An Online Advising Tool for a Rapidly Changing World: Showcasing a Student's Thinking and Accomplishments through e-Folios

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In a rapidly changing world, online tools offer innovative ways to reach students at a distance, to engage students who are interested in technology and/or environmental sustainability, and to provide new and exciting opportunities for collaboration. In a Lasallian world of higher education, online tools offer new ways to work "together and by association." As students complete more of their coursework online – from online or blended classes to papers written and submitted electronically – our advising tools and our Lasallian approach[2] need to adapt to take advantage of technology and to "meet students where they are."

Why turn to a 300-year old approach to education in the twenty-first century? Practical, collaborative, creative – all were hallmarks of John Baptist de La Salle's innovations in the late 1600s, and are exactly what we need now. Golinkoff and Hirsch-Pasek[3] demonstrate our need for new educational outcomes: collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creative innovation, content, and confidence. Further, the outcomes must be facilitated and assessed in developmentally appropriate ways.[4] While these scholars describe a new, revised K-12 educational system, we need to heed this advice in higher education as well. Our students are not coming to us with these skills and dispositions.

John Baptist de La Salle revolutionized education. At a time when only the elite were educated, and educated in Latin, De La Salle saw the need for a practical education, in the vernacular. Meeting students where they were and helping them to excel; teaching groups of children at appropriate levels and having teachers and students work and learn together and by association became hallmarks of Lasallian pedagogy – hallmarks that have served us well for over 300 years. Given reports from current employers suggesting that many college graduates are not emerging with the critical thinking and creative imagination skills that are required by a rapidly changing workplace,[5] we need to address these practical needs directly. A current call from business is for innovation and radical change in education – exactly the sort of pedagogy practiced by Lasallian educators for three centuries.

While the core tenets of Lasallian pedagogy persist, aspects of the day-to-day classroom have certainly changed. The ferule has no place in a twenty-first century classroom, nor does the silence of the 1679 Rheims classroom merit a return to the twenty-first century classroom. However, the philosophical underpinnings of a Lasallian pedagogy – working collaboratively, communicating, innovating to meet current and future needs – are exactly what scholars in higher education are seeking and employers are demanding.

Is it time to redesign the bachelor's degree, as suggested by Selingo[6]? Is our undergraduate education stuck in colonial era design and industrial revolution focus? Employers are no longer hiring for a lifetime – workers who are hired with a shorter time commitment bring more creative ideas and more productivity to a company.[7] Employers want to hire good communicators, critical thinkers, and innovators, yet our educational system still values content.[8] Our students do not arrive on college campuses with the skills for learning or habits of mind that facilitate the development during college years.[9] The calls are converging on a theme: it is time to address thinking, development, and creativity in our undergraduate curricula. As Appleyard[10] has noted, all universities are responsible for the formation of our students – intellectual, social, and (perhaps debated on the last area) moral and/or religious. Appleyard further suggests that the integration and intertwining of development in these three areas is critical.

Twenty-first century students need content and technology, not for specific jobs in specific careers, but as tools to develop skills in collaboration, self-authorship, communication, creative innovation, and critical thinking. As noted in the "Call from the 45th General Chapter":

> The world needs new thinking. We are invited to make incursions into inhospitable terrain and from there to offer our educational, evangelical, missionary and human contributions . . . We are teachers in a world that needs risky and bold responses. Let us open our horizons of creativity in order to ensure that the mission deploys its strength in the promotion of a world that is more just and in solidarity with others.[11]

It is in this spirit that a particular technology is considered, not as the only means, but as one approach to facilitate the integrative, intertwining of development we hope to foster.

Case Example

In the psychology department of Saint Mary's University of Minnesota (SMUMN), we noted that our students were entering university without some of the skills and dispositions we believed were essential for fully developing as young men and women of purpose and intellect. We also noted that our primary advising tool (a rubric provided to help students consider their own development and to use in face-to-face advising meetings) was no longer particularly effective. Thus, we developed an e-Folio for our advising process. In summer of 2013, we unveiled our e-Folio template to a small sample of psychology majors at SMUMN. We included students across four years of study, students with high GPAs, students who were struggling academically, student leaders, and students who were not connecting with groups on campus. We included psychology majors with no other concentration in their academic programs and psychology majors who were completing double majors and minors. Our first group was invited to use this tool over the summer to focus their reflection of their academic careers, to gather materials from their coursework across disciplines, and to assist with face-to-face advising.

With a user-friendly, cost-effective Google platform, we provided a template with pages and prompts for "My Academic Story," reflections on academic choices each semester, samples and written reflection of oral presentations, written papers, internship experiences, community involvement, campus involvement, Lasallian mission involvement, self-care strategies, and a curriculum vitae. Students were encouraged to personalize their e-Folios – adding or eliminating

sections to better tell their stories and to reflect on the integration of diverse aspects of their lives. One suggestion through advising was to explore talents, passions, and experiences and their intersections in the e-Folio. Our first group found the process to be very helpful. Faculty noted that this group of students stopped talking about "getting courses out of the way" and were more reflective about choices within the major and the general education program. Upper class students "wished the e-Folio had been available" as they entered the university due to its encouragement of reflection and gathering of supporting materials.

We have expanded the e-Folio to all psychology majors across four years. Upon declaration of the major, students are welcomed to the department and provided with an e-Folio. Advisors suggest students spend more time in specific sections when that seems developmentally or academically appropriate. Students are then able to report on activities and connections that faculty often would not learn about until students were involved in capstone experiences. These connections are then available during advising sessions or when discussing deeper learning in specific classes. Students are encouraged to include work and reflection from their entire academic and college developmental journeys, not only in the psychology curriculum.

Broader Context

Many have called for a developmental approach to advising,[12] to assessment across the curriculum,[13] and to individuals' exploration and academic journeys. How do we foster ownership of education or self-authorship? This is part of our pedagogy – "Lasallian education believes that students are primarily responsible for their own education."[14] Hermida[15] described the deep learning approach as student driven. Students are "constructors of their own knowledge" while faculty are "designers of learning environments and experiences."[16] While deep learning occurs in a social, collaborative context, students are clearly the authors of their own academic journeys.

Chen and Black[17] reported on a pilot study at Stanford University using e-Folios with all incoming freshmen for their first two years at the university. e-Folios were associated with persistence and retention and improved face-to-face advising. The pilot study reframed advising as a "shared responsibility" and encouraged students' ownership of their "learning careers."

A joint project of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Carnegie Foundation[18] stressed that integrative learning – integrating across time, across courses, and across many areas of life – is our biggest challenge and ought to be our biggest goal. Through integrative learning, students develop habits of mind to help them in development of personal, professional, and civic lives. Hermida stated, "deep learning . . . helps students become active protagonists of their own learning process."[19]

How do we help students reflect on their academic journeys, their life experiences, and their creative discoveries? "The function of reflection is to make meaning, to formulate relationships and continuities … it is what enables us to make sense of and attribute value to the events of our lives."[20] Reflection is key for making connections – it is not entirely the realm of individual, solitary pursuits; but often happens in conversation and interaction with others.[21] To facilitate this conversation and interaction with others, we might turn to tools such as e-Folio.

e-Folio is an electronic tool that may be used to attain many of these goals. Eynon, Gambino, and Török[22] suggest using e-Folio as a central tool for reflection and learning, provided a "sophisticated" integrative pedagogy is central in this approach. e-Folios are ideal for students' self-reflection and self-assessment.[23] Further, e-Folios lend themselves to social development,[24] allowing students to construct meaning and understanding, to communicate meaning, and to move to an integrated sense of intellectual and personal significance with an authentic audience.

Of course, e-Folios are merely tools. Many criticize e-Folios for uses that are not intended in an integrative approach. e-Folios ought not be "scrapbooks," mere repositories of historical artifacts[25]; places to easily find materials for job or graduate school applications. E-Folios ought not be self-contained course projects for students to engage with independently. As a tool, e-Folios encourage communication and deeper understanding when they serve as part of the exploration process in a community context. e-Folios ought not to be the only solution nor the only possibility to encourage integrative learning.[26] Finally, e-Folios ought not be a time-consuming project for faculty members to consider in the context of grading. They can be a useful tool in a Lasallian educational context when used in community, as part of a collaborative exploration process where students explore and discover in a creative, self-authorship approach. Additionally, e-Folios, when used thoughtfully, foster open communication with advisors, professors, or peers that capture a student's way of being in the world and a student's varied experiences. Most important, the student's reflections evolve as experiences, concepts, and theories are integrated across time, place, and context. As "older brothers and sisters" to our students, Lasallian professors are in a position to mentor effectively with tools at our disposal.

Faculty members' use of e-Folio is maximized with a developmental approach to advising and academic exploration. Incoming freshmen are not yet prepared to contextualize all aspects of the learning process. Hodge, Magolda, and Haynes[27] posit that students are prepared to develop self-authorship much earlier than we expect, if we guide them from the beginning in a developmentally appropriate way. How is this not all consuming of a faculty member's time? Reviewing the student's e-Folio during each advising session and requiring coursework to be submitted in the e-Folio from the beginning of freshman year are two strategies that facilitate the process for students and faculty. If I am providing the learning environment and facilitating learning, then I am engaged in active dialogue with the student and the e-Folio. This is not a solitary practice.

Return to Case Example

Now that e-Folios are provided for each psychology major at SMUMN, what has happened? What are the challenges and why would others want to pursue this? Perhaps not surprising, some students readily immersed themselves in the e-Folio work while others avoided beginning what they viewed as one more assignment to be checked off. While we had many leaders within the pilot study group, their enthusiasm was not sufficient to encourage all students to dive into the challenge. In faculty member discussions, we readily observed that developmental level was but one factor in students' readiness to engage in the e-Folio process. We needed to get students to begin the work, even at the level of "scrapbooking" first. Then, we needed to encourage development across spheres through the e-Folio work.

On a very small scale, we have explored the challenges and impacts with our e-Folios. The need for developmentally appropriate advising with respect to engagement with the e-Folio was readily apparent in many students "not getting to the e-Folio" in time for advising sessions or in perfunctory use of the e-Folio as scrapbook. This year, two of four faculty members sent e-Folio reminders at the start of the academic year, one week prior to breaks, and two weeks prior to advising meetings. One of the two faculty members had students' e-Folios open on her computer as students entered the office for advising meetings. While reminders led to an increase in some engagement with the e-Folio, the open e-Folio and conversation led to dramatic increase in thoughtful engagement with the narrative and exploration sections of the e-Folio. Additionally, three of four faculty members required an entry in the e-Folio as part of specific classes. While these required entries were made, this practice did not appear to increase engagement with the narrative. Students who engaged with the narrative were noted to be more active in connecting experiences across classes and between community and class environments.

The next hurdle will be expanding the use of the e-Folio across all four years into all disciplines in the university. Some clear needs to encourage faculty "buy-in" include the availability of the template, so there is no need to recreate an e-Folio structure. Additionally, we need faculty members to "buy-in" to the process, such that students will view this as an active tool at the university, not only in the major. Further, as mentors, we use the e-Folios as tools for advising, not as a replacement for relationships in the advising or teaching process. Our faculty members found that we connected with our students at a deeper level with the use of e-Folios than we had with only face-to-face meetings. Further, the e-Folio can be shared, not only across disciplines and across campus, but also across countries and cultures. The primary limitation to e-Folios would be access to technology. As educational settings worldwide gain access to technology, collaboration possibilities increase dramatically.

While our numbers are small and random assignment was not conducted, our experience is promising in the intentional, invitational, and developmentally tailored approach to using e-Folio as an active, deep learning tool. Our Lasallian approach – practical, in community, together and by association, meeting students where they are – is ideal for an e-Folio approach to, not just the major, but to the student's academic journey. e-Folios are but one tool available for a deep learning, integrative approach to fostering collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creative innovation, content, and confidence. Additionally, e-Folios are a powerful tool readily adapted in our Lasallian pedagogy. Engagement with e-Folios in a Lasallian context may be exactly what our twenty-first century learners need in order to continue our work, together and by association.[28]

Questions for Consideration

1. Given that Lasallian pedagogy is relational, what is advising or mentoring when it is shifted to an online environment? For example, does advising work in a Lasallian context if the student is engaged in study and work at a Lasallian mission in Rhode Island while the faculty member is in Minnesota? Is the e-Folio with e-mail, phone, or Skype contact sufficient for relational, developmental advising?

2. Seebach and Charron[29] translated the "Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher"[30] for an online environment (for an online or blended course). Are there specific Lasallian advising or mentoring practices that need to be translated when some of our work is in an electronic portfolio?

3. How do we encourage reluctant students or faculty members to engage in this process?

4. Would e-Folios facilitate cross-cultural or international team-teaching? What limitations or privacy concerns would need to be addressed?

Endnotes

1. Elizabeth E. Seebach is an associate professor and chair of the psychology department at the undergraduate college of Saint Mary's University of Minnesota. She earned a PhD degree at Vanderbilt University.

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