

How Oxford College Confronts the Past to Build a Better Future

With Peter McLellan

[Oxford College of Emory University](#)

Traditional education typically focuses on passing facts, information, and expertise from knowledgeable educators to students who are sometimes unsure of who they are and their place in the world. While there has always been room for assessments as a measure of students' retention of lessons, and results, a determinant of their prospects in the labor market, students seldom get the chance to give feedback about their learning experience. As the world progresses in technology, higher institutions are now more conscious of every aspect of learning as a holistic experience where one element isn't independent of the other. Faculty members are no longer isolated from the students. Rather, many institutions like the Oxford College of Emory now adopt digital storytelling as a way of getting feedback from their students to improve the learning experience for future generations.

In a chat with Digication's Scholars Conversations, Peter McLellan, the educational analyst at Oxford College of Emory University gives details of how the institution made conscious efforts to understand students' journeys while studying at the college. Although students may always give positive remarks about their experience when asked, this might not be a true reflection of their feelings.

The higher institution experience transcends beyond the classroom to interpersonal relationships with other students, teachers, and advisors. If they have indeed learned from their peers and formed valuable connections, how do they feel about this and how do they express these feelings? Do they have the confidence to talk about it?

Digital storytelling gives students the chance to express themselves freely about their experiences, without the fear of being penalized or judged wrongly for deviating from the traditional order of higher learning. In his conversation on Digication's Scholars Conversations, Peter talks about how he reached out to a renowned ePortfolio advocate, Elize Hellam to discuss digital storytelling and ePortfolios. Although he describes his interest in this field as wanting to know "how people hear stories," Peter explains that he wishes to know what knowledge is carried within those stories. This led to a discussion regarding his interest in what he calls "anti-racist pedagogy."

Consulting the Past for a Better Future

As a way of improving the future from the past, Peter takes us back to the origins of the university system. He reckons that because the university "is a white invention," there might not be enough structures to cater to the pedagogic needs of minorities. This is why anti-racist pedagogy strives to create a higher learning space that is against racism and white supremacy, with hopes of creating a conducive classroom for all students, including students of color, to succeed.

The desire for feedback and the quest for a conducive environment for minority students led the college to come up with the Milestone program designed to give students a reflective learning opportunity with a fun digital storytelling portfolio where they can talk about their experiences. Although students didn't take the milestone project as seriously as they had anticipated, it gave the school insights into some fundamental issues. Thanks to the milestone pilot group, they realized that students of color were getting lower grades in their projects. To Peter, the reason for these low grades isn't far from the rules of assessment evaluation which, as you'd guess, doesn't quite accommodate the complexities of students of color.

As a solution to this problem, the anti-racist pedagogy suggests that the assessment starts from the root of students' knowledge. Peter McLellan gives an example of an African-American student whose portfolio exhibited a lot of knowledge of the world but the learning that they demonstrated in the portfolio was from before college. The student has a narrative about how "I learned all this stuff from my family." In their digital storytelling record, this student who wishes to become a doctor highlights the things they have learned from the past and how this knowledge is going to help with their medical ambition.

In drawing inspiration for the future from the past, this student's time at Oxford is clearly missing. The African-American student's digital storytelling omits time spent at Oxford and its possible impacts on his ambition. Since this portfolio has clearly left out the student's time at Oxford, traditionally, such a student would be marked down. However, Peter begs to differ. He suggests that the portfolio should be assessed from the angle of somebody who has a lot of knowledge, who's in our community and is telling us something about their experience.

"Instead of having them come from a top-down approach, we can have them come from the students themselves. So how do the students through their portfolios assess our institution? I think the agency that students exhibit in portfolios is itself a resource for us to start doing anti-racist pedagogy because it's just a more democratic way to think about it when we have students owning their own space and producing knowledge there."

Peter McLellan

Educational Analyst, Oxford College of Emory University

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