**Best Practices: E-Portfolios Come to First-Year Composition**

As the final Spellings Commission Report generates controversy and discussion, the maxim, “Do assessment before it is done to you” takes on greater significance.

Michael Day, Director of First-Year Composition (FYComp) — NIU’s core writing program — heeds this maxim. Together with Director of Networked Writing and Research, Eric Hoffman, and WAC Coordinator, Brad Peters, Day recently headed a pilot project in implementing electronic portfolios under the auspices of the National Coalition of Electronic Portfolio Research.

Day insists that e-portfolios are a learning tool first and assessment method second (see: [http://www.engl.niu.edu/mday/niueportf.html](http://www.engl.niu.edu/mday/niueportf.html)).

Assessment scholars define e-portfolios as a thoughtfully arranged collection of multimedia-rich, interlinked, hypertextual documents that students compose, own, maintain, and archive on the Internet or in other formats (e.g., CD-ROMs, DVDs). E-portfolios provide structure, guidance, and feedback to students, and enable them to connect selectively with multiple reading audiences for different purposes.

More simply put, for the past two years, FYC students wrote and revised a series of essays as they always do in composition classes. Then they selected their best work and wrote a cover letter that reflected on what they’d learned over their semesters in ENGL 103 and 104. Finally, they transformed their collection into a website, where they created links to examples that illustrated their specific learning outcomes. Many also embellished their e-portfolios with photos and images, experimenting with the visual rhetoric of electronic document design.

Simultaneously, the students’ instructors designed electronic teaching portfolios, to demonstrate their professional growth as reflective practitioners.

At the end of each academic year, a scoring team of experienced instructors, led by FY-Comp Assistant Director Ellen Franklin, rated a representative percent of the students’ e-portfolios. To compare measurement instruments, they modified a holistic rubric developed and used by the FYC Program for over 10 years. They also adapted an analytical rubric based on outcomes suggested by the National Council of Writing Program Administrators. For two years, raw data from both sets of scores appears to correlate, suggesting that local programmatic outcomes compare favorably to national expectations. Day is also able to examine where students collectively show areas of weakness and focus faculty development on improving teaching in those areas.

Students can go on revising and building upon their e-portfolios as they continue their academic careers. They can also adapt their e-portfolios for prospective employers, showcasing only the work that they deem pertinent to specific job descriptions.

In future, the “NI-You profiles” on the university homepage could easily morph into a tool that not only represents students’ general accomplishments, but also makes available a personally controlled, detailed record of their incremental learning across the curriculum and their professional credentials, adapted for readers such as faculty, directors of graduate programs, job recruiters, and certification boards.

To learn about prominent e-portfolio projects, go to the following websites:

- La Guardia Community College — [http://eportfolio.lagcc.cuny.edu/](http://eportfolio.lagcc.cuny.edu/)
- Alverno Diagnostic Digital Portfolio — [http://ddp.alverno.edu/](http://ddp.alverno.edu/)
General Education: Experts Say the Smartest Assessment is Local

Too often, we think of assessment as an onus rather than a systematic, self-generated means of protecting what we do best. Yet it’s true. Self-generated assessment gives voice to faculty, who best know their programmatic goals and student learning outcomes. And in a public institution funded by tax dollars, we only remain silent about our work at our own risk.

Early general education courses are especially important to assess, since they form the core of our students’ academic experience. Universities can better decide how to assess advanced general education courses once a system for the core is in place.

Assessment scholars James and Karen Nichols suggest a three-step approach. Their recommendations sound more like action research than drudgery, encouraging cross-curricular articulation. Nichols and Nichols recommend the following three principles:

(1) Reconceptualize general education as a program. We can start by identifying a university’s expanded statement of purpose. For example, NIU’s Undergraduate Catalog specifies that our mission “is the transmission, expansion, and application of knowledge through teaching, research and artistry, and public service.” If we meet our institutional goals, students will develop:

- Effective habits in logical thinking
- Communication skills
- Quantitative skills
- Understanding of and ability to use modern technology
- Sophisticated practices in using sources
- Mature interpersonal behavior in various settings
- Unique skills for their chosen areas of in-depth study

Among those institutional goals, intended student learning outcomes in general education core courses might include:

- Compose a well-developed research essay that correctly cites online and print sources
- Present a public speech that effectively uses audiovisual technology
- Write a step-by-step explanation of the process for solving a mathematical calculation at the level of college algebra

Rather than using standardized tests developed by “outside experts,” the instruments of program assessment and the criteria for measuring success should be realistic and vary as each department in the program sees fit, e.g.,

- 90% of ENGL 103 portfolios will pass the faculty rubric for all written standards, and no more than 10% of students will not meet expectations on any single performance criterion
- 94% of COMS 100 students will present 3 speeches that meet all 8 course competencies
- 96% of Math 101 students will pass the common course exam

Then data can be collected and summarized so service departments can each interpret what the programmatic strengths and weaknesses are, e.g., “96% of writing samples posted on student e-portfolios passed the faculty rubric for written standards in ENGL 103, but 18% did not meet expectations on Criterion #5, “Constructs a logical, functional website.”

Finally, each service department can use the results of data to implement changes that will improve the program, e.g., “Support for the ENGL 103 curriculum has been modified to provide drop-in e-portfolio technology workshops for instructors and students.”

(2) Identify the most important reasons to assess general education as a cross-disciplinary program. Three questions can guide articulation among faculty and different service departments:

- What links can faculty formulate between institutional and programmatic levels of assessment?
- How does programmatic assessment clarify what students need to know (cognitive), think (affective), and do (behavioral)?
- Where can programmatic assessment spotlight improvement and accomplishments?

(3) Establish oversight that focuses solely on, and coordinates, the assessment that each department conducts. Oversight in assessment of general education should include broad faculty representation augmented with stakeholders and campus experts from primary service departments in fields such as mathematics, writing, reading, oral and technical communication.

Earlier oversight tasks include:

- Determine the history of assessment that’s been done and assessment that’s in progress
- Identify existing support for assessment
- Learn the regional accreditation association’s expectations in assessment
- Assemble a “long list” of outcomes for each branch of the general education program
- Break the long list into several short lists
- Set a short-list rotation, and establish a timeline for implementation

Later oversight tasks include:

- Plan annual cycles of assessment
- Approve service department assessment proposals
- Approve service departments’ use of results
- Maintain documentation