

Content Analysis of Course Syllabi and Assignments for IU ePort Pilot

Project Directors: David J. Sabol, Assistant Professor, Department of English
Campus Address: UC 2112A
Phone: 274-2508
E-mail: dsabol@iupui.edu

Janet DeWester, Lecturer, Dept. of Communication Studies
Campus Address: CA 309
Phone: 274-2615
Fax: 278-1025
E-mail: jdeweste@iupui.edu

Senior Personnel:

Howard R. Mzumara, Director of Testing Center
Campus Address: UN 003S
Phone: 278-2214
Fax: 274-3400
E-mail: hmzumara@iupui.edu

Susan Kahn, Director, Office of Institutional Effectiveness
Campus Address: AO 139
Phone: 2748-3604
Fax: 274-4651
E-mail: skahn@iupui.edu

Project Title: Content Analysis of Course Syllabi and Assignments for IU ePort Pilot

Project Dates: Spring Semester, 2005 through Fall Semester, 2005

Project Checklist:

- Statement of support from the department chair, by e-mail to esener@iupui.edu
(See attached letter of support from Associate Vice Chancellor Nancy Chism, Office for Professional Development, IUPUI)
- Simple budget (see page 5)
- IRB approval attachment
(This test analysis project does not involve human subjects; uses pre-existing course syllabi and assignments that are part of Sharon Hamilton's IRB Study No. EX03010-02B -- ePortfolio Pilot)

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Abstract

In Fall 2004, IUPUI implemented a pilot project designed to use student electronic portfolios (or ePortfolios) in selected Thematic Learning Communities (TLCs) and introductory courses, where ePortfolios have been integrated with instruction and assessment of student learning outcomes. Portfolios, when well-designed, deepen learning and empower students, providing them with tangible evidence of their learning and illuminating a pathway toward educational and career goals. As assessment tools, they also have advantages over other methods, such as surveys and standardized tests. Using content analysis procedures, the proposed study will assist faculty participating in the ePort pilot to evaluate the appropriateness and alignment of their course syllabi and assignments with the goal of using ePortfolios to enhance teaching and learning at IUPUI.

Project Background

There has been strong interest among both top-level administrative officers and faculty members in encouraging faculty to incorporate the IU student ePortfolio system in planning undergraduate courses at IUPUI. Ideas have been shared and perspectives debated at various campus-wide meetings, but attention has yet to be given to systematic assessment of what is being done by faculty participating in the IU ePort Pilot. In an effort to understand more specifically how individual instructors are addressing the integration of ePortfolios into the classroom, the ePort Core Committee has commissioned the collection and analysis of course syllabi and assignments from ePort pilot faculty. The proposed analysis of course syllabi and assignments will be part of the ongoing evaluation of the ePort pilot.

As instructors work to design classroom environments that promote active learning, we must also consider developing appropriate tools for evaluating students' work. Performances being assessed should be important in the real world and highly contextualized. As direct measures associated with authentic or performance assessment, ePortfolios provide a valuable method of capturing the breadth and depth of student learning in multimedia learning environments (Prestidge & Williams-Glaser, 2000). Standardized tests or indirect measures of student learning outcomes often lack fidelity between task and criterion or real-life application and/or distort instruction if faculty "teach to the test." In contrast, ePortfolios based on authentic tasks and/or classroom projects offer a more promising approach to assessing student accomplishments in student-centered learning environments. Portfolios would seem to be an effective way to integrate assessment with instructional goals, since authentic assessments flow directly from instruction (Shavelson, 1992).

Unfortunately, empirical evidence to document the efficacy and impact of ePortfolios is sparse to date. For instance, Zeicher and Wray (2001) noted that there are very few systematic studies that address the nature and consequences of portfolios for assessment or development purposes. Consequently, this project has practical significance in that it will address the need to obtain empirical evidence of the efficacy and impact of student ePortfolios as pedagogical or assessment tools at IUPUI. In addition, we hope that this project will yield data that are helpful in producing well-designed portfolios that represent important, contextualized learning that requires higher-order thinking and communication skills.

Purpose of Project

This project is aimed at providing empirical evidence that demonstrates the extent of the alignment between faculty-developed course syllabi or assignments and student outcomes as

reflected in the objectives of the ePort pilot project. In addition, we will document a process that helps faculty to determine the appropriateness of ePort-embedded assessment tasks that are assigned to students participating in the ePort pilot project.

Intended Outcomes of the Project

This content analysis project will seek to achieve the following intended outcomes:

1. Identify and describe pedagogical approaches, intentions, focuses, or common themes that faculty included in their course syllabi and assignments and that will allow us to make inferences about the appropriateness of student ePortfolios as tools for enhancing teaching and learning at IUPUI. The content validity evidence obtained from this project could be corroborated with other methods of data collection, such as faculty interviews or reflections, student focus groups, and surveys.
2. Determine which of the six IUPUI Principles of Undergraduate Learning are explicitly mentioned in the course syllabi and assignments.
3. Determine the extent of the alignment among course objectives, assignments, and PUL criteria.
4. Examine trends and patterns in course syllabi and assignments that would then allow us to assess the appropriateness of course objectives and assignments in relation to the overall goals and objectives of the IU ePortfolio Pilot.

Assessment Methods Used in the Project

Content analysis approach (also known as qualitative thematic analysis of documents) will be used to examine course syllabi and assignments. A content analysis rubric that includes a listing of course objectives and the six PULs will be developed by a team that includes ePort

pilot faculty, an assessment specialist, and a member of the ePort Core Committee. The reviewers will rate each course syllabus and assignment in terms of the degree to which each of the criteria within the content analysis rubric is “strongly evident,” “moderately evident,” or “not at all evident.”

Data Analysis

Basic content analysis procedures will be used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within the course syllabi and assignment tasks. Using a content analysis rubric, the review team described above will quantify and analyze the presence, meanings, and relationships of course objectives to the PULs. In addition to categorizing syllabus content, we will provide frequency counts for each category. A key goal of the data analysis will be to determine to what extent the content of the course syllabi and assignments are aligned with the PULs and overall goals of the ePort Pilot. And where possible, we will assess and report **intercoder reliability**. If possible, qualitative research software (e.g., NVivo) will be used to facilitate data analysis. For instance, NVivo will allow researchers to create a project and organize the data sets and ideas in a way that facilitates coding, annotating, and editing of content. The results of coding will be reported both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Evaluation and Dissemination of the Project Results

The project staff will collaborate with members of the ePort Core Committee and ePort Assessment Team in conducting evaluation activities and will disseminate the project results during Fall Semester, 2005. One key goal will be to disseminate the results to members of PRAC and the larger IUPUI community. Further dissemination of project results will be accomplished through the Web site for the IU ePort Project, a presentation at the Moore

Symposium, and Town Hall meetings. Dissemination to the wider academic community will be accomplished through scholarly presentations at conferences or through formal publications.

Intended Use of Findings for Program Improvement

The ePort Core and pilot faculty members believe that this study will provide valuable baseline data to supplement the ongoing work of the ePort Assessment Team. Data from this study will also be made available to IUPUI departments and schools for possible use in program improvement and/or in assisting faculty to design course syllabi and assignments that students and faculty would find most useful in developing learning or assessment portfolios.

Budget

Project Personnel	Itemized Cost	Total Cost
Stipend for 5 Instructors (document reviewers)	\$500 per faculty member	\$2, 500

Under the supervision of the ePort assessment team, a group of 5 faculty members at IUPUI will be recruited and hired to serve as independent document reviewers. The full composition of the independent panel will include 5 instructors, at least one assessment expert, and a core member of the IU ePort Project. The independent panel will conduct a basic content analysis of the course syllabi and assignments (based on a content rubric that will be developed for this project). The ePort Assessment Team will collaborate with the independent panel of reviewers in assessing and reporting **intercoder reliability** and **validity evidence** from this content analysis project.

Appendix A

COPY of Statement of Support from Associate Vice Chancellor Nancy Chism (OPD)

February 10, 2005

Dear Members of the PRAC Grants Review Committee:

This letter is in support of the proposal entitled, “Content Analysis of Course Syllabi and Assignments for the IU ePort Pilot.” The goal of the project is to raise awareness of the ways in which selected courses address the IUPUI Principles of Undergraduate Learning (PULs), as evidenced by the description of the course in the syllabus and the learning tasks set by the assignments. Such awareness is foundational to documenting the process by which we hope to facilitate our students’ accomplishment of these institutional learning goals.

Mapping the fit of goals and instructional actions is essential to the improvement of student learning toward those goals. Although faculty do this routinely as they design their courses, we do not know to what extent their goals are consistent with our institutional articulation of student learning goals in the PULs, and additionally, whether the learning activities they assign are also aligned. This study will provide a descriptive portrait of the present state of practice in systematic fashion, using peer researchers to gather the data.

The benefits of the project are several: first, the descriptive portrait that emerges will help IUPUI to assess the extent to which our courses are supporting the individual PULs; second, when the portrait is shared with faculty and academic units, actions can be taken to remedy any imbalances that are found; third, by encountering others’ analysis of the fit of their courses to the PULs, faculty will be stimulated to reflect on course changes that they might make to ensure closer alignment; and fourth, better alignment of courses and assignments with the PULs will increase the capacity for the ePort to be used more productively in capturing student accomplishment and furthering their learning. Results from the project also may be used as a baseline for further research in this area.

The project directors, Professors Sabol and DeWester, have a record of commitment and experience to undergraduate education and to the PULs and ePort initiative. By engaging their colleagues as reviewers, in conjunction with skilled help from Dr. Howard Mzumara of the Office of Testing, they enhance the probability that the project will be executed well and the results meaningful.

I hope that you will be able to support this worthy project.

Sincerely,

Nancy Chism
Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs