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Lauren Heimlich Foley
Holicong Middle School

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Digitally Motivated: Inspire Adolescents with the 21st Century Portfolio

by Lauren Heimlich Foley

My students beam with enthusiasm as glowing laptop screens paint their faces with final revisions and portfolio designs. The gentle click . . . click . . . clicking of keys complements the quiet, purposeful murmur of student voices in the conferencing areas. Navigating between desks, I can feel a palpable buzz of excitement pulsing through the air. When I arrive at Corey's desk, I ask if his myth, a piece first written in September, is revised and ready for publication. Last week he worked relentlessly, improving his character development in class and at lunch to better reflect his present writing ability. He responds, "I'm done! I really like how it turned out. Now I am focusing on my reflection and the final presentation of my portfolio." Although the last day of school is next week, Corey is focused on perfecting his writing and finishing his project. He is one, among a sea of 7th graders, who eagerly refines his writing, reflects on his process, and shows off his ability by using the enhancements 21st century technology offers. My students' dedication inspires me to implement the Electronic Portfolio Project each year.

The idea originated from my undergraduate courses at The College of New Jersey. In my Writing Methods class, we employed the concepts outlined by Jim Mahoney in *Power and Portfolio* to construct our own writing portfolio and mimic the process our future students would explore. A year later during student teaching, I created an electronic portfolio that examined my journey from student to teacher. Appreciating the writing and technology skills learned from each assignment, I longed to develop a project that would offer my students a similar experience – one that would tap into their intrinsic motivation. The electronic portfolio is designed to integrate authentic student writing, revising, and meta-cognition with technology. In addition to online publication and communication, this assignment hooks digital natives because of their innate interests in forming an online identity, having creator choice, and exploring presentation options.

Teacher researchers and educators are finding that Internet communication appeals to teenagers because it allows students to become part of the meaning-making process as they comment on other electronic portfolios and become involved in computerized discussions surrounding their writing. Students view this portfolio as a natural extension of the ways they communicate online through texting, instant messaging, social networking, and blogging. Troy Hicks in *The Digital Writing Workshop* suggests, "When students are responsible for posting their own writing and commenting on the writing of others, they are likely to feel more engaged in the writing process" (82). Writing becomes a means of expressing who they are and connecting to the world around them; students are validated when they receive feedback from their peers. They transcend the role of online consumer to online composer and responder through the communication aspect of the electronic portfolio.

Furthermore, students are intrigued by the ability to become published authors. Teenagers, who create Web pages, are able to share their work with peers, friends, family, and the world-wide Web. When students understand that their work is going to be viewed by a larger audience, they become more invested in the writing process. Gretchen Lee saw a change in her students when publishing on the Web became an integral part of her classroom. In "Getting in Line to Publish Online," Lee shares her students' responses and thoughts about online publishing. One student, Alisha, explains, "When I see my writing on the Internet, it's kind of amazing to know that people all over the world have access to your work. . . You also want to make sure that people understand what you're implying. . . Overall, getting published is pretty cool!" (24). When electronic portfolios are implemented in Language Arts classes, all writing pieces and classroom activities have the option of

being published on the Internet. Students value their work in a different way and begin to understand that everything they do has the potential to be accessed by someone other than their teacher. The publishing component keeps students focused on their learning because the work is for more than a grade.

Although current research primarily focuses on publication and communication, the electronic portfolio engages students from its inception (Hicks 80-102). This is possible because the assignment enables Generation Z to employ their technology literacy skills in the classroom and prepare for their futures. *Adolescent Literacy: an NCTE Policy Research Brief* claims that “using technology is one way to provide learner-centered, relevant activities. For example, many students who use computers to write show more engagement and motivation and produce longer and better papers” (Kajder xiii). The electronic portfolio increases student participation because it excites them with novel technological components far beyond the hackneyed programs of Word and PowerPoint. Additionally, Kerry Weinbaum, a New York City public education teacher, explains, “Portfolios work when classrooms and students work, when the value of what is being done comes from, and is seen by, the students themselves” (Belanoff and Dickson 214). Portfolios are still a relevant tool in education 25 years after Weinbaum was published; however, the 21st century student values technology. My informal action research demonstrates how computers inherently increase students’ desires to want to write and want to write well.

The electronic portfolio is important to students because it builds upon their already existing skills and enables them to work in a medium that they feel comfortable and confident in. To help confirm this significance, I asked my seventh graders to reflect on the value of their Microsoft OneNote portfolios, an electronic notebook that provides digital enhancements and can be shared via the Internet with multiple users. Common sentiments included: “It [is] exciting. You can customize anything, and you get a chance to be creative,” “The project is very handy. It is online where all my typed documents are, and it is easy to format to make it look perfect,” “It [is] a good way to share our writing, and I [think] it was really cool how it was all done electronically,” and “I think the electronic portfolio project was fun because I’ve never done something like that before.” Students have “fun” and are “creative” as they build their portfolios, complete the writing process, and think critically about their products. All the while they are practicing relevant technological skills that they will need in the professional world.

My previous eighth grade students, who worked with Wix.com, a free Web page builder, enjoyed the process and discovered the value in designing their online selves for future educational and career opportunities. Students expressed: “I can show it to my future teachers,” “When I apply to college I can show my Wix,” and “Wix could be something to use in the future for things such as my music career.” Namely, students decided to use Wix to design their Social Studies final projects and believed they would be able to apply their abilities for high school and college assignments. Regardless of whether students first learn to produce a portfolio on Wix, Google, OneNote, or Wikiblogs, teens’ interest increases and their writing naturally becomes stronger because they are happy and find future value in their work and learning.

Even more compelling than students’ inclination toward technology is their need for personal development. During adolescent years, teens search for their identities as they are influenced by the world around them. Today’s middle school students investigate who they are by writing on social networking sites, blogs, wikis, and other online forums. Technology is an ever present force in their lives. With the electronic portfolio, students draw upon these social writing tendencies to create their portfolio personalities. In “The Digital Imperative: Making the Case for a 21st Century Pedagogy,” Elizabeth Clark explains that electronic portfolios at the university level “offer a platform for considering questions of digital identity and audience as students explore the public/private nature of writing...Students tailor their digital identities for multiple audiences, learning how to introduce

themselves to a virtual world” (29). Students begin to learn how they can use technology to create an academic persona as well as their social one; they are able to develop who they are within the school setting as well as with friends and family. The success found in collages also benefits students in the middle grades because computerized portfolios inspire students to enhance their writing as a way to better reflect who they are.

For instance, Riley, one of my seventh graders, commented, “I think my portfolio captured my personality very well. I feel as though the pictures represent me.” CJ, another student, explained his overarching theme, “I have optimistic pictures and quotes in my welcome. My reflection is optimistic. Even my story has a touch of optimism.” This self-exploration and creation process in turn drives students to revise and edit their writing pieces and produce a final electronic portfolio. They pay careful attention to the topic, genre, and presentation of their writing. Riley went on to describe her revisions, “I am proud of how I revised my original piece...I really developed the issue of the town and why the queen was a horrible queen. I also developed the conversation between the queen and the old man.” Likewise, CJ communicated how he spent extra time crafting his piece; “I altered the paragraphs where the son is imprisoned...I added a prologue instead of my original epilogue. I also changed the message the dad sent through his son’s dreams.” This close reading, rereading, writing, and rewriting becomes possible as students discover their digital selves. Creating and writing become synonymous because teenagers wish to represent an accurate, unique, online persona. They are eager to have a space to create who they are and who they want to become.

Students are simultaneously drawn to the electronic portfolio because they design how their writing is perceived by others. They are the storytellers. Hicks explains that “by structuring the portfolio with a table of contents that allows for easy navigation as well as other features such as links to reflective statements or previous drafts, digital writers can take advantage of the media to present a more robust portrait of their work as writers” (84). Equally important to the higher level thinking and comprehensive organizational skills that Hicks refers to is how teens are fascinated by the ability to craft personalized final products. Students choose how their audiences will view their work. They have the option to create a table of contents that their readers must return to in order to proceed further. Other students can design a linear model for half of their portfolio that eventually leads to a table of contents. Additionally, they decide whether they want their writing pieces and reflections on the same page. The development is up to the individual, which supports their originality and creativity. My students’ feedback validated the importance of these features; they stated, “I like how we can organize our work.” “I thought the enhancements (table of contents) really made [my portfolio] better because it feels more complete.” Just like professional Web page makers, students are in charge of the navigation in their electronic portfolios. Print portfolios do not offer this type of choice, which does not promote the same type of ownership in student writers.

Moreover, multimedia presentation options intrigue students and invite them to think critically about how to best represent their work. Students have more choice in the design than just drawing pictures or printing and cutting out images to complement their writing. Kathleen Yancy in “Postmodern, Palimpsest, and Portfolios: Theoretical Issues in the Representation of Student Work” emphasizes the “Web sensible” portfolio in her college classroom because “through text boxes, hyperlinking, visuals, audio texts, and design elements [it] not only inhabits the digital space and is distributed electronically but also exploits the medium” (745-6). By including these various technological components, students develop new literacy skills and have more responsibility over how their work will be comprehended.

The electronic portfolio requires students in all grade levels to decide how they will enhance their writing through digital options. Now, middle school students have more power in how they frame their texts. For example, students writing a memoir about a music concert can include a video clip of their final performance or multiple clips of practices leading up to the performance. Sean, one of my

current seventh grade students, recorded a video through OneNote because he wanted a unique way to show his writing process; the final product documented various pages in his Writer's Notebook so his readers would understand the steps he took to write his piece. Similarly, students can be creative with how they include pictures. Jon expressed that the picture collage he created "showed the meaning of [his] literary essay and how *The Cay* and "The Summer of the Beautiful White Horse" compare. Lyndsey explained, "I really [like] having the pictures from my Writer's Notebooks in there. Those pages really show a lot of revisions and some pages are even completely changed." Students are eager to spend extra time enhancing their portfolios by including these technological improvements.

Besides uploading their own pictures and videos, students are able to interact with their classmates' work. Two students, JoJo and Chloe, referenced each other's story in their portfolio pieces and shared how this came to be by explaining the writing process in their reflections. Instead of having this novel concept go unnoticed, the girls were able to highlight the intertextuality of their pieces by linking their portfolio pages – a component they had never dreamed possible but was made possible by the technology. Their readers are now able to view both pieces without having to fumble for a different project, and the girls' final products are even more an illustration of who they are as writers.

In addition, teens are able to join the academic conversation by including videos and articles relating to their narratives or argumentative essays. In particular, students writing about Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday "can link to another essay on the Internet that talks about the same event or they can import a video clip that contains King's 'I Have a Dream' Speech" (Kahtani 263). Specifically, Jackie, one of last year's 7th graders, added online magazine and news videos that she had watched about body image before writing her essay; she wanted to allow peers and other readers a glimpse of what inspired her writing as well as raise awareness on body image issues that plague women in today's society. Furthermore, she transformed her Works Cited page into an interactive tool, prompting her viewers to explore all of the online research she had conducted. By inserting hyperlinks, readers are able to visit supplemental information with just a click of the mouse. Providing middle schoolers with control over what is shared, and how their audience comes to understand the topics they write about, increases their investment and encourages them to practice necessary writing and technology skills. Not only are students determining the pieces to include in their portfolios, but also they must decide the best way to portray their work, which is an exciting journey for them to take.

To summarize, students operate in a technology rich environment outside of school. Bridging traditional literacies with digital literacies within the classroom becomes essential to nurture adolescents' natural motivational tendencies. The electronic portfolio places students' reading, writing, and reflecting abilities at the core of its purpose while the meaning-making process is extended through technological enhancements. By incorporating the electronic portfolio in their classrooms, teachers will engage students, foster strong writing, and prepare Generation Z for real world 21st century opportunities.

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Lauren Heimlich Foley, a graduate from The College of New Jersey, taught at Roy W. Brown Middle School for five years in Bergenfield, New Jersey, before relocating with her husband to Pennsylvania. Currently, she is in her third year of teaching seventh grade English Language Arts at Holicong Middle School in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. She loves to be out in nature and finds inspiration for writing from the world around her.