

# Starting An ePortfolio: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach


Lana Zinger, Queensborough Community College, USA  
Alicia Sinclair, Queensborough Community College, USA

## ABSTRACT

*ePortfolio integrates technology with a student's academic course work and have increasingly become an integral part of higher education curriculum. They allow students to showcase their academic work in a fresh way on a digital platform. Traditionally, however, ePortfolio is implemented from a single discipline approach. This project aimed to combine two similar courses within a learning community setting where students compiled their course work onto their individual ePortfolios. By engaging in a multi-disciplinary approach, students reported a better understanding of the other discipline and felt a better sense of academic preparation (i.e. real life experience) for graduation and transfer to four-year colleges.*

**Keywords:** ePortfolio; Multi-Disciplinary; Health Education; Learning Community

## INTRODUCTION

 Portfolio is an excellent tool that can be used to facilitate learning and to emphasize student accomplishments. Portfolios have been used for decades as a tool for sharing work. ePortfolios, however, offer an updated option over traditional portfolios by adding digital technologies that allow for multi-media presentations and easier (and vaster) data collection (Meeus et al., 2006). Additionally, ePortfolio can easily be used to document both course and program outcomes and can deepen student learning by developing reflective and integrative thinking. Still, as the field and use of ePortfolios continues to grow and becomes a permanent part of the learning process in higher education (Challis, 2005), there is a growing demand for an increase in their quality and application (Jafari, 2004). Yet, few institutions have implemented comprehensive ePortfolio programs across the disciplines and on to graduation (Jafari, 2004). This project implemented a multi-disciplinary approach to ePortfolio by collaborating two programs: health education and nutrition science. As a result, ePortfolio was identified as an ideal platform for students who must be prepared to function within a multidisciplinary team of professionals collaborating to address client/patient needs.

## METHODS

Technology is rapidly changing how students learn, especially in a community college setting. In order for faculty to be effective in the classroom, they decided to team up and explore a multi-disciplinary, high-impact strategy involving ePortfolios. Faculty explored the use of ePortfolios as an interactive tool designed to help health education and nutrition science students successfully complete their curriculum, cultivate professional development, and complete their degree program. The goal of the project was to explore the use of ePortfolios as a potential tool to increase student retention, increase graduation rates, and help with transfer to a four-year college.

Before faculty planned this project, the first step involved exploring the educational objectives of the college (see Table 1). Keeping these objectives in the forefront always helps to stay on track with not only college objectives, but also course objectives (Barbera, 2009).

Table 1

Educational Objectives of the College
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate effectively through reading, writing, listening and speaking</li> <li>• Use analytical reasoning to identify issues or problems</li> <li>• Use information management and technology skills effectively for academic research and life-long learning</li> <li>• Integrate knowledge and skills in their program of study</li> <li>• Differentiate and make informed decisions about issues based on multiple value systems</li> <li>• Apply aesthetic and intellectual criteria in the evaluation or creation of works in the humanities or the arts</li> </ul>

The second step involved creating a multi-disciplinary assignment created within ePortfolio which involved students demonstrating a wide range of health and nutrition competencies related to their profession as health care providers. The assignment involved the health education students identifying a nutrition behavior they wanted to improve (i.e., drink more water, eat more vegetables and fruits, etc.). Similarly, the nutrition students had to identify a health behavior they wanted to change (i.e., exercise more, stress less, etc.). Students were paired from each class. The assignment was developed based on the combined college and course objectives from both disciplines. The last step was incorporating an integrative value rubric into the combined assignment.

Faculty participants chose the integrative value rubric because it allows the student to build 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 college experience. Faculty used the rubric to require students to reflect on these different areas:

- *Connections to Experience* connects relevant experience and academic knowledge.
- *Connections to Discipline* sees (makes) connections across disciplines, perspectives.
- *Transfer* adapts and applies skills, abilities, theories, or methodologies gained in one situation to new situations.
- *Integrated Communication* implements the coordination of all communication activities (ePortfolio, in-class reflection, student blogs, etc.).
- *Reflection and Self-Assessment* demonstrates a developing sense of self as a learner, building on prior experiences to respond to new and challenging contexts (may be evident in self-assessment, reflective, or creative work).

Students from both classes shared the same learning outcomes which were:

- created a common writing assignment (as discussed above), which they contributed to and read while exchanging their individual experiences on the ePortfolio
- worked with partners and responded to partner journal entries and exchanged “gifts” through their ePortfolio to help them succeed with their course work
- reflected on their learning experience
- connected experiences in learning to course objectives

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Integrating ePortfolios into coursework is a challenging yet rewarding process in an academic course. Even more so, combining disciplines using ePortfolio offers an enhanced experience for students academically as well as professionally.

### **What Worked**

The communication and interaction among students was successful. Students expressed great enthusiasm in sharing and exchanging ideas and information focused on their assigned partner. They became better versed in finding information, different resources, and vehicles in gathering this information. Students enjoyed and found the collaboration between the two disciplines to be insightful and resourceful. Additionally, students reported a better understanding of the other discipline and felt a better sense of academic preparation (i.e., real life experience) for graduation and transfer to four-year colleges. Not surprisingly, faculty reported improved camaraderie among students and among faculty members involved in this collaboration.

### **What Did Not Work**

Challenges occurred in setting up the technological aspect of collaboration. Timing also was challenging in coordinating the two different class meeting times (at least initially), as well as completing course requirements on top of the ePortfolio project. Attrition was also an issue that had to be addressed. Students who dropped one course automatically left their partner in the other course without a project partner.

### **Recommendations**

Through this ePortfolio collaboration, faculty members and students contributed to an approach that’s easily replicated by other disciplines.

Instead of having random courses isolated from one another, this project allowed for practical experience for students in each course as well as use of a multi-media tool (ePortfolio) that captured their experience.

In replicating this project in the future, it is clear that there needs to be a technology “point” person who can help troubleshoot technical glitches that are inevitable. Students need to feel capable with the technology in order to be successful with the course content of the ePortfolio.

Time management is key when implementing a multi-disciplinary ePortfolio project. ePortfolio issues cannot repeatedly monopolize class time. If this happens, meeting all course objectives will be impossible.

Planning ahead for student attrition and having a course of action in place is important so as not to leave any students feeling “left out” if their partner drops their course.

ePortfolios are an innovative way to showcase a student’s real academic experience. A multi-disciplinary approach to ePortfolio further enhances a student’s academic experience and takes the ePortfolio to a new level.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

**Lana Zinger, EdD, CHES, RD**, has extensive experience in community health and nutrition. She is a registered clinical dietitian specializing in sports nutrition and athletic training, weight management, medical nutrition therapy of chronic disease such as heart disease, hyperlipidemia, hypertension, diabetes, and HIV. Dr. Zinger was the Clinical Nutrition Director at Cabrini Medical Center and St. Vincent's Hospital. For over 17 years, she has worked as a fitness and nutrition consultant to athletes, individuals of all ages, and corporations. Dr. Zinger holds a Bachelor's of Science in Nutrition from New York University, a Master's of Science in Nutrition and Physiology from Columbia University, and a Doctorate in Health and Behavior Studies from Columbia University. Dr. Zinger is the author of *Health for Life; Critical Issues in Health; Introduction to Public Health* and co-author of *The Fundamentals of Nutrition and Nutrition and Health Today*. She has conducted numerous workshops, presentations and national conferences on such topics as *The Role of Nutrition and Disease, Prevention and Treatment of Obesity, Teaching Meditation and Compassion in an Urban Classroom, and Implementing Service Learning*. Email: [lzinger@qcc.cuny.edu](mailto:lzinger@qcc.cuny.edu).

**Alicia Sinclair, EdD, CHES**, has been in the fields of health education and nutrition for over a decade. She is a health educator with specialties in overweight and obesity, as well as nutrition education. Her clinical experience includes work at St. Luke's Obesity Research Center in New York City. There, she treated patients with binge eating disorder. As a consultant, she has worked with Shape Up New York, a free family fitness program where she taught participants strategies for healthier eating. She holds a Bachelor's of Science in education from the University of Maine, a Master's in counseling psychology from New York University, and a Doctorate in Health and Behavior Studies from Columbia University. Dr. Sinclair is the co-author of *The Fundamentals of Nutrition and Health* as well as *Nutrition Today*. She currently teaches various health and wellness courses for the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey as well as health and nutrition courses for the City University of New York. Email: [asinclair@qcc.cuny.edu](mailto:asinclair@qcc.cuny.edu).

## REFERENCES

1. Barbera, E. (2009). *Mutual feedback in e-portfolio assessment: an approach to the netfolio system*. British Journal of Educational Technology: Vol. 40, Issue 2, 342-357.
2. Challis, D. (2005). *Toward the mature ePortfolio: Some implications for higher education*. Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology: Vol. 31(3); Fall.
3. Jafari, A. (July/August 2004). *The "sticky" ePortfolio system: Tackling challenges and identifying attributes*. Educause Review: Vol. 39, No. 4: 38-39.
4. Meeus, W.; Questier, F., & Derks, T. (2007). *Open source ePortfolio: Development and implementation of an institution-wide electronic portfolio platform for students*. Educational Media International: Vol. 43, Issue 2.