



De-Coursing a Course: Promoting Student Reflection and Initiative via ePortfolios

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Abstract

A goal of any college course in any field is to promote both student reflection and initiative in learning. Yet we often design the learning environment of online courses in a way that contradicts these goals, dividing information and learning activities into specific, discrete, assignments which are the same for all students, and not providing a discussion of, or space for, reflection. This presentation will look at course design initiatives that give students more control over their learning, initiatives which involve using ePortfolios as workshop and reflective spaces, both within an online course housed in a traditional learning management system as well as a course that is housed completely within the Mahara ePortfolio system. As John Zubizaretta states in *The Learning Portfolio* (2004), the main purpose of portfolios is “to improve student learning by providing a structure for students to reflect systematically over time on the learning process and to develop the aptitudes, skills, and habits that come from critical reflection.” [1] Helen Barrett, in “Balancing the Two Faces of ePortfolios,” emphasizes that effective ePortfolios “create an environment that makes people feel good about participating, give[s] users autonomy, [and] keep[s] the system as open as possible.” [2] Both Zubizaretta and Barrett emphasize the processes that ePortfolios encourage – documentation, reflection, integration, publication – processes that engage students and make them more aware of themselves as learners. And both emphasize the importance of carefully aiding students through those processes.

This presentation will address current course design projects in the State University of New York, Empire State College’s online program, all of which are focused on creating environments that promote student reflection and learner control via ePortfolios. It will identify issues we are confronting, such as how to present, integrate, and scaffold reflective spaces; how to deal with student expectations for courses and, in some cases, student fear of using ePortfolios; and how to respond to student reflections and help students move to their personal next steps. We will discuss works in progress, including a resource/course currently in design that focuses on learning through ePortfolios. Using the examples of 2-3 courses, we will examine how they have been “de-coursed” by implementing ePortfolio strategies that promote student reflection and initiative in learning, in our attempt to change a traditional course experience into discourse.

References

- [1] Zubizaretta, John. *The Learning Portfolio: Reflective Practice for Improving Student Learning*. Bolton MA: Anker Publishing.
- [2] Barrett, Helen. “Balancing the Two Faces of ePortfolios.” <http://electronicportfolios.org/balance/Balancing2.htm>