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## Beyond the “sanctity of the content”: e-portfolios

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Conventionally teaching takes place by reference to “faculty-centered instruction in the oral tradition” which involves the delivery of content via lectures. This is invariably also accompanied by an emphasis on an instructional discourse which features an almost sacred approach to “content” and thus a preponderance of “*listening is learning*” as the preferred methodology for teaching. (Oblinger and Rush 1997) In this respect and during the last few decades such conventional teaching methodologies which presume “*telling is teaching and listening is learning*” have had to face the problem of how to cope with the explosion of “new knowledge” emerging daily from the academy. Thus, given the preferred teaching methodology, it is not surprising that the invariable response of most faculty to the increasing quantities of knowledge and the collateral compression in the half-life of prior knowledge is to cram larger amounts of the “*sacred content*” into lectures. (Paul and Elder 2001; Spence 2001) This in turn has generated an almost universal response from students who are confronted with an onslaught of so-called “sacred knowledge”. Students have become ever more proficient at memorizing and cramming information for the purpose of coping with assessments and the equally “*sacred grade*”, but with little or no regard to ability to thinking (critical or otherwise), how to apply such knowledge or its significance. Although such students may achieve higher grades, however, few if any, develop critical thinking or for that matter any of the other skills that are so necessary in their future professional careers or for their life as citizens. (Lemke 2003; Weimer 2002)

Certainly, this traditional approach to teaching and learning carries with it a degree of merit, but to presume that it is the only way or in fact the best way to enhance learning ignores compelling evidence to the contrary that has emerged from most recent research on teaching methodologies. (Wilson 1997) We are now cognizant that faculty-centered instruction in the oral tradition has seriously been challenged by both students and faculty and found wanting. Instead, more and more faculty in a great variety of liberal educational institutions seek to identify ways in which their teaching will contribute to critical thinking and active learning. Thus, faculty are exploring a variety of learner-centered environments and a variety of instructional strategies that will and can support the active engagement of students. In fact, many professional educators have now come to recognize that we must move beyond the “*sanctity of the content*” and that there is no such thing as essential material and/or information that must be communicated to students. In contrast, such pedagogies argue for ***the centrality of the skills that students learn as being the key to a high quality modern liberal education.*** (Wright, 2001)

It is, of course, beyond the scope of this newsletter to identify and discuss appropriate instructional strategies that enable us to move beyond the “*sanctity of the content*” and instead focus on enhancing learning by “...*teaching students to think critically, to find and evaluate information, to communicate effectively, to interact with peers, and other outcomes that will be essential for a successful career, whether in science, business or social work.*” (Wright, 2001) Nevertheless, a generic strategy that may contribute, ***while allowing faculty to still retain the lecture-based strategy for teaching,*** is suggested by Stephen Ehrmann and may deserve noting since it relates specifically to a liberal educational environment and reflects the interests of faculty, students, institutions and potential employers. Ehrmann argues that ***electronic portfolios*** constitute a key element in modern liberal education as they provide the means by which students can move beyond computer literacy as a goal

in itself and instead make use of information technology as a methodology for critical and reflective thinking in relationship to learning goals and objectives. (Ehrmann, 2004)

In this respect, Ehrmann's suggestion articulates well with the fact that learning is now recognized by most educational experts as a lifelong process, no matter what we do, both in work and at leisure. By recording all the different things we have done, currently do and expect or plan to do in the future we are:

- Reflecting on who we are and what is unique and special about us,
- Identifying areas where we want or need to learn more either by building on existing strengths or addressing current or predictable weaknesses.

Most of the time we respond intuitively to demands on our time using appropriate skills and knowledge: we do not need to consult a record of everything we have done to know whether or not we can achieve a particular task. However, it can be very difficult to know that we will be able to achieve tasks which are poorly defined, appear to require skills or knowledge we do not yet have, are a long way off, or indeed are so immediate we cannot see where to start. An electronic record can be used to match experience, skills and understanding to these sorts of difficult tasks. It can also be employed to develop new goals to help meet changing demands in the context of objectives set in education, work and in leisure.

An electronic record will also enable students to evaluate the effectiveness of any training and development they undergo to meet their goals. If the outcomes do not meet the goals they have set they have a record of what still needs to be done. Thus, when electronic portfolios are used by students it also enables faculty to seek ways of enhancing the curriculum taught and reflect on the instructional strategies adopted. They provide an ideal opportunity, for example, where classroom action research and information technology can articulate in order to enhance the goals and objectives of a modern liberal education and move beyond the limited goal of delivering content. Thus, it is not surprising that an increasing number of institutions (HE) around the world are adopting e-portfolios as an innovation within learning and teaching which they believe might enable us to move to learner-centric methodologies and strategies. In this respect electronic portfolios that can be used alongside most instructional strategies and pedagogic methodologies become indispensable tools for a modern liberal education. (Tosh and Haywood 2005) This is particularly so as they enable us to still deliver content, if we so wish, and at the same time move beyond the "sanctity of the content" in favor of a more learner-centric approach.

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