

“I Learned What?” Reflections on an Arts Career Portfolio

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Abstract

In a 400-level Arts Capstone course, students are asked to complete a career portfolio, one founded largely on the work they have done in their Arts degree. In order to complete the portfolio, students are asked to review all the assignments and activities they have completed for their degree and to extract from them their strongest skills, knowledge, and attitudes, ones that might make the best impression on a prospective employer. The activities that lead to the portfolio encourage thinking about the transferability of their learning but also help students identify their strengths and gain confidence in their abilities. In this paper, the instructor and a student explore, through an interview, the process of collecting, selecting, reflecting, and presenting an online career portfolio and what the student discovered through that process.

Key words: Portfolio; Assessment; Senior year experience; Career; Capstone

Introduction

The completion of a degree can be both an exciting and a daunting prospect for students, many of whom will have been in school for most of their lives. For liberal Arts majors, the transition may be even more unsettling, since their programs rarely intend to lead to one clear career path. Some “Senior-Year Experience” programs attempt to make that transition a smoother one, with various capstone opportunities such as final integrative projects or internships and service learning opportunities. We argue that the transition out of university is a far more difficult one than the transition in; still, universities have tended to pay far more attention—and devote more resources—to the transitional period at the beginning of a student’s program than at the end.¹ At the University of Prince Edward Island, a Capstone Arts course that includes a career portfolio based on the work of the degree is one attempt to bridge the gap between university life and the rest of life.

That course, Arts 401, has its origins in the principles outlined in the foundational work on the idea, *The Senior Year Experience* by John Gardner and Gretchen Van der Veer and in the work at the University of Guelph by J. Z. Wolstenholme, Fred Evers and others on competencies and the career portfolio. In the first, four elements are identified as essential in a good senior year program: integration, which involves some opportunity to pull together ideas, disciplines, and concepts that might have been studied separately through the degree; reflection, or space to think again about not just what but how the

¹ A search of ERIC gives some indication of the attention of educational researchers as well: a search at the date of writing for “First-year Experience” yielded 470 hits; for “Senior-Year Experience,” only 14.

student has learned; transition, so a bridge to life after the degree; and finally closure and celebration. The portfolio addresses all four of these elements. The portfolio that we ask of our students grew out of initial conversations between Shannon Murray and Fred Evers, and the work of Evers and his group on identifying essential skills underpins our conception of the process and product (Evers, Rush, & Berdow, 1998; Wolstenholme & Evers, 2009).

Students in the course are asked to integrate their learning through their degree through an exploration of a variety of readings on the purpose, history, and uses of a liberal education; to explore career options through a job shadow or service learning project; and to produce a full-length portfolio that showcases their accomplishments and abilities. That portfolio could be either on paper or online, and increasingly, students have opted for the latter. They may choose the platform that best matches the impression they want to convey; most choose either Wix or WordPress, with a few using the university-supported Google Sites. In order to complete the portfolio, students review all the assignments and activities they have completed for their degree and to extract from them their strongest skills, knowledge, and attitudes, ones that might make the best impression on a prospective employer. Those skills, once identified, are linked to artifacts that demonstrate the students' strengths, artifacts like focussed letters of reference, assignments, presentations, photographs and videos, certificates, performance assessments. The activities that lead to the portfolio encourage thinking about the transferability of their learning but also help them identify their strengths and gain confidence in their abilities.² This paper explores the process of completing that portfolio in an email discussion between the course instructor (S. M.) and one of the successful students (D. K.).

The Interview

S. M.: What was your experience with portfolios before you started this one?

D. K.: Honestly quite limited. I had completed small portfolio projects for other classes. These allowed me to compile information about particular areas in my life. However the experience I had with the career portfolio was far more extensive as it covered a broad range of areas in that required me to explore both professional and personal aspects of my life.

S. M.: Do you remember any worries or concerns that you had heading into the portfolio?

D. K.: I suppose I worried about whether or not I would have enough information to develop my own portfolio. It was oddly organic. All of sudden, some of life's mundane tasks could be articulated as applicable and useful skills. Before I knew it, there was plenty of information to fill up my portfolio. I was surprised at how much I had actually done and how many skills my liberal Arts degree had helped me hone.

S.M.: The first step in these portfolios is the "collection" step; how easy or hard was that?

D. K.: I suppose it must vary for everyone, but in my case it was moderately easy. Not impossible, but not a walk in the park: or in this case, not a walk through the archives. I had to go through boxes of unorganized school work from four years of university in order to present some of the important items in my portfolio. Looking back I realize now that I was lucky even to have these boxes in the first place. To

² The framework for that portfolio is adapted from Williams and Hall, 2008.

be honest, I still need to take some time and finish sorting and properly archiving the contents of those boxes.

S. M.: What about the element of reflection: was that something you were familiar with from earlier coursework or experiences?

D. K.: Yes. No. Maybe? Reflection is key to learning and being a successful student, so yes; on the other hand I'd never really had to do so much "personal reflection." It was like a self-dissection in which I had to poke, prod, and evaluate my accomplishments and failures. At times this made for somewhat of an uncomfortable experience, but ultimately it was rewarding and often insightful to sort through all of that reflection.

S. M.: Were some sections easier to complete than others?

D. K.: Not necessarily. I remember some of my peers found the archiving difficult because they hadn't held on to as much as some of their peers, while others struggled to determine who would best provide a permanent written reference to include in the portfolio. For me the tough part was definitely the design and presentation of the portfolio. This isn't necessarily a section, but it's the step that brings the section together. There was a template to follow, but I wanted to try my best to make my presentation unique. At the risk of sounding clichéd, I wanted to let my personality shine through.

S. M.: How did you decide on the format of the portfolio? Were you sure from the start that you would do an online version?

D. K.: Initially I liked the idea of a physical portfolio. I figured it would be easy to put together, perhaps more timeless, and less hassle with technology. However, once I saw an electronic version and understood how much easier it could be to adapt and update, I was sold! Using an online platform for my portfolio was also an attractive option as it made for easy distribution. I can simply share a link with a potential employer anywhere in the world.

S. M.: How did you connect the skills and attitudes you wanted to claim with the artifacts that would back them up?

D. K.: This took place through both reflection and discussion. The usefulness of an artifact was not always immediate but with the help of my professor and peers I suddenly saw the applicable workplace skills in things that had become regular tasks. For example, the skills developed and honed while writing a simple essay are incredibly useful in other contexts: research, reflection, and presentation skills all come into play when writing an essay. Defining and claiming skills and attitudes was like assembling a puzzle; I had to take apart and dissect the process behind artifacts (whether they were school work or experiences) then analyse and articulate the skills developed in the process. To do this well takes time.

S. M.: Were there any surprises as you worked towards the finished product?

D. K.: Quite simply the time commitment. From compiling the evidence to understanding the online platform, this portfolio took hours and hours, and it's still not exactly how I'd like it but that is in part the beauty of it—it will continue to grow as I grow. It is an organic process, which was another surprise. I suppose organic things take time.

S. M.: How do you see yourself using the portfolio after graduation?

D. K.: I'm honestly excited to use my portfolio for years to come. I've started to recognize it as more than just a tool; it is also a personal testament to my goals and accomplishments. As I continue to develop it over time I expect it to be practically useful in the job search, but I think of it also as a sort of journal. I'm of the mindset that I would like to do many different jobs and not just one career, so my portfolio will not only help me land future jobs; it will also help me to document and archive the different experiences over time.

S. M.: What advice would you give to Arts students about assembling a portfolio?

D. K.: Start now. Take your time. And don't hide your light under a bushel. Start sooner than later; the portfolio will help you to understand and articulate the years spent pursuing your Arts degree better. In a way it's a "sigh of relief" validation for all your time and hard work. The portfolio shouldn't be rushed. Take your time and properly review your accomplishments. Some of them may not be obvious immediately, but they may turn out to be your most important pieces to showcase. Don't overshadow yourself: in other words, allow your personality to shine through. This is an opportunity to showcase more than just your name and some dates on a piece of paper. This is an opportunity to present the best version of yourself, the version that you strive to be every day when you wake up.

S. M.: Any other advice you'd give Arts student at any stage of their degrees?

D. K.: I think just about every Arts student will question the pursuit of that particular degree at some stage. To them, I will offer the words of an inspirational and wise professor: "It's going to be okay"—and I believe she is right. If you ever question the decision to get an Arts degree, then you know you're going to be okay. Why? Because an individual with a Bachelor of Arts should have learned to question just about everything. A BA can prepare you for just about any challenge that you'll face in life, both professionally and personally. So when you ask yourself, "Is the pursuit of an arts degree worth it?" turn that question into a thesis statement, put your Arts skills to work, hypothesize the best answer possible, and then figure out how you can support and prove your statement. With that you will be more than "okay"!

Conclusion

In almost twelve years of the course, Shannon can say with confidence that Dana's experience is a common one. He identifies the portfolio as both a product and a process, and that process was both time-intensive and reflective, sometimes uncomfortably so. It required him to see the work of his degree in a new way, through the lens of prospective employers. He sees it as a living document that will change as his career progresses and anticipates that it will act as a kind of journal of the various turns his career will take. And finally, he frames it as a way to present the "best version" of himself. A portfolio can be helpful both as an exercise and as a completed document and for any student; for Arts students, it can yield many surprises about just how much they have actually accomplished, learned, and developed through their degree.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the hard work and good humour of all the students in the Arts 401 class of 2015: Vanessa Chew, Robert Lingley, Molly Grady, Jamie Curley, Kelsey MacDonald, Sarah Power, Chloe Colwill, Emma Stetson, Terrilyn Herrick, Ryan Nicholson, and Marc Pineau. We also thank Dr. Jane Magrath with whom Shannon Murray designed the pilot for this course in the English Department.

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