Work and Professional Studies: A Work-based Curriculum for Returning Adult Students

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Building a work-based curriculum

Interdisciplinary programs such as Old Dominion University's (ODU) Bachelor of Science in Work and Professional Studies are valuable to students, to the university and to the wider community. The program gives students and faculty opportunities to focus their attention on specific issues that affect people everyday. It also allow faculty to interact across the borders that separate them into their academic departments. This experience is stimulating and beneficial for almost all faculties. They also contribute to the wider community by helping to develop creative, flexible and thoughtful student / citizens to help communities improve their quality of life.

The Work and Professional Studies (WPS) degree is an integral and key constituent of programming at the off-campus higher education centers of ODU. Creatively designed with a challenging curriculum, blend and synthesis of technology, and flexibility, this degree truly demonstrates ODU's College of Arts and Letters' commitment to developing programming to further enable returning adult students and diversity.

WPS is particularly attractive in a region where workforce development initiatives and strategies are increasingly critical for economic sustainability, growth, and development. The convergence of training, lifelong learning, and academic endeavors are critical to both individuals and businesses in the changing market. Since the higher education centers have a broad mandate to extend the resources and image of the University by providing quality, innovative credit and non-credit programs that meet the ever changing and life-long learning demands of individuals and organizations in the Commonwealth of Virginia, the WPS program is an emergent link to serve both individual students and corporate training initiatives

The premise behind the interdisciplinary core courses (IDS) was to enable students to gain a greater appreciation for the degree program upon which they were embarking if they could learn the value and processes of interdisciplinary work by focusing on a specific problem or theme. At the end of her book exploring interdisciplinarity, Julie Thompson Klein (1990, p.196) summarizes her discussion with words reflective of our approach. She writes:

> Cutting across all these theories **[of interdisciplinarity]** is one recurring idea. Interdisciplinarity is a means of solving problems and answering questions that cannot be

satisfactorily addressed using single methods or approaches.

The topic of work and labor is something that occupies us for a greater part of our lives. Faculty from different disciplines often came to classes and engaged in discussions about how they could employ concepts from their disciplines to analyze a film about work, such as Charlie Chaplain's MODERN TIMES.

Seeing how such disciplines as psychology, sociology, political science, economics, art, literature, philosophy explore issues related to work and learning and what these different disciplines have to contribute to our understanding of work was a fascinating experience in itself. In addition, learning about the intersection of these disciplines would assist students in developing their critical thinking skills, class projects, and eventually, their capstone project of the electronic presentation portfolio since during the interdisciplinary core courses, students focus on work related to their individual interests or experiences.

In developing the WPS program, many discussions occurred with the Director of Experiential Learning about the course and its focus on work. By providing a vehicle to integrate work experience and academic study this degree program permits students to learn of the myriad of forces that shape the nature and experience of work. Gaining such knowledge would assist students in navigating their work experiences in a world where the nature, opportunities and meaning of work seem to change by the day.

In addition, the program places value on the work that people do every day. With all of the media attention given to the stock market and investments, this degree program addresses the value of the contributions of people who produce the goods and services that investments produce. It assists them in developing skills and perspectives that enhance their contributions to their workplaces. It also recognizes the meaning work contributes to their individual lives. Fortunately, faculty, associate deans and deans from various colleges involved were very supportive helping us find ways to integrate this degree program into our course offerings.

The curriculum begins with an introductory course Introduction to Interdisciplinary Theory and Concepts (IDS 300W). The faculty use the experience of work to introduce students to the idea of interdisciplinary learning; John Gardner's writing on excellence and ethics, Robert Reich's theories about success in the workplace and private and public choices, Ellen Galinsky's interviews with parents and children about work and family issues, and Studs Terkel's interviews of workers in Chicago in the 70s, provide the students with a rich overview of the complex world of work, one to which they can closely relate their own lives.

In the second core course, Interdisciplinary Seminar (IDS 487), students collect and select academic and workplace documents to begin work on their electronic presentation portfolios, the focus of their capstone course, IDS 497. Students must

analyze and integrate their learning in their course work and in the workplace to demonstrate the skills and knowledge they have gained in an interdisciplinary approach to the study of work. Activities build on those initiated in IDS 300W, including the refinement of, and reflection on, their professional resumes; external interviews of mentors/models/colleagues in their field of interest or practicing field; and the beginning description of their three skills.

The third core course, Interdisciplinary Capstone Project (IDS 497) is the culminating course in which the students continue to build their electronic presentation portfolio. They must choose from their "archives" the workplace and academic examples that most effectively highlight the three skill areas. They also put together an interdisciplinary essay that acts as a "cover letter" in describing the focus of their interdisciplinary degree and the benefits of interdisciplinary study in the workplace. One of the challenges WPS students face is to how best describe what their degree means. The essay gives them the opportunity not only to introduce their electronic presentation portfolio, but also to articulate the integration of their workplace skills and knowledge with their academic program, as well as the strengths of an interdisciplinary approach in the workplace. When they finish the degree program, they leave with their completed electronic presentation portfolio, a living, breathing document that they can continue to develop and make use of in the workplace.

The students have curricular choices across a range of disciplines, under the areas of "understandings" and "applications." The courses in "understanding work and labor" provide students with a big picture look at the workplace from disciplines such as history, management, philosophy and sociology. The applications courses provide students with the opportunity to continue to develop their skills and knowledge in areas such as technical writing, management, communication and training. Students are encouraged to focus on three "skills," for example, communication, management and professional writing. This focus fosters the individual's building a curriculum beneficial to his or her educational and career goals.

The program takes advantage of existing courses within the colleges of Old Dominion University, and has taken the initiative to create new course work across disciplines. Courses recently created for the curriculum include Philosophy of Work and Sociology of Work, Family and Children. Additional courses to be developed take an interdisciplinary approach to topic areas such as career planning across the adult lifespan; innovation and collaboration; crime in the workplace; and organizational cultures.

Electronic presentation portfolios

An electronic presentation portfolio (eportfolio) showcasing academic learning and workplace skills is a vibrant component of the Work and Professional Studies Program. Students collect, select and reflect on their learning within and outside of the college classroom and integrate this into a presentation portfolio that they may use in the

workplace. This section of the paper discusses the development of the eportfolio system at Old Dominion University in terms of: (1) trends toward using electronic presentation portfolios in higher education, (2) integration within the Work and Professional Studies curriculum, (3) selection and development of technology, and (4) examples of student work, including students transitioning from the military to the civilian workplace, re-entering the workplace and changing fields.

1. Trends toward Using Electronic Presentation Portfolios in Higher Education
The announcement of electronic portfolios' arrival as the next wave in higher education can be traced to the 2001 publication by AAHE of *Electronic Portfolios: Emerging Practices in Student, Faculty, and Institutional Learning*. This collection provides:

1. an implicit overview of portfolio theory,
2. an in-depth discussion of student, faculty, institutional portfolios, and
3. an acknowledgment of the difficulties and problems associated with repurposing print portfolios into electronic archives.

However, the groundwork for this change in learning assessment systems can be found a variety of electronic portfolio projects that predate *Electronic Portfolios'* publication. Notable systems include both static and dynamic site technologies. Static site technologies produce fixed html pages, while dynamic site technologies use xml in combination with a database to produce flexible modes of viewing student portfolios (distinction between static and dynamic made by Trent Batson in his syllabus article). Examples of static electronic portfolios include:

- Kalamazoo College, where students use NS Composer to create their eportfolios
- Rensselaer, where a system of portfolios was piloted courses through Writing Center; RPI is currently working on a dynamic system using XML
- Clemson, where they are using "grow-it-slow," approach and allowing students and faculty to develop prototypes using a variety of html editors and other multimedia composing tools.

Dynamic Electronic Portfolio systems include:

- Alverno University**,** where they use SQL and ASP to run a database driven system off Windows NT machines.
- University of Texas at Austin, where the Learning Record Online uses an open-source combo – Linux, Apache, MySQL, and Perl. Although the system is built with open-source products, the completed LRO is not available for download via the web.
- Iowa State University, where they are developing JavaServer Pages
- Open Source Portfolio Initiative developed by University of Minnesota at Duluth, University of Delaware, and rsmart.com.

The Work and Professional Studies program at Old Dominion University is working with OSP and refining the software to meet the needs of returning adult students; one of our

goals is to push the development of electronic portfolio technology into a phase of application that cuts across the academic/workplace divide.

2. Eportfolios Integrated into the Curriculum
When we began to develop the electronic portfolio system, we did not immediately turn to a particular technology solution. Rather we began by asking: How can we integrate this tool into the existing curriculum in a way that will benefit the users? We used user-center design to inform the development of this system (sources on UCD). Some of our basic principles were drawn from research on writing portfolios. The techniques of collection, selection, and reflection informed the development of our system, and we saw ways in which these principles could be linked to particular courses:

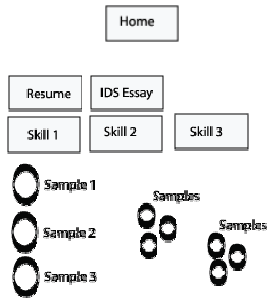
➲ **Collection**
begins in IDS 287/300W, continues in your other courses and at work.

➲ **Selection**
begins the semester following IDS 287/300W using Blackboard discussion lists.

➲ **Reflection**
begins in IDS 487, and continues in IDS 497. Reflection builds on materials already collected.

3. Selection and Development of Technology
As we were integrating the electronic portfolios within the Work and Professional Studies curriculum, we were also exploring the existing technologies that we would be able to adapt for our program. We sketched out the following Organizational Structure for Presentation Portfolios:

- **6 html files**
  Home
  Resume (pfd?)
  IDS Essay
  Skill 1
  Skill 2
  Skill 3



- **9 files in a variety of formats (mostly pdf, but could be ppt)**
  S1: Sample 1, Sample 2, Sample 3
  S2: Sample 1, Sample 2, Sample 3
  S3: Sample 1, Sample 2, Sample 3

- **1 or 2 jpegs**

1 jpeg (but resized for thumbnail) or 2 jpegs (one larger one smaller)

We also identified a series of Information Technology questions and needs, which included:

Needs: Apache Linux server; high speed internet connection
admin account on the server
install mySQL (http://www.mysql.com/)

Questions: What authentication scheme do ODU students use, could we tie into it? Does it make any sense to try to tie into the LAN authentication scheme when most students in WPS are DE students? (Purpose: If we can do so, they would not have to create another username and password). What about the Blackboard authentication scheme? Isn't it the same?

We also planned an interdisciplinary design process that included team members from Work and Professional Studies, English, Computer Science and the University's IT staff.

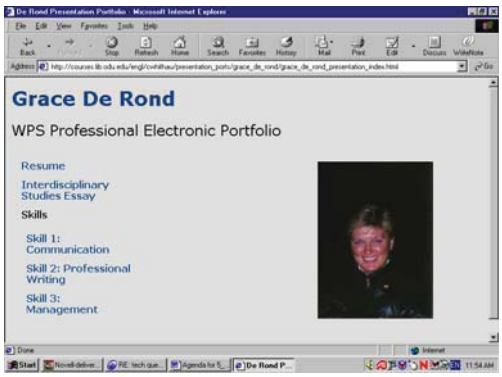
Balance between extracting code/materials from OSPI and development of our own material for each of the following tasks:

1) *Create a database;*
   OCCS will install MySQL or Oracle on an Apache Linux server for database creation.
2) *Design an interface to upload files and pictures into the database;*
   Design the interface for task 2 using either: HTML/ASP, Java Servlets or Perl. Forms for Uploading (use UltraDev and Dreamweaver to develop html/ASP pages)
3) *Arrange for output from the database to work with existing eportfolio pages.*
   Integrate database and/or ospi material with existing presentation portfolio design.

Finally, we had to plan to distribute the "help desk" support functions among faculty, graduate and undergraduate students as the software went into its production and pilot phases.

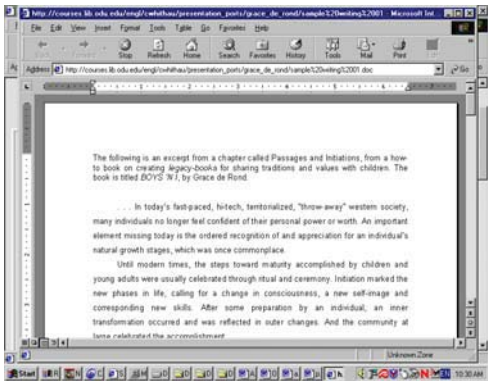
4. Current WPS Eportfolios

Home page



Skills page

Text page



Assessing experiential learning

Learning takes place in many settings and at many times during our lives. Old Dominion University offers a program, Experiential Learning, for assessing college-level knowledge gained through work, life experience and self-study. Students may initiate assessment of prior learning through a variety of assessment tools, including departmental examinations, portfolios, external examinations, performance assessment, or documented training programs, as determined by academic departments. The program, Experiential Learning, facilitates the assessment of such learning. A student may earn a maximum of 60 semester hours at the undergraduate level through experiential learning credit. At the graduate level, students may also use experiential learning options for 6 semester hours. All students considering experiential learning options are strongly encouraged to work with their academic advisors in considering appropriate possibilities.

The students in the Work and Professional Studies Degree Program range in age from mid-20s to late 50s. They work in health care, information technology, human

resources, training development and marketing; they may be in the military or transitioning out. Competent individuals in the workplace, these students are strongly motivated to complete their degrees, and an interdisciplinary degree focused on the study of the experience of work intrigues them. Working with an advisor at the beginning of their program, the students determine the areas in which there may be experiential learning options and those which will provide new learning. This early focus on prior learning in their degree planning helps them to make wise choices about courses to take and the three skill areas to develop in their curriculum, and in turn, invigorates the e-portfolio process. Students may also be lacking general education requirements; the degree program advisors encourage them to explore external examination options, such as DANTES and CLEP as well as departmental examinations.

The students' experiential learning process acts as a bridge in the Work and Professional Studies program, joining what they bring with them from the workplace to their learning experiences in the classroom. Through their participation in training evaluation, departmental exam, and/or portfolio, students are analyzing and reflecting on their prior experiences, explicitly demonstrating the relationship of their skills and knowledge to their curriculum. An advantage for students in this interdisciplinary degree program is that they may come into the program with proficiencies in areas such as health care management, public relations and technical writing; the structure of the curriculum encourages their implementation of experiential learning options across disciplines as possible academic credit in their concentration area. One student's comments on the interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum, the focus on the experience of work and the experiential learning "bridge:"

> "WPS allows you to interpret your prior formal and informal education into a degree granting plan. The student is not just collating past academic studies and squeezing them into a list of program requirements, but they are building on what they have. A student can choose to use some or all of his experiences in shaping focused areas of study " (student interview, July 25, 2003).

A specific example to highlight this bridge experience is with Grace de Rond. An art studio major at ODU in the 80s, Grace returned to ODU at the age of 52 as a "distance learning" student. Bringing in rich, deep and broad experiences in the areas of writing, communication and management, she was an excellent candidate for assessment of prior learning. As an accomplished writer, Grace found the experiential learning portfolio to be a good choice for documenting her expertise and earning academic credit in the areas of interpersonal communications in organizations, feature story writing and management writing. The process of reflecting upon and analyzing 30 years of varied experiences as a special education teacher, a manager of a non-profit organization, and a freelance writer enabled her to clearly identify her skill areas and the new areas of learning she wanted to explore. In her experiential learning portfolios, she considered her work environments and how they provided feedback, support and opportunities for

the development of her proficiencies. She explicitly identified and described her levels of proficiency across disciplines. This process of naming, reflecting and analyzing fostered a greater understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of her learning in the workplace, as well as the benefits to an interdisciplinary approach not only in an academic setting, but also in problem solving and collaboration in work-based projects. The experiential learning approach from the outset of her degree plan created a framework from which to identity existing skill areas and specific learning goals and to thoughtfully design her curriculum and electronic presentation portfolio.

Serving the distant student

The distant student often feels disconnected from the "mainstream" of the campus environment and the perceptions of the academic experience. Therefore, the bridge to serving the distant student is to create an academic community starting from the orientation of logistics, administrative, advising, to the academic/learning experience and beyond. The Work and Professional Studies program makes use of a variety of technologies for advising, assessment of experiential learning, and the learning activities. Interaction among students in the program, with the advisors and faculty is simply essential for a successful student experience. It integrates the high-touch with the high-tech flair.

Student services and advising includes the parameters of administrative logistics, program orientation, center support, library services, computer account access, and registration. From the student's initial inquiry, it is communicated that technology will be a large component of the experience. Currently, the WPS program is offered on a site-based model and structure, but the program's delivery is via a 2-way video conferencing (H.320) system. Students identify a "campus" location to serve their local administrative and general student service needs. The off-campus higher education centers then serve as a connector to the main campus departments. Technologies such as telephone conferencing, e-mail, and two-way videoconferences are the vehicles used to individually advise the student regarding curricular, experiential learning, and academic planning.

In addition, the WPS web site is crucial as a communication and information tool to both current and potential students. Updated schedules, curriculum sheets, events, program details and news highlights are featured on the site. The diverse, dynamic realm of the student demographics drives the need to continuously develop communication and "program community" strategies for the administrative and student services aspects. The community evolves and the students feel connected to the program, to the faculty, to the other students, to the graduates. With returning adult student populations, retention to a program is not solely based on the academic/classroom experiences. If there are frustrating administrative procedures and logistics, the student may simply choose another option. Therefore, creating a "program community" that bridges the multitude of experiences to support the adult, distant learner is beneficial. Future

enhancements to the WPS web site include discussion board capabilities, synchronous chat sessions with advisors, program alumni, and a self-subscribe program newsletter.

Since the WPS is delivered to the higher education centers using a 2-way video conferencing system, dedicated time is scheduled each semester for the course offerings. This brings reality and commitment from the administration for the development of a long-range course schedule. The distant student is then able to plan in advance with the program advisor a path to graduation. It also assists the student when life's challenges arise and he/she has to alter the plan. The long-range schedule, the consistent communication from the program administrator and advisor, coupled with the collegial support of classmates promotes the student's success.

In addition to the 2-way video conferencing environment, the WPS program adopted Blackboard (Bb) as the course management tool. Full-time and adjunct faculties embrace the use of various technologies, including Bb as integral components of the WPS program. The faculty member must be comfortable with the technology, receive appropriate training in order to transition "traditional" course materials to a technology delivered environment, and have insights to the student population and characteristics. The time and training invested in the faculty support is a vital component to serving the distant student.

Bb enables a number of features that supports the creation of the classroom community. For example, students can use discussion boards and synchronous chat rooms to communicate regarding course assignments, peer feedback of assignments, and to continue debate/discussion for a synchronous chat session. Students are geographically dispersed, but the Bb environment creates a community of learners that over a semester become intimate and collegial. The faculty member then has the power to manipulate or guide this community. For example, he/she can start a discussion during the class session, post a follow-up discussion thread and requiring students to react and respond to one another prior to the next class session. This communication is captured and can be referenced later during the semester.

The foundation to this "program community" starts with the IDS core courses because of the use of Bb as a course management tool. Students review, read, and evaluates each other's work such as resumes, short papers, e-portfolios, and presentations. Through the use of the discussion board, the students provide direct, constructive feedback to one another, making connections to each other, find similarities, gain strength, persist and help each persist – because the issues of work, family and self are not around the edges of the course work, but the focus of the course work. What is being developed is a community of learners, with a range of experiences and expertise, reflecting on self and others' and providing each other with feedback. This is stressed strongly through the organization of the course work and the facilitative nature of the courses. The orientation of the adjunct faculty includes the concepts of the community of learners – themselves, their students with each other, and faculty with students.

Additionally, faculty teaching the IDS core courses often invites guest lecturers from across the main campus community to participate in class course work. This includes participants from the library and writing center. For example, the social services librarian typically makes a presentation to the IDS 300w class regarding academic research. This includes information on how to access databases; journals, publications and how to approach a research project form an interdisciplinary perspective. This strengthens the student's experience because he/she has a direct contact to the library services and therefore, this provides support to the faculty member.

This work-based program grows because of direct feedback from the graduates. Graduates from the program serve as great mentors to new students and present as "guest" lecturers in the IDS 497 seminar. This maintains the graduate's connection to the program, to the university, and keeps the department linked to the student's success. The e-portfolio process is key to this connection and relationship. Each group of students in the IDS 497 seminar is asked to assess the process for eportfolio and to make suggestions along the way about their experience with the project. The program's leadership also follows the student "back" into the workplace after graduation to see how they use this eportfolio. Through interviews, surveys and electronic communication, feedback is gained regarding how they used it, how they changed it, what they would have done differently, and future plans for it.