

# Bridging the Academic-Real World Gap with Service Learning & Writing-Intensive Courses

With Kathleen Borbee

**SUNY Monroe Community College**

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Imagine a young engineering graduate eager to embark on a career of innovation and opportunities. This engineer is equipped with a freshly minted degree and a wealth of theoretical knowledge, ready to conquer the professional world. However, as soon as they start their first job requiring experience and practicality, they are confronted with a daunting realization -- the gap between what they learned in the classroom and what they face in their everyday tasks is vast.

This scenario is not unique to only engineers. It's a challenge many graduates encounter as they transition from classroom academics to the realities of the real world. Fortunately, the world acknowledges this challenge and robust educational approaches are now being implemented to help bridge this gap, equip students with practical skills, and make their transition into the professional realm smoother.

In our Digication Scholars Conversations podcast, we had the privilege of talking to Kathleen Borbee, a professor of Business Administration at SUNY Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York. With over 30 years of experience at IBM and 14 years in academia, Kathleen brings a wealth of real-world knowledge into the classroom. Our conversation highlighted Kathleen's experiences, journeying from classroom to career, and how service learning and writing-intensive courses are pivotal in narrowing the chasm between academic knowledge and real-world application.

## Bridging Academic Gap With Service Learning

With growing competition in all sectors, we agree that teaching should not be limited to what can be taught and learned in traditional classrooms. Kathleen's philosophy is built on bringing in real-world experiences. She wants her students to apply their knowledge and skills to real-world scenarios, working for actual companies instead of hypothetical projects. Kathleen's beliefs led her to champion service learning, where students engage in projects that benefit their community while applying their academic learning.

Incorporating service learning into her courses allowed Kathleen's students to gain valuable hands-on experience. They worked on projects for real clients, presenting their solutions to clients in live settings. This approach solidified their understanding of course content and gave them practical skills and a sense of accomplishment.

*"We are all continuous students; we'll learn forever."*

**Kathleen Borbee**

Professor of Business Administration, SUNY Monroe Community College

## Embracing ePortfolios: A Modern Approach

ePortfolios provide a platform for students to showcase their academic and professional achievements, creating a dynamic representation of their skills and accomplishments. With this in mind, Kathleen's commitment to enhancing students' real-world readiness led her to embrace ePortfolios.

She recounted a student's story who initially viewed ePortfolios as busy work. However, after completing her projects and building her ePortfolio, she realized its value during a job interview. Her ePortfolio showcased her work, skills, and professionalism, leaving a lasting impression on her potential employer.

Recognizing the significance of effective communication in the real world, Kathleen also introduced writing-intensive components into her courses. She believed that writing is a critical skill, irrespective of the field of study. Kathleen encouraged her students to write clearly and professionally, emphasizing that written communication reflects their professionalism and competence. While some students initially resisted the idea of writing-intensive courses, they soon realized its value.

Kathleen emphasizes that the benefits of service learning, writing-intensive courses, and ePortfolios extend beyond the business realm. These high-impact practices apply to all fields, from STEM to the arts, and equip students with valuable skills that make them attractive to employers and vital additions to any organization.

Her son's experience in the construction industry exemplifies this very benefit. The sector values out-of-the-box thinking and problem-solving skills, precisely the qualities an ePortfolio can showcase effectively. Kathleen believes that ePortfolios have the potential to revolutionize how employers evaluate candidates.

Kathleen is part of the High-Impact Practices (HIPS) committee at SUNY Monroe Community College (MCC). This committee focuses on implementing practices that provide students with transformative learning experiences. Service learning, writing-intensive courses, and ePortfolios are a few HIPS that enhance students' academic and real-world skills.

The HIPS committee at MCC aims to create a cohesive learning environment where faculty from various disciplines can share best practices and help students develop and strengthen the skills necessary for success in today's ever-changing world.

## Embracing the New

As Kathleen reflects on her journey in implementing ePortfolios and service learning, she acknowledges the initial challenges of introducing these innovative approaches to her students.

Yet, she wasn't surprised by the varying reactions -- some students struggled, while others embraced the concept wholeheartedly. What surprised her was the creativity that emerged.

In her 200-level courses, Kathleen provided specific guidelines for ePortfolio creation but encouraged students to add their personal touch. The results astounded her. Students crafted incredibly creative portfolios, some even contemplating using them for their businesses. This newfound enthusiasm illuminated the power of ePortfolios as a tool for self-expression and showcasing one's abilities.

One student's request left Kathleen breathless. Instead of creating a personal ePortfolio, they proposed building one for an on-campus organization. This groundbreaking idea sparked a revelation -- every campus organization could benefit from having its ePortfolio. The absence of rigid guidelines led to remarkable creativity and new possibilities.

Kathleen's approach encourages students to take ownership of their portfolios and integrate them seamlessly into their academic and professional journeys. By removing the perceived constraints, students find newfound motivation to excel.

Our host also highlighted the importance of fun in education - which is often overlooked in traditional academic settings. Fun, in essence, can be a catalyst for engagement and learning. Kathleen agrees that making learning enjoyable can lead to enhanced engagement and deeper understanding.

She shares anecdotes about infusing fun moments into her classes, encouraging student interaction and collaboration. These experiences can be precious for students who have missed out on socialization due to the pandemic, helping them rediscover the joys of teamwork and communication.

The conversation pivots to the role of AI in education. Kathleen acknowledges that AI is here to stay, and rather than resisting it, educators should embrace it as a tool for enhancing productivity and efficiency. She highlights her experiments with AI tools for generating content and how students can use AI-generated material as a starting point for their work.

According to Kathleen, educators' evolving role guides students in interpreting and critiquing AI-generated content, reinforcing the importance of human insight and creativity.

Kathleen Borbee's journey in education reveals the power of innovation, imagination, and adaptability. Her commitment to service learning, writing-intensive courses, and ePortfolios is a testament to her dedication to preparing students with the skills and experiences they need to thrive in their future careers.

Finally, as we continue to pursue and navigate the ever-evolving landscape of education, Kathleen's innovative approaches inspire educators looking to make a lasting impact on their students' lives. Her approach serves as a beacon, reminding us to embrace change, nurture creativity, embrace the new, and keep the element of fun alive in our pursuit of knowledge.

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