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# Are We Who We Think We Are?

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## Overview: ePortfolios as a Tool for Curriculum Redesign

This promising practice focuses on the use of ePortfolios for formative assessment in the redesign and development of academic degree programs. In 2011 Northeastern instituted an ePortfolio requirement for students enrolled in the university's Master of Education program. Systematic review of these student ePortfolios as a collection has informed planning for the 2012-13 Masters program redesign.

Outcomes Assessment – [Guiding Questions](#)

This redesign includes the articulation of a vision for program outcomes, competencies, integrated program course map, and shared foundational courses across four concentrations. Program redesign implementation will include ePortfolio requirement revisions to improve outcomes transparency for students and better course-level ePortfolio integration.



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## Setting the Stage

The process described in this promising practice is separate from yet congruent with larger institutional commitments to outcomes assessment and recurring NEASC accreditation. The Masters program redesign sets the stage for outcomes assessment by articulating a vision, competencies, scaffolded course sequence, and through lines for competencies across all courses. ePortfolios inform program re-envisioning by providing a view into students' presentation of self prior to program redesign. They serve as a catalyst for discussion and gap analysis. Faculty examine entire ePortfolios as artifacts of student professional self-identity, and compare that view with their unarticulated assumptions about program purposes.

### Helpful Links

- Expanded Version of this piece, published in 17:4 2014 issue of the *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, [See Article](#)
- [Guiding Questions for Curriculum Redesign](#) (PDF)
- Video presentation of [Are We Who We Think We Are?](#)
- [M.Ed. Program Redesign Document](#) (Mission, Competencies, Map)

## Developmental Story: Inquiry, Reflection & Integration

### Inquiry: Who are our students? What is their self-conceptualization?

Institutions, programs, and class cohorts are cultural entities. They are groups of people who, over time, develop a mythos about their identity and accomplishments, a shared narrative that is

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often unspoken. This includes ingrained beliefs about members: their backgrounds, hopes for the future, understanding of what they have learned, and how they intend to use that learning in the future.

As organizations, how can we make our tacit assumptions visible so that we can reconcile belief and reality, with the goal of charting a new course?

ePortfolios provide a window into student self-perception. Viewed as a whole, an ePortfolios is a construct of identity created by the student. Viewed as a collection, ePortfolios depict a community of learners, making it possible for us to spot patterns that are not readily apparent in enrollment statistics.

In summer 2012 a group of faculty at Northeastern University embarked upon the redesign of their Master of Education degree program. The MA program includes four concentrations (Learning and Instruction, Higher Education Administration, Special Education, and a new concentration in Instructional Design that is under development) and an MAT for the licensure of people entering the field of K12 education.

We held a day-long retreat in August 2012 to kick off the program redesign process. In developing the agenda for the retreat, we decided to begin the day with a review and discussion of student ePortfolios. We anticipated that process would help us base program revisions on patterns of need in student academic performance. We had no idea that the process would challenge our fundamental beliefs about who we are as a program.

An ePortfolio requirement had been in effect for about six months for the MA program and for approximately a year in the MAT. Prior to the retreat the ePortfolio working group leader reviewed all ePortfolios; other faculty were each given a subset of the ePortfolios to review. The guiding prompt for review was open-ended: what do you observe in the ePortfolios?

## **Reflection: We are not who we think we are**

The day before the retreat, a faculty member from the Higher Education Administration concentration expressed concern that she had not been given a representative sample of ePortfolios. Her ePortfolio collection depicted students who were barely out of college and represented very little socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity. This was both surprising and problematic. Northeastern University is an urban school with a long history of commitment to “non-traditional” learners, and the HEA concentration is designed for professionals who have been working in the field of education at least three years. The ePortfolio working group leader assured her that the sample was representative of the student body.

Faculty members voiced additional concerns during the retreat, observations that could not be gleaned from the demographic data typically gathered about students. When writing about goals in their ePortfolios, many students voiced a desire to “break into the business” of higher education, describing a pathway up the ladder of success that revealed serious misunderstandings about the institution of higher education. One faculty member observed that the ePortfolios were “way too personal,” not reflecting a professional sense of self or indicating substantive reflection on how they were developing as professionals in the program. Some faculty attributed this to “Facebook Culture,” but others argued that the program should prepare students to represent themselves as professionals, speaking to their strengths and ambitious — but realistic — aspirations for the future.

Did we need to reconsider program admittance and/or realign the curriculum to the needs of pre-professional students? Were we missing the mark in achieving integrated program learning outcomes? Was there a problem with the ePortfolio requirement implementation? The consensus was that it was a combination of all three, and this informed subsequent reformulation of the program.

## **Integration: Re-envisioning the curriculum**

The summer 2012 retreat entailed the development of a coherent vision for program outcomes; in intervening months the vision was extended to include program-level competencies and a

course map designed to embody and enact those goals. As of January 2013, program redesign is underway and integration is a hallmark of this work. The new program involves many changes, but one example of professional/program integration a foundational course, first in the program, entitled “Education as an Advanced Field of Study.” This course helps Masters-level students reconceptualize themselves as participants in a community of education professionals — replete with commonly-held concerns, expectations for rigor — and engenders the perspective of education as a complex system.

## Next Steps

The process of redesigning and integrating the curriculum also involves embedding ePortfolios throughout the program. Prior to redesign, students could take courses in whatever sequence they wished, and there were very few required courses. Students were only required to upload one artifact from each course into their ePortfolios. Some courses integrated ePortfolios into the learning experience; others simply reminded students of the artifact-per-course requirement.

The redesigned curriculum weaves ePortfolios throughout the program, within the context of a newly formed required course sequence. The goal is to make competencies explicit and transparent, for both teachers and students, and to scaffold student learning through ongoing engagement with ePortfolio development. Students’ journeys will begin with the creation of an ePortfolio in the foundation course, mature through iterative revision throughout the program, and culminate in a Capstone experience during which they transform learning portfolios into a showcase of accomplishments.

The intent is to use ePortfolios generated under the new system as one source of evidence in a process of outcomes assessment and program improvement, an evaluation that we will be equipped to perform in the next 18-20 months. We anticipate that, in comparing pre-redesign ePortfolios with those generated under the new system, we will see the program’s vision reflected in the self-representation of our students. ePortfolios will continue to serve as an outward and visible sign of the alignment between student learning and program aspirations, keeping us honest about the impact of our program and shining a flashlight on areas for improvement.

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