio was incorporated throughout the program to facilitate ongoing integrative learning. Students see the value of integrating their learning and would like to engage actively in making connections from the very beginning of their program. Recently, the faculty has begun to address this by creating PebblePad workbooks to help facilitate these processes throughout the curriculum.

Take home messages about 'Scaling up'

- Integrative learning is an important learning outcome in college – at the beginning levels up to graduate levels and eportfolios can facilitate this type of learning. Colleges and universities should consider appropriate ways to address scaling up their use of eportfolios at various academic levels to advance integrative learning.
- Individual choice is key to helping students take ownership of their learning in eportfolios. Students at all levels benefit from being able to articulate their individual learning.
- Developing a Digital Academic Identity is a powerful way to engage in public civic discourse with intention and especially important for young adults.
- ePortfolio processes can aid in helping adult learners articulate their learning and aid in the interview process for jobs.

References

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