

# **Creating a Communication-based e-Portfolio Program**

## **Why the proposed topic is important to UNC Charlotte**

For decades, the skill most valued by employers of college graduates has been communication: writing and speaking in multiple contexts. Even though communication has changed in those decades, the value placed on it has not. In fact, the growing complexity of communication makes writing, speaking, and working and communicating in teams, even more complex and difficult, thus more valuable.

There is a close relationship between thinking and communicating. If they are expected to be able to think, graduates of a university must be able to communicate. While often we think of creating ideas as a precursor to communication, many theorists maintain that language and ideas are synergistic—they work simultaneously, and there is no thought without language. Students whose communication skills are problematic may also have thinking skills that are problematic. Because of this relationship and because we want our students to be thinkers, UNC Charlotte must have a commitment to educating students for strong thinking/communicating skills.

This QEP pre-proposal suggests that the university can place additional value on students' learning by creating a program that emphasizes the relationship among thinking, communicating, and ultimately performing in both the workplace and the community by making communication "real." One way to do that is to make it "public," available to multiple audiences. Sometimes students don't value communication because they know that only the teacher reads what they write; as a teacher, I have noticed when others read their writing, suddenly the value of the work increases and the performance improves.

One way to make communication public is to encourage students to create a public space for that work through creating and maintaining e-portfolios. Thus, the University would emphasize enhancing students' skills, and ultimately tie them inextricably to disciplinary knowledge. Investigating the possibilities of requiring students to design, create, and maintain e-portfolios will move the university in that direction. Like the newly designed Communication Across the Curriculum program, this effort would be maintained at the department level.

## **How the proposed topic will affect student learning**

As mentioned above, there is a close relationship between knowing and communicating. We usually can't communicate something if we don't know it very well and communicating about it helps us know it better. Students often believe that academic disciplinary writing is irrelevant to the workplace. By creating an e-portfolio accessible to potential employers, students may come to value communication, learn more, and acquire a better sense of their disciplinary knowledge and ways to apply it. Because they are doing something concrete (creating the portfolio) out of what they know, they actually enhance their levels of knowledge.

## **What existing problems or gaps in student learning the proposed topic will address.**

One of the major gaps that this program will close is that writing is connected to learning and also connected to the non-academic world. Many students don't see this connection. The e-portfolio may force students to understand that writing is not irrelevant and thus may provide an incentive to write better. The e-portfolio, accessible to professionals outside the university, will enhance that idea.

## **What portion of the student body will be affected by the proposed topic.**

Ideally, any student who graduates with an undergraduate degree could be affected by this study. Students in every discipline are expected to be competent in their area of study and to achieve competence through practice. Often this practice takes the form of writing. Departments might require students to create e-portfolios that serve two functions: proof of academic competence and proof of professional competence to the outside community.

In its early stages, this project would focus on written products: disciplinary-based research essays, pre-professional projects, scientific experiments, proposals, etc. With new technologies, however, students can also add non-text based materials to their e-portfolios: videos of classroom presentations or performances; photographs of visual projects they have worked on and completed (I have seen such projects in the College of Engineering); programs they have created in computer science—anything that illustrates their level of professionalism.

**Whether the proposed QEP is a new endeavor or a significant extension of ongoing efforts.**

This QEP is a significant extension of the ongoing effort to establish department-based programs in Communication across the Curriculum. The e-portfolio might serve as an outcome of that program, initially in the area of writing but ultimately, through technologies such as U-Tube, in the area of other skills.