

Goshen College Team
I/NCEPR Cohort VI Final Report
Using Eportfolios to Gather Evidence of Student Learning on Study Service Term

“[The educator] must constantly regard what is already won not as a fixed possession, but as an agency and instrumentality for opening new fields which make new demands upon existing powers of observation and of intelligent use of memory. Connectedness in growth must be [the educator’s] constant watchword.” -- John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 1938

Introduction

As a small, residential, Christian liberal arts college affiliated with the Mennonite Church (USA), Goshen College is dedicated to providing a “whole person” education with a mission to create leaders for the church and the world. In order to accomplish this, we have included a great deal of experiential learning in our curriculum and have been moving toward strengthening the connections between Student Life and Academic Affairs for many years. Edwards and Burnham, administrators at Thomas College – a small, liberal arts college in central Maine – noted that “although college mission statements often reference lifelong learning or critical thinking, we generally fail to provide students with a structure or design that inspires them to make connections between the writing, thinking and analytical skills that make such learning possible” (2009, 87). As Goshen College began the process of creating a new First Year Experience (FYE) program and revising its General Education program, we dreamed of clarifying the connections between different types of experiences in our curriculum and using those connections to establish and maintain bridges between various divisions of the college.

One of the most visible ways in which we provide whole person education is through the Study Service Term (SST). For the past 45 years, our General Education program has had at its center the SST – a semester-long study abroad experience during which students spend approximately six weeks learning the language, history, culture, political and economic systems and natural environment of the country they are visiting, and another six or seven weeks engaging in a full-time service placement. SST locations are selected with contrast in mind – “units” take place in developing countries, and service placement locations are schools, clinics, churches, social service agencies, NGOs, even on farms. Goshen College faculty lead these units and serve as on-site coordinators for both the academic portions and the service placements. The concept of SST sprang from the enthusiasm of faculty in the late 1960s to provide students with a complex, challenging, and unstructured moment in their college careers with the intention of supporting them in dealing with uncertainty and in creating a transformative learning experience. Beginning in 1968, Goshen has required students to either go on SST or fulfill a cross-cultural learning requirement in order to complete their education.

Our efforts to assess SST – either separate from Gen Ed or connected to it – have been survey-based, and have not provided a rich understanding of learning or learning outcomes. We believed that Eportfolios would provide a better platform for seeing both how what students learned on SST was transformative, and also how it connected to what they knew before going in order to inform how we prepare them. Writing from their experience at the University of Waterloo, Light, Sproule and Lithgow presented an issue very similar to our context at Goshen. They noted that students in their co-op learning programs were asked in the Eportfolio to connect

learning from the classroom, the workplace and the community. “Although we know that students learn skills in these different contexts, university education often focuses on the academic setting only, encouraging students to limit their thinking to a specific course without connecting between courses, much less beyond them” (2009, 69).

Our participation in the Foundations of Excellence Process introduced us to various models of FYE programs and confirmed our already strong sense that a partnership between Student Life and Academic Affairs would be necessary to sustain our programs long-term. In this context, we began planning for assessment of FYE and the new version of General Education – which was named “The Goshen Core.” The impetus for our participation in the I/NCEPR project came from the need to understand how to best incorporate the Eportfolio into our overall assessment plan for The Core, but since we had not yet defined or launched our new program, we used SST as the focal point of our exploration.

Our Research Question

The purpose of our project was to explore the extent to which electronic portfolios provide for generalizations about student learning as a result of the SST experience. To that end, the question that has guided our work is: “using ePortfolios, what generalizations can we make about student learning as a result of the Study Service Term experience?”

In order to get at this question, we asked students to respond in writing to reflective prompts that directed them to the Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) that faculty used to structure the Goshen Core. The model for these SLOs were the Essential Learning Outcomes of the AAC&U’s LEAP project and as such they were divided into 4 categories: Knowledge, Skills, Responsibilities, and Integration (*NOTE: see the “Process of Inquiry” section for a full list of the SLOs).

Students who had completed SST terms were invited to create electronic portfolios which provided an opportunity for their reflection on the ways in which their experiences helped them achieve the learning outcomes of the Goshen Core. Since in the past we had not had consistent enough participation in post-SST surveys to establish any findings based on quantitative data, we see this project as a first step in establishing a broad understanding of the themes students use to report on their learning from SST and a way to begin development of more suitable survey instruments. We also see this project as a way to gather data on how SST affects students in order that we might be able to describe the experience in richer detail to students and their parents before they embark, or even before they enroll at Goshen College.

Main Findings

Our main finding is that the short, reflective statements in the Eportfolio provide evidence that students experience SST as a “transformative learning” experience and are able to use the Eportfolio as an opportunity to establish their experience on SST as a transformative learning experience. Mezirow points to the importance of perspective shift as an identifying feature of

transformative learning. “Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings” (1991, 167). A content analysis of students’ reflective statements reveals six strong themes with regard to their learning on SST. While there is a more detailed description of our methods contained in the next section, we should note here that our final tally of completed portfolios was 24, although we were able to extract 32 reflective statements on “Knowledge.” For the purposes of this report and for the time being, we have limited our analysis to the reflective statements in the Eportfolios. In these reflective statements, students reported that:

1. SST affected their identity (values, beliefs, and assumptions), generally through increased self-awareness

This theme was the strongest, occurring across all four areas of the SLOs, and with a great deal of frequency. In total students mentioned reassessment of their values, beliefs, or assumptions in 50 of the reflective statements – including 19 times in the Knowledge statements and 20 times in the statements on Responsibilities.

2. Experience – as opposed to classroom learning – increased their knowledge
3. They felt an increased sense of responsibility to foster and maintain connections to others
4. SST provided an opportunity to learn both knowledge and skills that are applicable to their future

Students also noted these three themes across all four areas of the SLOs, but with less frequency than the first. In total students mentioned theme number two 36 times, including 15 times in the statements on Knowledge. Students mentioned themes three and four 30 times each, but where they wrote about theme three 19 times in the Responsibilities statements, they mentioned theme four 14 times in the statements on Integration.

5. Living with a family was key to a change in their perspective
6. They felt an increased sense of global responsibility

These two themes either occurred across only two areas of the SLOs or were much less frequent. In total students mentioned themes five and six 22 times each. We found theme 5 in over half of the statements on Knowledge (18 occurrences), but not in any statements on Responsibilities or Integration.

Figure 1. (below) shows the distribution of the top six themes:

| Strongest Themes Overall | K | S | R | I | Totals |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|---------------|
| 1.1. Identity/increased self-awareness | 19 | 2 | 20 | 9 | 50 |
| 1.3. Experience (as opposed to classroom) increased knowledge | 15 | 9 | 7 | 5 | 36 |
| 3.1. Increased sense of responsibility for connection to others | 1 | 5 | 19 | 5 | 30 |
| 4.1. Application of learning to future | 5 | 6 | 5 | 14 | 30 |
| 1.2. Living w/ppl key to change in perspective | 18 | 4 | | | 22 |
| 4.2. Increased sense of global responsibility | 1 | 5 | 4 | 12 | 22 |

In our analysis of the students' statements, we intended to look both for what they were learning that we had expected (the SLOs) and what they reported learning that we may not have expected. While it was not a mystery that SST was an experience that changes one's identity, so far in our assessments we have not been able to establish *what about it* changes one's identity. We are a great deal more confident about asserting that the themes we reference above are generalizable.

Theme 1

We have so far focused on looking at the portfolios of students who have completed the minimum requirements of uploading three journal entries and writing at least one reflective statement (150 words or so) in response to our prompt. In that context, we observe our main finding across all units and in at least one of the four reflective statements of almost every student's Eportfolio. This suggests to us that in general, students experience SST as a "transformative moment" in their Goshen education.

Evidence for this finding:

A student who went to Peru reported the following in the section on outcomes associated with personal and social "Responsibilities":

"Whether I was helping pick coffee on their farm, fishing for dinner or having a deep discussion about cultural differences and worldviews, it was an experience that has fundamentally changed who I am."

A student who went to Nicaragua reported the following in the section on outcomes associated with personal and social "Responsibilities":

"As I stepped back into the United States, I didn't see things the same way I had before. Nicaragua had changed the way I see the world and given me awareness of aspects of American culture that I did not [have]. I am aware of the food I eat and how many actions have direct (even if distant) consequences in our newly globalized world."

A student who went to Egypt reported the following in the section on outcomes associated with personal and social "Responsibilities":

"Three months in Egypt strengthened awareness of my responsibilities in the world that had already been brewing. I grew in awareness of environmental issues; the need for global communications on a personal level; the involvement that religion plays in the practical day-to-

day life of people around the world and how it affects things on a political scale; my desire to remain active in intercultural and interreligious dialogue wherever I work in the world.”

Another student who went to Egypt reported the following in the section on “Knowledge” outcomes:

“Learning to live a step beyond just a tourist during SST caused me to look more intently at my identity. As a Caucasian, American, woman and Christian I was in a uniquely different culture. Stereotypes I had about Islam, about Egypt, about the Middle East were challenged as I learned about the complexity of Egyptian history and modern culture. My essays on art, the history of Egypt, and environmental issues today give just a glimpse into the amount of new information I faced and how I continue to digest what I experienced.”

Themes 2, 3, and 4

The character of that transformation appears also to be captured in themes 2, 3 and 4. As we established in previous reports for Coalition meetings, students report that they learned more from observing and interacting with the people of Nicaragua, Peru, Tanzania, China or Egypt than they did from the academic program that formed the context in which they observed and interacted with people. In some cases they even argue that the role the academic program played was less important.

Evidence for these findings:

A student who went to Egypt reported this in the section on “knowledge” outcomes:

“Thus, through observation, research and conversations, I gained a deeper knowledge of the history and celebration of [Christmas] within a distinctive Egyptian setting, both among Orthodox and Evangelical Christians and surprisingly, even among Muslims.”

A student who went to Tanzania reported this in the section on “responsibilities” outcomes:

“I have a better understanding of how the decisions and policies of my government and the dynamics of my economy can potentially harm the global community. I am inspired by my faith in God and in the human capacity to resist oppression and injustice nonviolently and develop creative, collaborative solutions. I observed many examples of this in action while serving among Tanzanian Mennonites and learning about Julius Nyerere's admirable commitment to equality and peace. Julius Nyerere is the founding father of Tanzania. He lead [sic] Tanzania in the nonviolent transition from British trust territory to form an independent state. I am also inspired by the perseverance and faith that friends, co-workers, my host families, and strangers exhibited in Tanzania. They put a human face on statistics. Finally, I am reminded by my time in Tanzania that it is my responsibility to walk humbly in my efforts to bring about positive change in place where suffering and poverty are present.”

A student who went to Peru reported this in the section on “knowledge” outcomes:

The knowledge I gained from SST did not come from the required readings I did there, or the museums I visited. I gained a little insight into the global community. At Goshen we pride ourselves on global awareness and acceptance of other cultures. Until I went on SST I didn't

really know what any of that meant...I thought I did, but I was wrong. I never grasped how privileged I was growing up and living in the U.S. The social systems in Peru have gaping holes that the poor and disadvantaged fall into. These holes are only filled by mission work and friendship.

I have realized that peacemaking in the world definitely does not only apply to war zones. There is injustice and systems of oppression that need to be changed for there to be a healthy global community. In Peru and around the world volunteering is important, but for you to make a difference you need knowledge of the people, system and techniques to really make a difference; otherwise you just throw charity at people and make them feel like lesser individuals.”

Transformative Learning

These excerpts provide strong evidence both of transformative learning and of the notion that the reflective components in the Eportfolios give students the opportunity to “create” that learning. John Dewey wrote that, “...in unfamiliar cases, we cannot tell just what the consequences of observed conditions will be unless we go over past experiences in our mind, unless we reflect upon them and by seeing what is similar in them to those now present, go on to form a judgment of what may be expected in the present situation” (1938, 68). The student reflections in the Eportfolio strongly suggest that they are using the moment of writing to do what Dewey describes here – in essence the Eportfolio is the vehicle by which they are engaging in reflections that connect their past experiences with the present. In this sense they are making meaning from the activity of reflection that unless prompted, they may not ever have the occasion to make. In addition, it is likely that the reflections support them in continuing their experience of transformative learning. At the very least, we would assert that students:

- a) experience learning from observation, description and interaction in similar ways across locations and semesters (Egypt was a Fall unit, Tanzania a Spring unit and Peru a Summer unit).
- b) are able to use the SST portfolio as an opportunity to turn their experience into evidence of learning.

Process of Inquiry

The Eportfolios we examined range from Eportfolios created immediately after their return from SST, to Eportfolios created twelve months after their return. Upon return from the experience, we send students an email asking them to meet us in a computer lab for a couple of hours and complete their Eportfolios. We inform them that they will be required to upload digital files to their Eportfolio and ask that they bring any relevant files they might have. We also inform them that we have scanners available for documents in case they would rather upload a scanned file than having to create a word-processed file. Once in the lab, we explain the study to students, have them sign consent forms, and then begin a brief technical training session. Students copy a template that includes four categories of Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs; Knowledge, Skills, Responsibilities, and Integration), each of which includes the list of SLOs and a prompt about how the experience has helped them progress in their achievement of the outcomes.

They are asked to do four things in order to complete each section of the Eportfolio: a. upload files to one area of the template, b. provide a brief description of the file, c. tag the file with the specific SLOs for which they feel it provides some evidence, and then d. respond to the prompts

in each area linking the files to the categories of the SLOs. The prompt for each category of SLOs is similar, for example in the Skills area the prompt is:

Below you will find the list of Student Learning Outcomes in the "SKILLS" category. Look them over and then use this text box to answer the questions below the list of outcomes.

SKILLS

In our academic and campus life programs, students will grow in their mastery of the following intellectual and practical skills:

- **Communication:** Listening, reading, writing, speaking and interacting effectively
- **Quantitative literacy:** Using basic mathematical concepts and operations required for problem-solving and decision-making
- **Inquiry:** Using visual and information literacy to gather appropriate evidence from multiple data sources
- **Critical and reflective thinking:** Analyzing, interpreting, evaluating and using evidence to make good judgments
- **Problem solving:** Working individually and collaboratively for creative solutions
- **Intercultural competence:** Acquiring language and cross-cultural communication skills to interact effectively with people from diverse communities

Write a short statement explaining how the files you've posted on the right-hand side of the web page represent either a change in your skills or an enhancement to your skills in any of the areas above. The questions below should help guide you:

- In what ways do these documents represent how you have changed as a result of SST?

- In what ways do they represent how you have been strengthened and in what areas of skill?

In essence we asked students to use the framework of the SLOs as their anchor for reflection. This gave us an idea of how they make meaning of their experience vis-à-vis the outcomes we use as organizing principles for our curriculum. The reflective prompts are similar for each section.

While we were able to engage approximately 45 students in this process, only 24 students completed the template in full. From the remaining 20 or so, we gathered various portions of Eportfolios, including artifacts and basic information from students' Mahara profiles. Once all these workshops were complete, we used a database query to extract students' reflective statements and organize them based on the area of SLOs – Knowledge, Skills, Responsibilities, or Integration – to which they were connected. We then identified and coded themes in the statements that noted direct responses to the two reflective prompts – changes or ways they had been strengthened. As in most assessment situations, we assume that when students identify a “change” this represents something they learned from the experience and when they identify some way in which they were “strengthened” it represents a reinforcement of learning they and acquired prior to this experience

The full list of SLOs we use are as follows:

KNOWLEDGE

In our academic and campus life programs, students will develop knowledge of:

- **The Christian Story:** The biblical basis and theological exploration of Christian faith
- **Identity:** Self, personal growth, and one's relationship to multiple communities
- **The Social World:** Values and histories underlying cultures, societies, and religious traditions and the relationships between them
- **The Natural World:** The natural created order, including the earth and its systems
- **The Artistic World:** Forms of human thought, movement, imagination, and innovation
- **Peacemaking:** The factors that create and sustain frameworks for the essential relationships between and among humans, God, and the natural world

SKILLS

In our academic and campus life programs, students will grow in their mastery of the following intellectual and practical skills:

- **Communication:** Listening, reading, writing, speaking and interacting effectively
- **Quantitative literacy:** Using basic mathematical concepts and operations required for problem-solving and decision-making
- **Inquiry:** Using visual and information literacy to gather appropriate evidence from multiple data sources
- **Critical and reflective thinking:** Analyzing, interpreting, evaluating and using evidence to make good judgments
- **Problem solving:** Working individually and collaboratively for creative solutions
- **Intercultural competence:** Acquiring language and cross-cultural communication skills to interact effectively with people from diverse communities

RESPONSIBILITIES

In our academic and campus life programs, students will develop a sense of personal and social responsibility for:

- **Faith in Action:** Reflecting on the relationship between personal faith and life choices that support God's justice, reconciliation, and peace
- **Ethical reasoning:** Living and serving with integrity in a variety of communities
- **Intercultural openness:** Creating partnerships with people across difference to learn from one another and work towards equity
- **Local and global community engagement:** Understanding human systems and knowing how to bring about change peacefully
- **Lifelong learning:** Remaining curious and occupying an inquiry stance in the face of challenges to current understandings of oneself and of the world
- **Living Sustainably:** Working to create restorative relationships with the natural world

INTEGRATIVE LEARNING

Integrative learning is an understanding and disposition that a student builds across the curriculum and co-curriculum, from making connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the

campus. We promote integration of learning across disciplines because we believe the acquisition and application of knowledge is most successful when shaped by various perspectives. An integrative approach highlights these realities and supports students in understanding how to select and apply appropriate techniques and methodologies for solving complex and significant problems.

The value of our research for our Eportfolio practice

Goshen College's vision statement (adopted by the Board of Directors in 2010) directs us to "be recognized as an influential leader in liberal arts education focusing on international, intercultural, interdisciplinary, and integrative teaching and learning that offers every student a life-orienting story embedded in Christ centered core values: global citizenship, compassionate peacemaking, servant leadership and passionate learning." The primary value of this research project for our Eportfolio practice at Goshen is to establish the legitimacy of the Eportfolio as an assessment tool for gathering evidence of learning about the extent to which our curriculum is supporting our vision. So far in our assessment history, we have struggled with collecting data on the kind of transformative learning effort our vision represents. We believe that this research strongly suggests that the Eportfolio will become the standard for assessment of programs across our entire institution, and that they will provide faculty and administrators with a platform for doing research on program effectiveness.

In addition, our work on this research project has required a collaboration of representatives from Academic Affairs, Institutional Research and Information Technology Services. This collaboration has provided a platform for each of these three divisions of the college to understand the challenges the other divisions face in implementing and sustaining Eportfolios across the entire institution. This has been one of the most valuable results of our research project.

The value of your participation in the Coalition for your research and practice

Our participation in the Coalition provided intellectual and logistical resources for our research and practice that would otherwise not have been available. In addition to the counsel and support the directors afforded us through organizing our meetings and check-in phone calls, the opportunity to exchange ideas and strategies with colleagues at other institutions was critical to our exploration of Eportfolios.

We doubt that we would have come as far as we have on our project without the accountability structure of regular meetings and the requirements to produce something in advance of each meeting that we would share with our colleagues. Similarly, without the exchanges we had with our "critical friends," we doubt that we would have explored as many different aspects of the Eportfolios as we have to date. In this report on our main findings we focus mostly on our examination of the short, reflective statements we ask students to complete. But in our discussions with Coalition member teams over the course of these three years, we have been pushed to examine the reflective prompts we use to elicit the short statements, the artifacts students post as evidence of their learning, the meta-data they attach to those artifacts (descriptions and tags), the actual Eportfolio software platform we use (Mahara), and the way we have organized our larger assessment strategies based on the extraction of artifacts from students' Eportfolio archives.

Overall, our work with the Coalition has proved to be well worth the time and financial resources we used to support our participation, and we believe this has been one of the best investments we have made in supporting academic assessment across the institution. We would highly recommend the Coalition to any institution of any type or size that is interested in developing a more scholarly approach to assessment using Eportfolios.

Plans for dissemination and application of findings

We have plans for both internal and external dissemination and application of our findings.

Regarding internal application, we have already used what we've learned in gathering students to complete the Eportfolios for the implementation of Eportfolios in assessing the Goshen Core. Our new Master of Arts in Intercultural Leadership program will also use an Eportfolio assessment when it is launched in June of this year (2013), and as we support other departments in using Mahara, we are beginning to see them transfer paper portfolios for seniors to the Eportfolio format.

Using this report, we plan to disseminate our findings internally to multiple campus offices including our own – Academic Affairs, Institutional Research and Information Technology Services – and the President's Office, the Office of Institutional Advancement, the Admissions Office, and our Communications and Marketing Office. In just under five years, we will celebrate the 50th Anniversary of SST, and we hope to include Eportfolios both in the celebration of the program and also in our on-going efforts to establish an endowment for the program.

Regarding external application and dissemination of our findings, we have already begun to present our work on the Goshen Core Assessment plan. In October, we presented our plan for Core Assessment at the IUPUI Assessment Institute and earlier this month we presented our plan at the AAC&U General Education and Assessment conference. These presentations have also resulted in invitations to consult with various schools including Marylhurst University in Oregon (a relationship that began in November of 2012) and Calvin College in Michigan.

Next questions emerging from your inquiry

The next set of questions we would like to pursue focus on the importance of the artifact meta-data for use in organizing our assessment work. We are most interested in examining the extent to which artifacts tagged with the SLOs provide evidence of whether or not students understand how the SLOs guide our curriculum. In short, the question could be understood as “do the tags they are using reflect what they are learning, and if not, how much should we coach them on tagging?” We hope this basic assessment question will provide insight into how much coaching we should employ with students to support them in tagging artifacts with SLOs that reflect our (faculty) understanding of what students should be achieving as a result of our programs.

References

Dewey, John. *Experience and Education*. New York: Touchstone, 1938 (1977 edition).

Edwards, Thomas, and Colleen Burnham. “The Promise of Eportfolios for Institutional Assessment.” In *Electronic Portfolios 2.0: Emergent Research on Implementation and Impact*,

edited by Darren Cambridge, Barbara Cambridge, and Kathleen Yancey, 87-90. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2009.

Light, Tracy Penny, Bob Sproule, and Katherine Lithgow. "Connecting Contexts and Competencies: Using Eportfolios for Integrative Learning." In *Electronic Portfolios 2.0: Emergent Research on Implementation and Impact*, edited by Darren Cambridge, Barbara Cambridge, and Kathleen Yancey, 69-79. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2009.

Mezirow, Jack. *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.