Assessing General Education Outcomes with ePortfolios at SLCC

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Salt Lake Community College uses ePortfolios to examine for the first time the extent to which its students are attaining essential learning outcomes.

Summary
Before implementing ePortfolios, Salt Lake Community College had never directly assessed student work in its General Education program. Since our ePortfolio implementation—which began in 2010—we have conducted one pilot assessment and two full assessments of General Education learning outcomes. Our project is clearly at the transforming stage, as ePortfolio assessment of General Education is firmly established and integrated into SLCC’s broader assessment and accreditation efforts. Our two full assessments of General Education learning outcomes have been publicized to the college community, and have been the subject of conversations in our Quality Higher Education Council. We still face the challenge of actually closing the loop on the recommendations written into our General Education assessment reports, as the ePortfolio office is not in an administrative position to influence the actions of our Faculty Teaching and Learning Center or the Associate Deans who lead specific disciplines.

Overview of ePortfolio-related Outcomes Assessment at SLCC

Part I: Setting the Stage—Salt Lake Community College is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU). Our Assistant Provost for Institutional Effectiveness is ultimately responsible for accreditation and assessment at SLCC. The ePortfolio office is also administratively aligned with the Assistant Provost, albeit down a couple of organizational layers. SLCC has a set assessment calendar that folds together course-level learning outcomes, program learning outcomes and General Education learning outcomes assessment. The college’s collection of assessment data is far more developed than its ability to close the loop and use the data for course or program improvement.
Part II: Developmental Story—In 2004 SLCC received a set of concerning recommendations from NWCCU, to the effect that the institution did not have General Education learning outcomes and was not directly assessing student work. In 2005 the current Director of ePortfolio led a group of faculty, staff and administrators in a year-long effort to write a set of institutional learning outcomes, which also served as the General Education learning outcomes. Over the next several years, all academic programs were directed to write or rewrite course and program-level learning outcomes to correspond to the institutional learning outcomes, which resulted in a hierarchical set of learning outcomes that could be assessed from the course level upwards. At the same time, a number of faculty began to pilot ePortfolios in courses, and the current ePortfolio Director—after hearing a presentation by assessment expert Mary J. Allen from the California State University Institute for Teaching and Learning—suggested the idea that signature assignments could be embedded in courses and represented in ePortfolios.

While serving as Dean of General and Developmental Education, the current ePortfolio Director worked with a group of faculty and staff to develop a proposal requiring ePortfolio implementation in all General Education courses. One rationale for this proposal was so the institution could more easily assess student work, as requested by the NWCCU. After much debate, the ePortfolio requirement in General Education was adopted by SLCC’s curriculum process, and went into effect in May of 2010. We conducted a pilot assessment using ePortfolios in May of 2011, with full assessment reports being issued in the summers of 2012 and 2013.

Part III: Conceptual Framework—Our eportfolio implementation follows Finley’s (2012) advice: “To ensure student achievement on learning outcomes that both faculty and employers value, educators need to ensure that students work on these outcomes, deliberately and frequently, across the curriculum” (p. 21). Thus a student paper on the campaign financing of incumbents and challengers in recent Congressional races would be a signature assignment that addresses SLCC’s “effective communication” and “quantitative literacy” learning outcomes. If students were required to make public service announcements or informational flyers to distribute around campus, instead of writing a paper on the subject of campaign financing, then the assignment would tap “civic engagement” as well. Students get multiple opportunities to demonstrate their progress toward essential learning outcomes and hopefully begin to see that faculty who teach general education courses are engaged in a collective effort to help students understand the importance and meaning of the learning outcomes across the disciplines.

Reflection serves its own unique purposes in our eportfolio implementation. As Cambridge (2010) wrote, “Almost without exception, scholars agree that the process of reflection that goes into composing an eportfolio is central to its impact on learning” (p. 103). Reflection forces students to routinely take a step back from their work and place it in broader personal or intellectual contexts. Among many possibilities, faculty ask students to reflect on process, to self-evaluate their work, to think about their thinking and how it changed during the course, and to make connections between assignments in one course and those in other courses the student has taken. An unanticipated benefit of student reflection is that it provides important feedback to faculty regarding the impact and effectiveness of their assignments.

SLCC’s eportfolio implementation has been designed from the start to be an integral part of its assessment regime. It accumulates, in the words of Finley (2012), “assignments designed to provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their learning for each outcome as individuals and within groups” (p.22). The college established an assessment schedule that looks at one or two learning outcomes per year, allowing time for deficiencies to be identified, collective steps to be taken by the faculty, and the loop to be closed. The assessment plan also works on two levels. When particular learning outcomes (e.g., QL and IL) are up for assessment, each academic program uses semi-standard rubrics to assess signature assignments that tap QL and IL, and the Assessment Office then conducts a meta-analysis of that data across disciplines. Meanwhile, the Eportfolio Office conducts the kind of high-level assessment of QL and IL that we report on here and that compliments the more detailed assessment done in each program.


**Catalyst and Connector**: EPortfolio outcomes assessment at SLCC is tied directly to the *inquiry, reflection* and *integration* design principles that are woven throughout the Connect to Learning initiative. For example, our assessment process uses faculty readers to comb through ePortfolios, and the reviewers collaboratively discuss and score ePortfolios according to VALUE-based rubrics. This represents a faculty-led, inquiry-based approach to outcomes assessment, and pays dividends beyond the data because our reviewers gain important insights into how General Education is actually experienced by our students. As mentioned above, reflection is an integral part of our ePortfolio implementation, and we are striving to implement deep reflection into all General Education courses. However, we continue to struggle with this because SLCC is such a large institution with many full-time and adjunct faculty. Our ePortfolio assessment process is also integrative in nature because it looks for evidence of learning outcome attainment throughout a student’s ePortfolio—encompassing all disciplines, signature assignments, and reflections. We are holistically examining student learning as opposed to isolating learning outcomes from each other and from the overall context of student work.

**Evidence**: The evidence we’ve gathered thus far has made a considerable impact on our understanding of SLCC’s General Education program as it is actually experienced by students. We discovered, for instance, that while 75% of assignments addressing *quantitative literacy* in ePortfolios were scored as meeting or exceeding our expectations for quality of interpretation and manipulation, we were concerned that students are asked to interpret and manipulate quantitative data almost exclusively in Math courses only, even though quantitative literacy is a course and program-level learning outcome across many disciplines. We also discovered that the faculty at SLCC need to do a better job of helping students use quantitative data to support an argument or achieve the purpose of their work. As Figure 1 indicates, only 49% of the 262 assignments in the ePortfolio sample met or exceeded expectations for quality when it came to using quantitative data effectively.

Figure 1: *Categorization of ePortfolio Assignments on the Communication Criterion. (n=262).*
Our most recent ePortfolio assessment of General Education also looked at the information literacy learning outcome. It found marked improvements from 2012 to 2013 in students conducting outside of class research, using credible sources in their work, and adequately citing their research. Figure 2 shows the percentage of assignments demonstrating some or considerable evidence of students accomplishing those information literacy tasks.

Figure 2: Percentage of Graduating Student ePortfolios (2012 and 2013) Demonstrating “Some” or “Considerable” Evidence of Key Dimensions of Information Literacy.

The data we’ve been able to unearth thus far using assessments of a sample of graduating students’ ePortfolios has allowed us to make specific recommendations about quantitative literacy and information literacy. Those recommendations are included in our attached 2013 General Education Assessment Report. We continue to hope that the college will develop processes to ensure that the recommendations are acted upon throughout the college.

Connections to Other Sections of Catalyst:

- **Pedagogy**—In our General Education assessment reports, we make recommendations that would directly impact pedagogy were they to be implemented. However, SLCC has not yet developed a clear set of processes to translate those recommendations into (for example) changes in the professional development activities of the Faculty Teaching and Learning Center. Such changes would be required to help faculty adopt new pedagogies that might address some of the deficiencies noted in the assessment data. As of now, the only real mechanism we have is the distribution by email of the assessment reports to all faculty and academic administrators. There is no way to know whether they are noting the data and acting upon the recommendations.

- **Scaling Up**—The ePortfolio team has a strong connection to SLCC’s outcomes assessment leadership. Indeed, the promise of ePortfolio to assess General Education and other academic program learning outcomes has been a significant reason that upper administration has supported it so strongly. EPortfolio-based outcomes assessment is an integral part of SLCC’s strategic plan. We recruit faculty readers for our assessment efforts through direct email solicitation. The readers are acknowledged in the report and are paid for their efforts.
- **Professional Development**—We have not had a strong connection with our Faculty Teaching and Learning Center. That Center has drifted in the past few years, and was overshadowed by staff development efforts initiated by upper administration. Consequently, the ePortfolio Director and Coordinator have done their own faculty development on ePortfolios. These efforts have taken the form of workshops, boot camps, faculty cohorts, and special events. There is little connection between our outcomes assessment efforts and faculty professional development.

- **Technology**—Our learning outcomes assessment is not very technologically intense. We have developed a collection point in our college intranet where students put the web address of their ePortfolio. The ePortfolio’s address is then put into a Banner field associated with each student. That ties to a reporting site our IT department built for us. This field allows us to pull up the ePortfolio of any student simply by knowing his or her student number. This simple technology allows our students to own their own ePortfolios that they create on Web 2.0 platforms.

**Attachments and Supporting Documents**

- General Education Assessment Report 2012
- General Education Assessment Report 2013

**Conclusion**

We are pleased thus far with our ability to use Web 2.0 ePortfolios to gather data pertaining to student attainment of General Education learning outcomes. There is no doubt in our minds that ePortfolios are an effective tool in this regard. We recognize, however, that SLCC has not yet developed a way to close the loop on General Education assessment. We are in the process of discussing this problem with upper administration.

We also recognized that the ePortfolio initiative needs a stronger connection to our Faculty Teaching and Learning Center, which is primarily responsible for faculty professional development. That Center will be undergoing some changes in the next six months, and we will be staying abreast of those changes and try to build relationships that so far have not developed.

--David Hubert, SLCC ePortfolio Director, Professor of Political Science