



CASE STUDY

Embedding self-awareness and authenticity into the curriculum: A practitioner's tale

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PEBBLEPAD CASE STUDIES

STORIES OF INNOVATION TOLD BY THOSE CHARTING NEW COURSES IN LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT.

WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE A PORTFOLIO PRACTITIONER

I use PebblePad to build portfolios that are personal, professional and public. By incorporating folio thinking in these three spaces, I am bringing the “Wholistic Folio Thinking practice” of self-examination, role clarification and growth to my overlapping identities (Fisher 1994). Fisher (1994) described a paradigm shift in which “the whole is understood as the sum of its parts” and the addition of multiple digital spaces and electronic portfolios increases our ability to do this in a more authentic and engaging way in all the spaces we inhabit. While Fisher was focused on folio thinking with respect to teaching professionals, I find that her insights are transferable to personal portfolios as well.

My personal portfolio use has included collaboration with my oldest son on an electronic portfolio showcasing interviews with my grandmother who passed away in May 2018. Using eportfolio in this way incorporates principles of genealogy, historical and cultural transmission of knowledge, reflective practice and intergenerational communication. Strom & Strom (2015) note that with the increased use of digital communication, generations are getting more siloed in their discussions. The concern is that with age-segregated pockets of communication, important values are not adequately transmitted and by relying more and more on technology, families lose face time and lose touch with each other's values and priorities (Strom & Strom, 2015). Using eportfolios to bring generations together around shared stories could be an important way to counteract these concerns. As I was writing this, my younger son was reading over my shoulder and asked if he could be included, so we built a portfolio together. We decided that the subject of our eportfolio would be the kittens we had gotten in June, after my grandmother's passing. We had a lot of images to draw on because he and I also maintain an Instagram account together for our kittens.

An additional personal use of PebblePad is a blog I created about going through the process of helping my grandmother and my family transition through the end of her life. I did this to create a personal archive that I could draw on for future writing projects, in addition to sharing with family and friends the different stages of her process. Maynor (2016) discusses how the digital era and social media have led to a series of "temporary shrines" that pay tribute to public loss and grief (p. 583). These public shrines in many cases actually become permanent fixtures and those most affected by the loss continue to maintain a virtual footprint. In writing the blog about my grandmother's last year of life, I created a "temporary shrine" that has become a fixed virtual location. Moving forward I can draw on that blog to help my family members remember and appreciate some of the lessons we learned along the way, and I can share her journey and my reflections with friends or acquaintances who might be going through similar processes.

Many of my eportfolio practices have a deeply personal component, but they allow me a meaningful context to continually use the tools and thinking processes outlined by Fisher (1994) in the practices of self-examination, role clarification and growth. I can then use these same skills in developing more professional eportfolios and those professional eportfolios are more authentic from gaining comfort in digital folio spaces. My professional portfolios include portfolios for annual review and promotion, and a public facing portfolio that acts as a web-based resource for presenting at conferences. My public facing portfolio is the most "incomplete" of my folio spaces. It is an active space that I am constantly adding to and subtracting from, depending on what is occurring in my teaching practice.

Recently, I have started using PebblePad as a place to blog about time spent at conferences and what I learn there. I was inspired to start doing this after listening to Helen Chen talk many times about using eportfolios for digital annotated transcripts. I thought, "I should think of my professional eportfolio as a digital annotated CV." Once I started thinking along those lines, a conference blog seemed like a natural way to showcase the impact and learning from these professional meetings. I can use the blog to demonstrate the value of my experience at conferences in my annual review portfolio, but the blog also serves as a way for me to share with my colleagues the insights I have gained, and topics I would like to discuss and/or work on with my peers. For example, because I am on the undergraduate research committee at Portland State, at the most recent AAC&U conference I attended a session given by the Center for Undergraduate Research (CUR). Creating a blog entry for the CUR gathering helped me to organize my ideas and think about what information was most useful to share with my colleagues.

Upon returning to Portland, I immediately found myself in a committee meeting and I was easily able to draw on my blog post to inform my response and suggestions. I also knew that if any of my colleagues wanted more information, I could quickly share my blog post and answer any questions they had.

My public portfolio blends my personal and professional life and serves as a warehouse for my digital identity. Aresta et. al. (2015) remind us that “the development of the social web brought deep changes in the way individuals see and place themselves in the online world” (pg. 70). The changes that came with our new digital spaces include the ability to create and recreate our representations of self in a way that best reflects where we are in the moment (Aresta et. al., 2015). This curation of our representations of self has come to be known as our digital identity. Even though I have had a digital identity for many years, I first learned the term during a presentation of how PebblePad worked in 2015. As I listened to the words of the presenters, I realized that my digital presence had been largely haphazard and not very intentional. I immediately grasped that what I had to say in online spaces could become more powerful if I aligned all of my online identities and avatars and became more intentional in my digital spaces. Within a few days I had changed all my usernames to reflect a digital identity that I felt would be relevant for the rest of my life, Nomadic.Academic. I chose this name because I am an insatiable lifelong learner and because I am addicted to traveling, both metaphorically and literally.

In reflecting on the shift in how I viewed my digital identity, I recognize the role and importance of PebblePad in my digital eportfolio learning journey. My thinking on eportfolios has evolved so that I now view them as snapshots - a moment in time - and the real practice is behind the scenes in collecting, cataloguing and maintaining my digital learning archive. My digital learning archive spans multiple platforms - Instagram, Facebook, twitter, google drive and PebblePad. PebblePad has become a sort of digital staging area where I have components that are half finished and completed projects. Once something gets to PebblePad, that means that it can be easily drawn in to assemble an eportfolio, archive, record or blog.

When it comes to my students, I try to model how my folio and digital archive spaces work together, and I encourage them to build a digital learning archive, use guided workbooks to help them think about their digital academic identity and support them in building an eportfolio that reflects the time they have spent in my classes. In this way I make use of my colleague Melissa Pirie's (2019) work on understanding the stages of eportfolio development. I hope that during my time with students I can shift them from beginning to intermediate and possibly proficient or culminating levels of eportfolio development.

WHAT IT IS LIKE TO TEACH PORTFOLIO PRACTITIONERS

For my students, I am always looking for ways to make learning more authentic and meaningful, and PebblePad provides an excellent platform for bringing digital identity into a thoughtful space. It is in the platform where my students' academic identity can mesh with digital citizenship, and where connections and reflections can happen as a coordinated experience. Johnsen (2012) explains that eportfolios, “make visible the production of knowledge” (pg. 144). Because I am primarily concerned with helping my students develop self-awareness of their own learning process, this aspect of eportfolios is particularly useful. In order to help students along their eportfolio developmental pathways, I create scaffolded assignments that ask them to engage in more complicated reflection and connections as the year progresses. At the beginning of the year I have them do a synthesis assignment that becomes their homepage.

Students showcase examples from their first assignments, along with an introduction to who they are and what they stand for. Later students complete a series of workbooks that incorporate images, personal narrative, and connection to key concepts in my course as a mechanism for helping them develop their academic identity. In addition, I have them complete a multi-phase workbook where they reflect on and showcase their individual research projects. These undergraduate research workbooks provide a space for ongoing feedback throughout the year as students build on their project. In sum, my assignments provide them with mechanisms for building the skills they need to produce a powerful eportfolio at the end of the year, a representation of their knowledge production over the course of the year. The tools and design features found in PebblePad have been instrumental in helping me find this path.

I have adapted my PebblePad assignments for use at multiple levels and in a variety of different contexts. However, the main context for my teaching practice is within the Senior Inquiry Program at Portland State University. Senior Inquiry is a dual-credit, embedded first year experience that we offer to seniors at six different high schools in the Portland Metro area. Senior Inquiry is taught by teams made up of two high school faculty and one PSU professor. Currently I am the Director of Senior Inquiry in addition to teaching in the program. In Senior Inquiry we prioritize collaborative learning and empower student voice. This turns traditional lecture style teaching on its head.

Perry (1970) conceptualized student development as a four-stage reciprocal process beginning with dualism and then advancing through multiplicity, relativism and commitment. In addition, Perry noted deflections from cognitive growth perceived as temporizing, escape and retreat. In Senior Inquiry we can see that student development is actively occurring, and yet as learners, educators and researchers we perceive Perry's model of scholarly development as unable to capture the lived experiences of our non-traditional learners, who often have pressing obligations to their families and communities, may lack social capital and familial knowledge of education, have low monetary resources, and do not enjoy a privileged status in society. More disturbing, the "deflections from cognitive growth" described by Perry might be understood as deficit thinking. Thus, Perry's model could be used as a mechanism for victim blaming and further marginalization of underrepresented groups. Our pedagogical framework resonates more deeply with a study responding to Perry's model of development that sought to uncover and express how development occurs for women in higher education. In their study Belenky, et al. (1986) illuminated how development occurs for non-traditional students. It has since been extrapolated to encompass the experiences of underrepresented, low income, and first generation scholars who were experiencing serious self-doubts and indicated an array of needs that has come to be described generically as the need for validation (Terenzini, et al., 1994; Dancy and Brown, 2011). With this demographic the most important step in their development is helping them access and utilize their own voices and experiences within the larger social, cultural and political construct we live in, or the practice of digital autoethnography.

Although it is clear that new ways of understanding knowledge production are needed and in fact have been developed, there are deep institutional patterns that exist which create barriers to realizing significant change. The primary grades have traditionally been focused on what Paulo Freire (1972) referred to as the banking style of education. In the banking education model, students are repositories for information that is deposited in them by teachers, who then control what is valued as knowledge. The alternative to banking education is the problem-posing model, which focuses on collaborative reciprocal learning where students and teachers engage in collaborative production of knowledge.

Because my students inhabit a transitional space between high school and college, there is a great deal of 'unlearning' that we must do together. The unlearning that happens in our classroom becomes part of their new collaborative knowledge production, which is then internalized and showcased in individual eportfolios.

In changing the way we teach, the faculty in my program are constantly battling resistance from the status quo. This battle is both external when we confront institutional obstacles and internal when we recognize our own indoctrination in miseducation. However, the student learning showcased by PebblePad provides growing evidence that we are on the right path. This evidence is helpful in fighting both the external and internal obstacles. Externally, administrators are inspired when they see examples of student learning in non-traditional ways that is clearly more personal, meaningful and transformational for students. Internally, our alternate views on teaching are validated by watching our students engage in the eportfolio process over and over again.

Students in my program who engage authentically with the portfolio process in PebblePad experience transformation and self-awareness that translates into deep and lasting learning and builds reflective skills necessary for civic engagement. As one student said in their end of year reflection:

"I've incorporated what I've learned over the course of this year in many ways. The most prominent would be those incorporated into my own individual and academic identity, as these things stick with me for the rest of my life. I'll carry the skills and knowledge that I've learned and I'm more than confident that I'll utilize them in the near future, within my journey through higher education."

Students engage authentically when they complete their PebblePad assignments thoughtfully and one step at a time, over time. In the beginning of the year some of the most powerful seeds of transformation are planted in eportfolio assignments that give us a glimpse into what students are thinking that would otherwise be invisible. For example, one student posted in their beginning of the year reflection:

"I hope to grow as a person. I want to one day be able to look back on my life and see the growth from a stupid kid to a leader of my people and my community."

Another student stated:

"I feel powerful when I am advocating for a cause I am passionate about, and when I am heard and validated. I feel powerless when I look at mass injustices happening across the world."

These students are clearly beginning to be self-aware of their learning and growth and they respond enthusiastically to a platform that allows them to bring their authentic selves into the classroom. However, the only way to make these moments possible is to embed portfolio thinking into the curriculum throughout the year.

It is clear that some faculty in my program have perceived the eportfolio process as an add on, which gets completed at the last minute. Yet, in order to be effective, the folio thinking process must be embedded in the curriculum so that students engage meaningfully in their portfolio space throughout

their time in each course. When eportfolio is embedded, the transformation and self-awareness becomes obvious in their reflections as they talk about their learning experience. When the process is embedded, then students can reach the self-awareness, role clarification and growth that connects them deeply to community and civic engagement. As one student said:

"I hope to use my passion for language to educate women and develop literacy in minority language communities."

In another reflection I found this hope embedded in the student's reflection:

"I would like to be in discussions with struggling African American youth and use my voice to encourage them that there a light at the other end of the tunnel and that we do not have to live up to other people's definition of African Americans as; thugs, drop-outs, dangerous, 16 and pregnant. We define who we are, what we are capable of, also [there is a] strength and independence of each unique individual."

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