

## **FROM “MY WORK” TO “OUR WORK”: A RETURN TO THE MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

In the rapidly changing and complex global lives and careers our students confront, the mission of higher education should be to focus on higher order learning. E-portfolios allow for the portability of learning across institutions, time and place; the centrality of student ownership and co-creation of their learning; the flexibility and inclusiveness of the panoply of learning in all its manifestations and guises; and the equity e-portfolios bring to the learning process when all students can see themselves and their accomplishments in a framework of educational attainment. Innovation in technology now allows higher education to integrate the teaching and learning process into something greater than its constituent pieces; something with meaning beyond the moment in which it occurs. Digital learning, and in particular, e-portfolios have the potential to create the ability to engage students in liberal education - intentional, integrative, creative, indeed

entrepreneurial student-authored/faculty guided and mentored education we must have to honor our higher education mission and to prepare a democratic society where all of our people can flourish.

**KEY WORDS:** eportfolio, prior learning, meaning-making, rubrics

## 1. INTRODUCTION

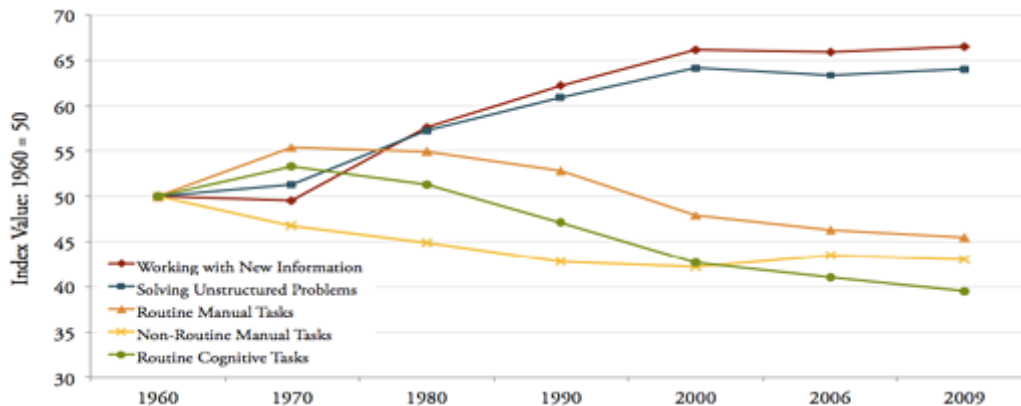
In the rapidly changing and complex global lives and careers our students confront, the mission of higher education should be to focus on higher-order learning. The environments of learning for students have changed, now often including a blend of face-to-face and synchronous or asynchronous digital interactive space. The “traditional” student, ages 18–22, fresh out of high school, is joined now by students who have already gained learning from significant work experience as well as from online resources from organizations such as Coursera, Saylor, and Udacity. At the same time, higher education knows much more now than in the past about how students learn and how faculty effectiveness through engaging with students to advance learning can be achieved and enhanced. Innovation in technology now allows higher education to integrate the teaching and learning process into something greater than its constituent pieces, something with meaning beyond the moment in which it occurs.

## 2. OVERARCHING CHALLENGE CONFRONTING HIGHER EDUCATION—THE MY VERSUS OUR CONCEPT

Employers have been telling higher education for years what they expect and need from the graduates of higher education. Employers obviously want individuals well prepared to perform a set of functions central to whatever the specific job requires, e.g., accounting, teaching, art curation, etc. However, more important to today’s employers is the need for these same people to be well prepared with such skills and knowledge as problem solving in diverse settings, knowledge and understanding of democratic institutions, values and judgment essential for contributing to the community and society, oral and written communication, teamwork skills in diverse groups, and critical thinking and analysis (HRA/AACU, 2015a). Yet, students believe that they are much better prepared as graduates to function in these capacities and for career success than employers report from their own hires (HRA/AACU, 2015b). This disconnect between employer expectations and student perceptions is troubling to say the least. What messages are we giving our students? What evidence do we have on actual proficiency on these sets of skills and abilities?

Further illustrating the importance of this disconnect in perceptions regarding the preparation of students in higher education is a recent report from Levy and Murnane (June 1, 2013). The changing nature of jobs in the twenty-first century economy mirrors a large shift in the nature of problems and opportunities confronting global communities. The authors track the trends in the changing work tasks required in the U.S. economy from 1960 to 2009. The clear trend is a consistent and noticeable decrease in jobs requiring manual tasks and routine cognitive tasks, and a large increase in jobs requiring working with new information and unstructured problems. In

other words, knowledge of past and present is necessary but not for future success. The ability to transfer knowledge and experience and to integrate disparate learning sources into new situations and unscripted problems is increasingly essential for today's graduates.



**FIG. 1:** Index of changing work tasks in the U.S. economy 1960-2009.

Not only has the work world been changing, the entire foundation of higher education also has been shifting during the latter twentieth century and continues in the present. There was a time when higher education and its faculty were the keepers and shepherds of knowledge; individuals came to the academy to learn and to engage with other knowledgeable colleagues. Now knowledge and access to it are ubiquitous and readily available instantaneously from virtually anywhere in the world. If anything, we have a surfeit of knowledge; we are overwhelmed with information access and variety. As a result, the roles of faculty and higher education also need to shift. Rather than persisting in the knowledge dissemination mode, the more important role has become to engage and help our students develop the capacities to understand and discover information that is reputable and based on solid research and evidence, to identify appropriate sources, to ask critical questions, to examine different perspectives, and to engage repeatedly and systematically in posing, exploring, and solving complex, often unscripted problems and questions, both enduring and contemporary. In essence, the role of higher education is to challenge our students and to guide them in the sense making and meaning making of the knowledge they bring with them and the knowledge they acquire through their education.

The nature of the changes occurring in the world, the economy, and the academy illustrate that those in higher education no longer can meet the needs of students through individualized courses or chunks of information. The magnitude and qualitative expectations for higher-order learning argue forcefully for the higher educational enterprise to reenvision itself in its collective responsibility for achieving the outcomes necessary for enabling student success. The work of the academy is now a shared set of activities that requires greater integration and intentionality than in the past, greater collaboration across traditional silos and boundaries, and a clearer recognition that we can achieve more working together openly than we can individually behind closed doors.

### 3. A ROLE FOR TECHNOLOGY IN FACILITATING MEANING MAKING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In practice, we need to provide our students with the ability to examine their own learning and to describe or represent that learning to others, to be able to demonstrate their abilities to integrate their learning, to locate appropriate and useful information, to communicate to various audiences in intelligible ways, to organize and apply learning to new situations and issues.

Just as technology, through the Internet and telecommunications, has been an instrumental force enabling the push toward deconstruction and atomization of higher education learning, it also has the means to help students and institutions make much better sense and meaning out of the educational experiences of our students. Specifically, students on more than half of campuses across the United States report the use of student e-portfolios (Dahlstrom and Bichsel, 2014). E-portfolio technology has continued over the years to become more sophisticated and less expensive and more user friendly. E-portfolios have spawned an entire community of practices, providing support, resources, scholarship, and functions that helped spread the usefulness of a technology that is flexible and malleable for students seeking a higher education<sup>1</sup>.

Part of the success of e-portfolios lies in the fact that portfolios are familiar to many parts of the academy, e.g., architecture, education, art, writing. They have also, although in a rather different context, been used for decades by institutions working with returning students on valuing prior learning. The advances in technology have now allowed students and institutions to include in portfolios learning captured through oral presentations, performances, community projects, visual displays, web pages, videos, etc. E-portfolios are a tool that reflects and encompasses the multitude of ways we learn and express our learning that in prior years could only be appreciated in person.

A key component of e-portfolios, though, is that they are most useful when they are conceived as more than a file drawer of collected artifacts or demonstrations. As the e-portfolio approach to learning and teaching has grown, the potential of the approach for learning has developed frameworks and design principles to guide good practice. Both commercial and noncommercial e-portfolio platforms and software now have incorporated into their organization frameworks the capacity to allow users to engage in three key activities for enhanced student learning, namely, inquiry, reflection, and integration (LAGCC, 2014), across their coursework, the curriculum, cocurricular and lived experiences, across areas of study, and among and between different institutions and educational providers.

Institutions have also been exploring innovative ways to integrate e-portfolios into other important functions within higher education. A common aspect of e-portfolios is a resume, i.e., a connection between what was learned through the student's education and subsequent employment or graduate pursuits upon graduation. Career centers have begun to connect the digital revolution in connecting employers with graduates to specific examples from e-portfolios illustrating what students have actually done through their educational careers to develop proficiency in the skills and abilities required for a position. Other institutions have begun to connect student e-portfolios with the formal transcript, again recognizing the decreasing confidence in what the transcript presents in relation to the actual level of proficiency students have in practice.

Employers have indicated that they are interested in seeing examples of what students have actually done—the project report, the presentation of findings to the board, the design for a public

service announcement, the packaging designed for a product, or a webpage for a specific purpose. “In addition to a resume or college transcript, more than four in five employers say an electronic portfolio would be useful to them in ensuring that job applicants have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their company or organization” (AACU/HRA, 2013). The e-portfolio is a precursor to what might be called a “flipped transcript,” i.e., a way to let each student lead with the presentation of their educated self through a demonstration of what learning outcomes, skills, and abilities of a liberal education they have developed and at what levels of proficiency that prepare them for success. This flipped transcript presentation of examples, illustrations, and actual work from the student could then be linked to the courses and activities that constituted the student’s educational preparation. This concept would place the student and her learning at the forefront rather than the institutional formalism, while still preserving the institution’s imprimatur that the work was the student’s and was recognized by the institution.

#### **4. ESTABLISHING EVIDENCE AND EXPECTATIONS FOR QUALITY LEARNING**

One of the primary roles of faculty and institutions of higher education is to certify that student learning meets standards of achievement associated with the appropriate level of degree or credential being granted. At institutions of higher education, the governing documents typically vest the awarding of degrees and credentials in the faculty. Therefore, even in the current digital world and changing roles outlined above, the faculty and the judgment of faculty still reside at the center of most credential granting processes. Albeit, pressures are increasing to provide badges and like credentials through industry groups, more focused, narrowly defined groups of experts, and even through crowdsourcing. The two common threads in this argument are that those who know the area of learning and its attendant skills and abilities in practice should be the ones exercising judgment about the quality of the learning, and that there is broad agreement about what an acceptable level of proficiency looks like.

One of the few methods for assessing student learning that exists in higher education today that enjoys widespread use by faculty and institutions, that meets the calls for broad expert participation in defining the quality measures, and that was developed by the experts is the VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) rubrics (Rhodes, 2010; Sullivan, 2015). The VALUE rubrics were developed by teams of interdisciplinary faculty and other educational professionals from across the sectors of higher education in the United States. The rubrics address 16 essential learning outcomes associated with what employers say they are looking for in graduates and what faculty say they are trying to teach. Based on rubric downloads and queries, the rubrics are being explored and utilized on thousands of campuses in the United States and around the world.

Every rubric represents the results of research on the key dimensions or criteria of learning identified by faculty and experts for the respective outcomes that are associated with developing proficiency in each outcome. Each criterion in each outcome is further articulated through a performance descriptor that describes what learning would look like when examining a piece of

student work. Emphasis in the performance descriptors is on using verbs reflective of levels of increasing complexity and sophistication of learning, i.e., higher-order thinking and learning as a student progresses from beginner to more masterful quality learning.

There are several examples of multiple institutions using the same VALUE rubrics to bring learning expectations into closer alignment across institutions where student transfer is frequent and critical for student progress and success, especially for returning and working adults. The American Council of Research Librarians conducted a study across multiple institutions around measuring information literacy learning as they considered performance expectations for student learning related to the ACRL standards. The South Metropolitan Higher Education Consortium (SMHEC) brought 12 of their members together, public and private, two- and four-year colleges and universities, to use the VALUE written communication rubric to engage in conversations about first year writing expectations since so many of their students took classes among the member institutions. By using the rubric, the faculty began to share a common language. "Faculty learned the importance of relying on common reference points to support scoring versus relying on personal experience and preferences. Through all of this, they recognize, discuss, and to some extent eliminate the inconsistencies in expectations and standards for 1st year writing" (SMHEC, 2014). Several two- and four-year transfer partners utilized VALUE rubrics to address student transfer success between their institutions by examining assignments and expected levels of learning to better prepare students for academic progress.

Currently, the VALUE rubrics are a centerpiece of the Multi-State Collaborative for Learning Outcomes Assessment (MSC)<sup>2</sup>, co-led by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the State Higher Education Executive Officers' (SHEEO) association. Twelve state higher education executive agencies are collaborating along with approximately 100 two- and four-year campuses in their respective states (plus several private four-year liberal arts colleges in a related project) to collect samples of student work and to have it scored by a group of faculty and staff who have gone through calibration training on three of the VALUE rubrics, namely, written communication, critical thinking, and quantitative literacy. The project is designed to both see if the VALUE rubric approach can be scaled to a nationwide level and to begin to identify what benchmarks for learning in these three areas of learning look like, i.e., a landscape of learning across a wide variety of campuses across the United States. An emphasis of the VALUE/MSC project is to establish the reliability and validity of the VALUE rubric approach to measuring student learning<sup>3</sup>.

## 5. COMMITTING TO "OUR WORK"

Fortunately for the faculty and the students (re-)entering higher education now, higher education has been developing tools, frameworks, and mind-sets that allow more students to see themselves as part of the academy, to be able to bring their previous learning and experiences to their educational goal attainment in ways they count and adds to their progress, and to focus not only on knowledge acquisition, but also on application and use of knowledge, and integration of learning in multiple contexts.



E-portfolios are both the most pervasive, developed digital approach/medium we now have at higher education institutions for student demonstration of learning and they provide the means to meet the need for ongoing development and evolution of technology's potential to shape and to enhance ways our students interact with each other, with faculty and staff, and with the world, and how each of these influence their own individual and communal selves and identities.

E-portfolios are particularly powerful when conceived as spaces for reflective practice for meaning making in the following ways:

- The integration of knowledge and its use or application.
- The development of self through social interaction with others and to engender, a sense of agency and control over one's life.
- The creation and recognition of the whole student person and the value of seeing self and other students within a set of interacting forces in their lives, as more than discrete data elements.

E-portfolios are a high-impact practice just as assessment can be a high-impact practice—when done well. One of the powerful things about e-portfolios is the transparency and visibility they provide for learning attainment. E-portfolios allow for the portability of learning across institutions, time, and place, the centrality of student ownership and co-creation of their learning, the flexibility and inclusiveness of the panoply of learning in all its manifestations and guises, and the equity e-portfolios bring to the learning process when all students can see themselves and their accomplishments in a framework of educational attainment.

In short, digital learning, in particular e-portfolios, has the potential now to create the ability to engage students in the liberal education—intentional, integrative, creative, indeed entrepreneurial student-authored/faculty-guided and mentored education—we must have to honor our higher education mission and to prepare a democratic society where all of our people can flourish.

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<sup>1</sup>See for example, the International Journal of ePortfolios, <http://theijep.com>; the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research, <http://ncepr.org/>; Association for Authentic, Experiential and Evidence-Based Learning; <http://www.aaeebl.org>; Electronic Portfolio Action and Communication (EPAC), <http://epac.pbworks.com>; and the Association of American Colleges and Universities, <http://www.aacu.org/eportfolios>.

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<sup>3</sup>See the Association of American Colleges and Universities, <http://www.aacu.org/value/msc>; State Higher Education Executive Officers, <http://www.sheeo.org/msc>.