

Letting Learning Serve as the Driver

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Overview: Faculty Learning Through Inquiry

Professional Development Story & Practice – [Guiding Questions](#)

The integration of ePortfolios into Northeastern's Writing Program was initiated under the leadership of Professor Chris Gallagher, Director of the program. His approach was to begin with a pilot that encouraged participants to be very exploratory, meaning that each instructor would devise his/her own approach to using ePortfolios with a common goal of learning about ePortfolios as a pedagogical tool.

Laurie Poklop, Ph.D.

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Instead of treating professional development as a separate activity, faculty learning was embedded into the fabric of the initiative through the regular gathering of an "inquiry group," which began with each instructor establishing a question to explore through using ePortfolios as a classroom tool. In this way, support for the initiative grew from the top down *and* the bottom up.



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In the Fall of 2009, Chris Gallagher, Director of Northeastern's Writing Program, contacted Laurie Poklop about developing a pilot for using ePortfolios as a pedagogical tool in writing classes. Faculty professional learning through inquiry has been key to the design, success, and growth of that program.



At that time Laurie Poklop served as the Senior Instructional Designer for the EdTech Center, and she has subsequently been appointed as Associate Director of Northeastern's Center for Advancing Teaching and Learning Through Research (CALTR). See the links section for the ePortfolio framework and guiding questions that inform Poklop's consultation with faculty.

Helpful Links

- [Faculty Inquiry Group Site](#)
- [Design & Implementation Framework](#)
- [Faculty Use Scenario Overviews](#)

The Writing Program offers two courses that are the only courses required of all undergraduate students. First-Year Writing (FYW), taken in the freshman year, is intended to introduce students to academic discourse. Advanced Writing in the Disciplines (AWD), typically taken during the third of five years, focuses on the writing conventions of a student's chosen field and seeks to help students bridge their roles as students of a discipline and practitioners. In any given semester, approximately 85 instructors are teaching 3,000 undergraduate students in one of these courses.

The pilot launched in the Spring of 2010 with a group of seven instructors representing all ranks in the program – from graduate student to tenured professor who used ePortfolios in 15 classes with about 300 students. Since the initial semester, use of ePortfolios has grown to 17 instructors and approximately 1200 students a year.

The director's approach to the pilot was to encourage participants to be very exploratory. Instead of treating professional development as a separate activity, faculty learning was embedded into the fabric of the initiative through the regular gathering of an "inquiry group." The group is made up of the instructors teaching with ePortfolios, Chris Gallagher, and Laurie Poklop who at that time served as Senior Instructional Designer at the EdTech Center. This ongoing group has met for a number of years, taking on a slightly different organization and topic focus each term.

Toward the end of the semester, the Inquiry Group created a blog-based web site that documents their teaching and lessons learned (see links section). The primary audience for this site was the approximately 80 other instructors in the Writing Program, and the site was organized to communicate how ePortfolios were influencing the participants' thinking about common themes in writing pedagogy. Laurie Poklop also conducted a case study of the pilot that served as the focal point of her doctoral research.

Beyond Workshops: Rethinking Faculty Professional Learning

The Faculty Inquiry Group met six times over the course of a semester to share progress, troubleshoot, and theorize about the meaning of their work and the applicability of lessons learned for a broader use of ePortfolios.

Each instructor devised an inquiry question that guided his/her work. Sample questions included:

- How does using an ePortfolio help students to view writing as a process?
- Does having this type of ePortfolio build accountability and ownership of the process of writing?
- How can an electronic portfolio be designed to emphasize the centrality of reflection in the writing process?
- How do new media composing and products ask us to change our assessment criteria?
- Can technology be alienating to students? How can teachers manage variation in digital literacy?
- How do different levels of visibility of students' work affect the quality of students' writing and peer review?
- How do different portfolio formats help students manage the identity transition between student and professional?

Thoughts on Integration

Regarding using ePortfolios as an “integrative approach,” I see that they can become tools that synthesize materials and ideas from a variety of classes/ideas, if the author actively attempts this. Obviously, just throwing together a bunch of different papers from different classes and calling the paper a “showcase” portfolio does not integrate the pieces together and the author is really not getting much out of this.



However, when the pieces are thoughtfully selected and when there is room for flexibility (could be in intro, in a conclusion piece, or even in little blurbs/authors notes throughout – again, I like the flexibility and think that this depends on the author’s goal) the author will be able to tie everything together. I also think it is important that these connections are what are meaningful to the student – not forced connections as teachers sometimes tend to ask their students to do – but the process of combining pieces together into one showcase portfolio will force us to come up with some type of “theme” or main idea that ties everything together.

- Chris Gallagher, [View Full Inquiry Group Journal Entry](#)

In the first term, the original pilot group of seven instructors focused on technical issues, implementation strategies, and what they were learning about their own pedagogy from using ePortfolio. The group used the term “de-familiarizing and re-familiarizing” to describe how ePortfolios influenced their views of their pedagogy.

In the second semester the group doubled in size and split into three smaller groups focused around different interests: issues of power in teaching with ePortfolios, using ePortfolios with different student groups, and ePortfolios in collaborative work. Small groups met several times and reported back to two large groups sessions.

In the third and fourth semesters, the group returned to large group meetings, though two were scheduled each time to accommodate schedules. The focus turned to looking at student ePortfolios together and discussing how the work was/could be evaluated and how working with ePortfolios was affecting what the instructors valued in student work.

Following a change in ePortfolio platform (from TaskStream™ to Digication™), in the fifth semester the faculty focused on orienting themselves to the new platform, including considering the pedagogical affordances and constraints of the new system.

The Writing Program’s Inquiry Group process illustrates the powerful impact of engaging faculty in ongoing inquiry that extends beyond one-off workshops.

The Role of Inquiry, Reflection & Integration in Faculty Professional Learning

Inquiry, reflection, and integration are central to the inquiry group process. Instead of having the framework for professional learning thrust upon them, the group approach created a context in which the faculty could develop their own guiding questions. In addition to the face-to-face gatherings, faculty also documented and reflected upon their work in writing.

They were co-inquirers who shared questions, reflected on their experience, learned from each other, and used those experiences to further invigorate their teaching. The direction for group development was not pre-determined, but each round of inquiry was used to determine next steps.

Evidence of Impact and Connection with Other Sectors of the Catalyst

Thoughts on Reflection

One of the most obvious strengths of using ePortfolios to encourage reflection is the simple fact that most, perhaps all, depending upon how one sets up the class, of the students' work is in one space.



At first this seems a merely convenient fact — and it has been the most consistent advantage noted by my students (other than the ease of not having to print their papers) — but I think it might be more than simply convenient. Seeing their work all in one place helps students to view their work as a body of work rather than as individual, isolated assignments. In addition to perhaps encouraging “ownership,” an idea I’ll try to explore further under that heading, I think it helps students to see connections, and maybe progression, though not necessarily in a linear sense, between different assignments.

- Kim Freeman, [View Full Inquiry Group Journal Entry](#)

Evidence of impact is demonstrated in the steady growth of the program, and by the group’s desire to “go public” by creating a website that documented its process and findings.

The Inquiry Group’s work was *pedagogically driven*. This shared concern for improving student learning served as the driver and motivator for the technical skills they needed to gain in order to achieve their goals. An organic expansion of the pilot group from 7 to 17 faculty members has taken the initiative to *significant scale*. Even so, the implementation of ePortfolio systems at large and diverse institutions is a complex process. Resilience and persistence require making one’s peace with living in a state of “perpetual pilot.”

For example, there has been an ongoing challenge determining where the funding will come from to support the ePortfolio *technology infrastructure* infrastructure in this program that serves approximately 3,000 students per semester. In addition, the culture of this writing program values instructor independence in determining pedagogical approach to achieving common goals. In the Fall of 2103, however, the University decided to invest in a site license for the ePortfolio platform, opening the door to significant growth in ePortfolio use.

Low Threshold Opportunities Continue to Have a Place

The Writing Program’s Faculty Inquiry Group serves as a leading exemplar for faculty professional learning. However, faculty who are contemplating involvement with ePortfolios need low threshold opportunities to consider the potential for this approach, particularly when the use scenario is not situated within a larger program-wide initiative. There are many dimensions to ePortfolio use that are often not apparent to people who are new to the concept. First time users tend to focus on the technology, bypassing fundamental considerations of purpose, scope, and pedagogy.

In fall 2013 Poklop began to offer faculty workshops on topics such as “Integrating Learning with Portfolios,” in her role as Associate Director of Northeastern’s newly-developed Center for Advancing Teaching and Learning Through Research (CALTR). During these workshops faculty are guided through an exploration of fundamental questions such as

- What is integrative learning?
- What are ePortfolios?
- What does one have to do with the other?
- How do you design an ePortfolio for integration?
- How can we assess integration?

Workshop participants brainstorm about the many dimensions of a student's college experience, look for critical intersections between those experiences and opportunities for integration, explore models for strengthening integrative learning through portfolios, and view ePortfolio examples to consider the goodness of fit between pedagogical goals and portfolio design (e.g., employment, reflective, showcase, project portfolios). Finally, participants return full circle to consider opportunities and next steps within the larger context of what they hope to achieve with their students.

For those who wish to move forward, Poklop uses a "ePortfolio Design and Implementation Framework," including guiding questions, to structure in-depth consultations (see "Design & Implementation Framework" in helpful links).

It's important to note that all of these models for professional learning and consultation are grounded in inquiry and focused on learning by design, modeling the process of inquiry-reflection-integration from the outset.

Conclusion: Striking a Balance Between Top Down and Bottom Up

Many key decisions influence the depth and vitality of ePortfolios within an institution. Faculty members need opportunities to reflect upon their aspirations for student learning so that they can make connections between their primary motivators and portfolio pedagogy.

An ongoing context for faculty professional learning is also a key factor in achieving program- or institution-wide involvement in ePortfolios. For example, the Writing Program started small and balanced grass roots and top-down support. Director Chris Gallagher made a top-down decision to become involved with ePortfolios, but was also committed to beginning with a small group of interested instructors, allowing broad leeway to instructors in terms of how they implement ePortfolios, and growing the program organically. He also led by example through his active participation in the Inquiry Group.

Leadership is key to sustained the sustained growth and depth of impact, but it is equally important to create a space in which faculty can let their professional passion serve as the driver for curiosity and motivation to learn.