E-Portfolios as an Alternative to PARCC in the "College and Career Ready" Age

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E-portfolios as an Alternative to PARCC in the “College and Career Ready” Age

by

Katherine Ondrof

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Abstract

In this thesis, I identify issues with the existing PARCC exam’s ability to develop and assess skills that are considered essential for college- and career-readiness, as per the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and existing research. I examine the benefits and challenges associated with electronic portfolios as an alternative, more authentic means of assessment that develop not only the skills identified as college- and career-readiness by the CCSS and research, but also digital rhetoric skills, which I argue are essential for true real world preparedness. Guiding this research are the following pivotal questions: How does the existing PARCC exam prepare students for college and careers? What possibilities do electronic portfolios have to teach/assess college- and career-ready writing, and specifically the commonly overlooked topic of digital rhetoric, and within our current CCR climate? What are the hazards and challenges of using electronic portfolios to teach/assess writing (in traditional and digital formats) within this climate? I answer these questions through a literature review and present my findings in five chapters: I explain the existing CCR climate in an introductory chapter; in Chapter Two, I identify issues with the PARCC exam; in Chapters Three and Four, respectively, I present the benefits and challenges associated with portfolios and, specifically, e-portfolios; then, in Chapter Five, I conclude that e-portfolios are most valuable when implemented at a local level and discuss further areas that must be researched surrounding the topic.
E-PORTFOLIOS AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO PARCC IN THE "COLLEGE- AND CAREER- READY" AGE

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Chapter One: Introduction

Schools have always taken on the responsibility of preparing students for the next step in their lives, but in today’s society, the bar is higher than ever. Through national policy, the idea of student preparedness has been politicized and, as a result, granted higher stakes than ever before. President Obama addressed the notion of preparedness in his 2010 Education Reform Policy, *A Blueprint for Reform*, claiming that a more rigorous, “world-class education” is now the prerequisite for success and calling for all high school graduates to be “well prepared for college and a career,” with skills that will practically ensure next-level success. This conception of College and Career Readiness (CCR) has become a mantra for modern education reform, driving educational practices—curricula development, instructional methods, and assessments—in K-12 education. CCR is based on more contemporary, more rigorous ideas about literacy and has served as the basis for new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) as well as the standardized assessments that are derived from them, the most commonly used being those developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balance. This thesis examines these existing assessments, particularly the PARCC exam, for its ability to promote and assess college- and career-ready skills, while offering the e-portfolio assessment method as a better alternative for accomplishing this highly prioritized goal of preparedness.

Most educational commentators suggest that the embrace of CCR by educational and political leadership is a result of the belief that the educational system is not succeeding. Much press has been given to research that indicates poor preparedness,
particularly in literacy. Research shows that the United States is now ranked 12th in the world in literacy results (Marshall 27). Current Secretary of Education Arne Duncan cites a statistic that 90 million American adults have below-basic or basic reading skills. Writing is another issue: a 2010 ACT study of college readiness indicated that more than a third of high school juniors are not prepared for college-level writing. Recent NAEP data further revealed that, consistently, for the past decade and a half, more than 80 percent of high school seniors achieve only a basic level of writing competence, while less than a quarter write at a proficient level, and a mere one percent write at an advanced level (Yagelski 188). If high school students are not even writing at a basic or proficient level, they cannot possibly be prepared for college or the work force.

The solution for achieving this preparedness, nearly all of these authors suggest, is linking high school literacy instruction with that which occurs in the “real world.” For this reason, real world skills are the foundation of the CCR movement, justified by the belief that requiring students to complete tasks and develop skills aligned more closely with the work that will be required of them during college and in their careers will better prepare them for success at these next steps. The current United States Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, places great value, specifically, on developing students’ real world literacy skills, calling reading, writing, and critical thinking the “cornerstones of democracy.” He argues that

What our young people need, and deserve, is an education that leaves them not just college-ready but innovation-ready. As Tom Friedman has written, they need an education that prepares them for the reality of
today's flat world—a world where you invent your own job, change careers, and constantly acquire new skills. The real world demands readers, writers, and critical thinkers—people who can work with others and communicate skillfully (Duncan).

Composition—which incorporates the critical thinking, "innovation," writing, and "communicat[ing] skillfully" advocated by Duncan—is especially pivotal to success in the real world. While this has always been true, composition in the modern world is somewhat different than before. It does still, of course, incorporate the critical thinking, innovation, and communication skills that all writing does, but it also necessarily incorporates a new level of digital rhetoric, providing students with even more modern real world skills.

So what does this new, more modern composition look like, and how is it different than traditional conceptions of writing? Writing has long been accepted as a recursive, non-linear process ("Framework") that occurs over extended periods of time, but, in today's society—which presents a "Brave New World" of literacy, according to Chris W. Gallagher and Eric D. Turley in their book *Our Better Judgment: Teacher Leadership for Writing Assessment*—writers must also attempt to foster "flexibility and rhetorical versatility" ("Framework") to adapt to different purposes and audiences, because writing now takes place "across a wide range of forms and media" (Gallagher and Turley 1). Rhetoric and Composition Professor Kathleen Yancey also conceptualizes composition in this way, explaining in her article "Composition in a New
Key” that, even at the most basic level, composition naturally inhabits multiple modes and genres:

when we consider how the presentations will morph into other talks, into articles for print and online journals, into books, indeed into our classrooms, it becomes pretty clear that we already inhabit a model of communication practices incorporating multiple genres related to each other, those multiple genres remediated across contexts of time and space, linked one to the next, circulating across and around rhetorical situations both inside and outside of school. (307-8)

Yancey draws on Elizabeth Daley, Dean of the University of Southern California School of Television and Cinema, who agrees, arguing that “No longer...can students be considered truly educated by mastering reading and writing alone. The ability to negotiate through life by combining words with pictures with audio and video to express thoughts will be the mark of the educated student” (305). Because of this new conception of composition, digital politics theorist Cynthia Selfe claims that modern writing is necessarily infused with technology. In her book Technology and Literacy in the 21st Century: The Importance of Paying Attention, Selfe suggests that teachers can no longer view literacy as separate from technology: “Literacy alone is no longer our business. Literacy and technology are. Or so they must become” (3). She criticizes illiteracy and links technology, literacy, and public education as a remedy, outlining the numerous social, cultural, and professional benefits of technological access, and
ultimately suggesting that, in order to be truly college and career ready, students must be digitally literate.

Research confirms this necessary familiarity with modern, multimodal, technological composition for both college and career readiness. Studies of college coursework show that, throughout their academic careers, students across different majors write a fairly decent amount, and they write in a variety of genres, using electronic media in addition to print (Rice 28). Other studies of college readiness conducted by David Conley, a professor of educational policy and leadership who is a foundational theorist in the field, acknowledge this more modern conception of composition as multi-genred and multimodal, while emphasizing the continued importance of more traditional, technical aspects of composition for student preparedness. He defines the role of writing in college as

the means by which students are evaluated at least to some degree in nearly every postsecondary course. Expository, descriptive, and persuasive writing are particularly important types of writing in college. Students are expected to write a lot in college and to do so in relatively short periods of time. Students need to know how to pre-write, how to edit, and how to re-write a piece before it is submitted and, often, after it has been submitted once and feedback has been provided. College writing requires students to present arguments clearly, substantiate each point, and utilize the basics of a style manual when constructing a paper.
College-level writing is largely free of grammatical, spelling, and usage errors. (14)

Conley further points out the applicability of these traditional aspects of composition for students outside of English classes: even in science, students are using evidence to draw conclusions that must be interpreted; in world languages, students are using language to communicate accurately and precisely; and in the arts, students are using reason to justify their aesthetic decisions (15-6). In this sense, for students of all disciplines, both traditional and more modern, multimodal conceptions of composition are essential for college success.

A knowledge of both types of composition is also necessary for students entering the workforce. Instructional specialist Jean Evans Davila argues in her article “Expanding Definitions of Career Readiness” that many careers, including technology, culinary arts, and automotive technology, provide a “rich context for the application of skills in literacy...” A study of the workforce conducted by Harvard Professor of Educational Policy and Administration Robert B. Schwartz indicates that, much like traditional composition, “work is concrete, specific to the task, and organized by problems and projects” (19), making, specifically, the application of literacy’s flexibility, attention to purpose and audience, and inquiry-based composition critical. Robert Rothman, of the Alliance for Excellent Education, agrees, but also addresses the more digital component of modern literacy by citing a 2004 study by labor economists Frank Levy and Richard Murnane which found that “technology is transforming the workplace by reducing the need for routine skills and placing a premium on problem-solving and
communication skills” (10). The distinction between college and career readiness, Schwartz explains, is that career readiness requires more creativity (4)—defined by NCTE as “the ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas”—as well as collaboration—defined as the ability to “Build intentional...relationships with others so to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought” (“Framework”)—and more general cognitive skills, such as perseverance, time management, and metacognition (Lombardi et al. 99-100). All of these skills that research deems essential for career success can be developed through traditional composition instruction, and heightened by modern composition’s incorporation of technology.

These research-identified skills required for success in college and careers became the basis for the new CCR component of high school curricula. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), created as a set of curriculum guidelines for K-12 teachers, were adopted in 2010 and accepted by all but six U.S. states. They attempt to translate this conception of “college and career ready literacy” from theory to practice by being “robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers.” In developing the CCSS, the standards writers defined readiness as

the ability to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing, academic college courses and in workforce training programs. That is, students who met the standards should be able to enroll in postsecondary education without needing remediation. For college, that meant enrolling in either a
two-year or four-year institution; for workforce training, it meant enrolling in programs that prepare students for careers that offer competitive, livable salaries and opportunities for career advancement in a growing or sustainable industry. (Rothman 12)

When developing the Common Core, the United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan explained that governors and state education chiefs set out to develop “a new set of learning standards aligned to the demands of the real world—to the kind of deep learning that your children and my children will need to thrive in a globally competitive economy.” They started with evidence from education and the workplace, much like that cited above, also conducting their own research by buying introductory college textbooks and studying the kinds of reading and writing students would be expected to do in their first year of college and, finally, talking to teachers of first-year college courses (Rothman 12).

As a result of this research process, the developed standards placed particular emphasis on literacy, requiring all subjects, not just English/Language Arts, to address both reading and writing. The writing standards, specifically—which have their own strand outside of reading literature and informational texts, speaking and listening, and language—reflect the type of “real world” composition—both traditional components of composition and more contemporary aspects—described above; they ultimately require students to “Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences” (CCSS.ELALiteracy.CCRA. W.10), calling attention to the
important concepts of writing process—mandating that students “Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.5)—as well as purpose and audience—requiring that students “Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.4). The “tasks” students must complete according to Common Core include argumentative, expository, and narrative writing (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.1-3). These tasks also must “Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.6), emphasizing two important real world skills: technology use and collaboration. Finally, within the CCSS Writing strand are research requirements; the standards adopt the inquiry-based approach that is advocated by the NCTE, asking students to conduct research based on “focused questions” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA. W.7) and to “Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.8). In many ways, these standards reflect what the research shows is required in both college composition and writing in the workplace.

If many educators and researchers can be convinced that the Common Core standards are reasonable in their goals for preparing students for college and career-level composition, there are serious questions about the tools that are used to assess student achievement on the Common Core. Education researchers Arthur Applebee and Judith
Langer claim that this assessment is even more important, pointing out in their article “A Snapshot of Writing Instruction in Middle Schools and High Schools,”

The New Common Core Standards, with their recognition of writing as a central strand comparable to reading in the teaching of English language arts and other subjects across the grades, may offer an opportunity to rethink what counts within the high-stakes environment in which schools and teachers now function. But even more critical will be how those standards are translated into the assessments that will ultimately shape what happens in schools and classrooms. (26-7)

Assessment theorist George Hillocks agrees, arguing that “Everything hinges on testing. And the stakes are high” (12). In his book The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning, Hillock explains the ways in which politicized tests are granted higher importance for classroom teachers, whose instruction is naturally shaped as a result. When asked about the importance of various external exams in shaping curriculum and instruction, 65.6% of teachers rated the state exam as important or very important (Applebee and Langer 17). This is particularly true within the CCR environment, where new policies further cement the link between student performance and teacher evaluations. The introduction of Student Growth Objectives (SGOs), for example, explicitly link student performance on state tests to teacher evaluations. Teachers who, for two years in a row, do not meet their growth objectives must formulate an improvement strategy and undergo a professional development plan. This encourages "shining the spotlight" on failure for teachers, which Hillocks claims
ultimately leads to a "teach to the test" mentality, in order to avoid failure. Though always problematic for its lack of critical thinking (particularly within the CCR environment), "teaching to the test" becomes especially so when the test itself is not a valid measure of what students need to know in order to be considered college and career ready, as is the case currently. In my view, the existing method for assessing the Common Core standards, the PARCC exam (Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers), does not reflect college and career ready composition as well as it could, given the standards that drive the assessment and their college- and career-ready goal.

The existing electronic portfolio method of writing instruction and assessment offers one possible more authentic, truly digital alternative to this flawed PARCC exam. Notably, the electronic portfolio is not an entirely new concept, as it builds on ideas about collecting and aggregating student writing first made popular in the 1980s. Writing portfolios were initially used as a means of alternative assessment by composition professors like Pat Belanoff and Peter Elbow, who wrote about their experiences using portfolios in a freshman writing course at Stony Brook University. Portfolio assessment was developed as a response to critiques that typical testing neglects multiple intelligences, does not make apparent an understanding of the writing process, and does not give a complete picture of students' writing abilities. The intention of the portfolio assignment designed by Belanoff and Elbow was to have students write in different genres on different occasions after going through their complete, independent writing processes in order to assess more genuinely each student's
writing-related strengths and weaknesses. Later versions of this project, such as that popularized by Kathleen Yancey in the 90s, took the idea developed by Belanoff and Elbow and placed it in an electronic context, developing the e-portfolio model.

As a teacher who works within the CCR system, I have become intrigued by the e-portfolio model as a means to address the Common Core’s goals and go beyond the assessment limitations presented by PARCC. I have developed an e-portfolio project of my own, but, given the pressures of the modern educational climate, I have become increasingly concerned about its ability to address the college and career ready curriculum and—now, because my employment status is dependent upon student performance—state assessment preparation. Because there is more pressure than ever, I need my students to possess the composition skills necessary for the state’s definition of college and career readiness, those that are specified in the standards and assessed on the PARCC; but I also want them to move beyond that more traditional definition of composition, towards a more modern digital rhetoric that, while not necessarily addressed in the CCSS and the PARCC, is required by the demands of real world, twenty-first century society.

This thesis, then, seeks to examine the use of electronic portfolios as an assessment alternative to the flawed PARCC exam. Specifically, it presents a review of the possibilities and challenges of using electronic portfolios to teach and assess “real world” writing, including digital rhetoric, within the college and career ready (CCR) climate of modern secondary education. Ultimately, it seeks to provide an evaluation of e-portfolio writing projects as a means to both develop and assess the students’ college
and career ready skills, particularly those relating to digital rhetoric, which is not effectively addressed through the PARCC exam. Guiding this research are the following pivotal questions: How does the existing PARCC exam prepare students for college and careers? What possibilities do electronic portfolios have to teach/assess college- and career-ready writing, and specifically the commonly overlooked topic of digital rhetoric, within our current CCR climate? What are the hazards and challenges of using electronic portfolios to teach/assess digital writing (in both traditional and digital formats) within this climate?

As a teacher myself who is affected by the PARCC exam and who currently utilizes electronic portfolio assessment, I am personally invested in discovering the answers to these questions. I am most directly concerned with the students because they are my responsibility and their learning directly impacts my employment. I am also influenced, though, by those who are above me on the power hierarchy, such as my administrators, my school district, and the government mandating my curriculum, because they determine what I teach and whether or not it is deemed effective. This placement within the education institutional structure directly relates to the focus of my research and my interpretation of results; my research cannot be examined separate from this positionality.

The chapters that follow examine, first, in Chapter Two, the existing PARCC exam, as it relates to college- and career-readiness. Chapter Three examines the use of electronic portfolios as an alternative method of addressing the modern composition required for college and career readiness, including not only more general education and
traditional composition skills, but also the more modern composition skills associated with digital rhetoric. While Chapter Three identifies the benefits of the portfolio project, Chapter Four identifies the potential hazards associated with the alternate assessment method. Ultimately, in the conclusion, Chapter Five, I draw conclusions about the possibility of e-portfolios within the context of the CCR movement, and identify areas of concern that must be addressed further moving forward.
Chapter Two: PARCC Assessment Method

The state of New Jersey adopted the PARCC exam at the beginning of the 2014/2015 school year. It was created by a group of Educational Testing Services (ETS) contractors, including former educators and literacy and assessment experts. It has been reviewed by K-12 and post-secondary educators, content specialists, and assessment experts from different locations and backgrounds, whose priority, according to the PARCC website, is to “evaluate whether the items are closely aligned to the Common Core; are of high quality; and are rigorous, fair and unbiased.” The test is administered multiple times each school year on district-provided computers, and writing pieces are completed on a word processor. Students taking the English/Language Arts PARCC exam complete three different writing tasks that require them to analyze literature, synthesize research, and describe a process.

The multiple writing tasks required by the PARCC exam address, in some respects, the writing skills required through the standards and in the “real world.” The variety of writing purposes is further beneficial because it moves the exam towards a more “open system” of writing described by composition assessment expert Chris M. Anson in his article “Closed Systems and Standardized Writing Tests.” Anson claims that writing naturally takes place in an “open system” that is constantly evolving, where students must adapt to meet the needs of different writing tasks and contexts; this is especially true in today’s “Brave New World” of literacy. He argues that good writing instruction should “[assume] that it is important for learners to experience a range of writing tasks, contexts, and purposes, and that it is better for them to gain adaptive
expertise than a narrowly defined set of skills relevant to a specific, artificial genre (such as a test essay)” (118). Though Anson suggests that state test writing is most frequently a “closed” system that results in “closed” writing pedagogy, the PARCC exam opens up instruction through its prompt variety; even if teachers did try to “teach to the test” students would still be prepared for the “real world” of college and their careers by experiencing a variety of writing types. While Anson is somewhat right, in my view, the test is still not completely open; while students are adapting to different writing tasks on the prompt, they are not adapting to different writing contexts, outside of the artificial test genre, which is another essential component of an open writing system.

The writing situations presented on the PARCC are too inauthentic to truly prepare students for writing in the real world. Not only are students unable to use spell check, conduct outside research, or consult with a teacher or peers, but they are also expected to write within a timeframe of only a few hours. This contradicts the standards, which call for “[Writing] routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision)” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.10) and real world composition in general. The PARCC exam also neglects the concept of audience; the audience of PARCC essays is undefined and, thus, inauthentic, which makes it difficult for students to adapt their writing to meet their needs. As Steve Watkins claims in his article “World Wide Web Authoring in the Portfolio-Assessed, (Inter)Networked Composition Course,”

Students write better when they have a self-interested motivation in the writing task and a clearly definable audience related to that motivated
context. Yet, the existence of grades often saps motivation and, hence, the desire to write and excel, in part because students are forced to address a critical, powerful audience, an audience to whom they would not primarily choose to write: the grader of their writing.

Because students do not know their intended audience—and, in many cases, do not trust, due to the hostile climate surrounding the test—, their writing is inauthentic, at best, and, at worst, “gamed” to appeal solely to the expectations of an assumed test-loving reader that is ambiguously, if at all, defined. This contrived writing situation on the PARCC prevents students from truly developing as writers by taking away the circumstances and knowledge with which students typically write for college and careers.

These contrived PARCC writing situations and the formulaic “gaming” they promote also prevent the type of higher-order thinking—inquiry, collaboration, creativity, and metacognition—that is valued by the CCR movement and necessary for real world success. According to Conley, writing prompts on standardized tests present a very basic representation of college and career readiness. He cites research conducted by Standards for Success and published in the 2003 report *Mixed Messages*, which found that most state standards-based high school tests were not well aligned with postsecondary learning: “These tests are perhaps good measures of basic academic skills, but not necessarily of the knowledge and capabilities needed for college success” (9). They are severely limited in their breadth or depth: “The tests rarely require students to apply their learning and almost never require students to exhibit proficiency in higher forms of cognition” (12). On the PARCC specifically, even the writing tasks
that require research and synthesis lack the important component of inquiry; as Applebee and Langer argue, the tasks are more difficult now, but they still don’t require original or critical thought (26). The exam also overlooks entirely the important cognitive skills of metacognition, time management, and collaboration, which are essential to college and career success. This creates serious problems, Conley explains, when high schools focus on getting students to pass state tests: “When students do finally pass the state exam, their program of study may be hopelessly out of sequence with what it takes to be college eligible” (9). Applebee and Langer agree, lamenting that “Given the constraints imposed by high-stakes tests, writing as a way to study, learn, and go beyond—as a way to construct knowledge or generate new networks of understanding—is rare” (26). This type of assessment has encouraged, in an attempt to prepare students for the test, the same contrived composition instruction, similarly reducing the higher order thinking that is required of students in the classroom.

The PARCC assessment attempts to both authenticate and complicate the contrived and formulaic writing situation of the test by incorporating a word processor. To some degree, this is effective: a word processor allows students to write in a more recursive way than they would if responding to the same prompt with typical paper and pen. On many other traditional paper-and-pencil standardized tests—including the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), New Jersey’s former assessment tool, and the SAT—students are encouraged to follow a one-size-fits-all writing process: pre-write first, then draft in beginning-middle-end order, and go back to make surface-level revisions after the essay is finished. With the use of a word processor though, students
are able to make more substantial revisions as they go along. This recursive style of “writing through chaos” is what foundational composition theorist Anne Berthoff claims comes naturally to writers, especially within the context of twenty-first century literacy. She explains that “we don’t have ideas which we put into words; we don’t think of what we want to say and then write” (648). By allowing the use of a word processor, the PARCC exam does not force students into an unnatural, ordered style of writing; it allows them to use their own, individual process, which simulates real world writing and promotes greater critical thinking, and, thus, college- and career- readiness.

However, this word processor is the extent of the PARCC exam's technological use, which is problematic in terms of both authenticity and the development of college- and career- ready skills. This is perhaps the biggest limitation of the PARCC: it does not prepare students with digital rhetoric skills, which help them develop as writers and are necessary to function in modern society. The standards for college and career readiness reflect a greater familiarity with digital rhetoric than the PARCC requires: they ask that students “Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.6) and “Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.8). In order to be college- and career- ready, students are expected to write within and for a collaborative digital environment, according to the standards. But on the PARCC exam, students use word processors simply as a powerful typewriter; they are not able to access the internet, research relevant sources, collaborate
with others, or publish their work, which prevents them from really using technology in the way outlined by the standards as college- and career-ready. Even worse, the limited use of technology prevents the test from being truly authentic in a world in which contemporary writing situations are most frequently digital, in that they incorporate multiple media forms, hyperlinked inter-connectivity, and a more public, interactive audience. This technological limitation inhibits students from developing a true real world, digital rhetoric, as it is described by foundational theorists Jim Porter, Jackie Rhodes, and Jonathan Alexander. In his article “Why Technology Matters to Writing: A Cyberwriter’s Tale,” Porter explains that, without internet connectivity, the computer is just another writing tool. Rhodes and Alexander agree, further challenging this limited use of technology in their essay “Refiguring Our Relationship to New Media” by calling for a truly digital literacy that “exceed[s] the essayistic” (62) and moves students outside of the essay genre and into a more digital rhetoric. This digital rhetoric, though an important part of modern composition, is absent on the PARCC exam, and even, largely, in the standards themselves. This noticeable absence of true digital rhetoric establishes the necessity for an alternative web-based project, such as an e-portfolio, that can ensure students are exposed to a rhetoric that is more truly digital than just a word processed (and, through the standards, internet published) essay.

The results of the PARCC exam also establish the necessity for an alternative project. The first year of PARCC administration during the 2014-2015 school year was plagued by multiple technology issues and opt-outs, which increased the length of the tests and the requirement for staffing, rendering numerous extra instructional weeks
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useless. Steve Baker, spokesman for the New Jersey Education Association, discusses the implication of these logistical aspects of test administration in reporter Adam Clark’s news article “Here’s How N.J. Students Scored on Each PARCC Test in 2016”: “The time and resources that are invested into PARCC really should be invested into providing greater education opportunities and better support for our students.” These logistical aspects were especially problematic in classes with high numbers of lower-socioeconomic students, where students may not have physical or experiential access to the technology required for test performance. According to another recent news article by Clark, titled “Why These ‘Staggering’ PARCC Scores Have N.J. Officials Worried,” the most recent administration of the PARCC test indicated that the lowest scores in the state predominantly belonged to “economically disadvantaged and minority students.” Eddy Ramirez agrees, reporting, additionally, on the performance of students with other unique learning needs in his U.S. News and World Report article “A Tough Test for Second Language Learners.” He claims that “‘one size fits all’ tests [like the PARCC] are unfair to students who can barely speak English or who have serious learning disabilities.” This seems to suggest that, because of the inequities of the PARCC exam, college- and career- readiness is an educational ideal that can only be accessed by some, not all. To increase access, though, Ramirez suggests an alternative assessment, which would combat not only the inequalities with which he is concerned, but, additionally, the concerns about authenticity and college- and career- readiness that have been outlined all throughout this chapter. His recommendation for a more fair alternative to the flawed PARCC exam is the same as others’ suggestions for a more
authentic, challenging alternative, mentioned in Chapter One: learning portfolio assessment. In the chapters that follow, this idea of portfolio assessment, and e-portfolios in particular, will be analyzed for the possibilities and hazards they bring about as an alternative to the PARCC exam.
Chapter Three: Benefits of E-portfolios over PARCC

There are many different existing portfolio models. In its most basic form, a portfolio is any collection of a student's work which can be used “to demonstrate his or her skills and accomplishments” (Lankes). Some state tests, including the PARCC, do, in fact, already offer a “portfolio appeal” as an alternative or back-up assessment for students who fail the general standardized test. The “portfolio appeal” requires students to submit a cover sheet with personal information, a proficiency plan completed via a worksheet, and a “specified quantity and quality of student graded work samples for each content area” (Harrington). This existing “portfolio appeal” project, while promising in its acknowledgement and even accommodation of the value of portfolio assessment, is flawed for multiple reasons: first, it is not an option for all students, but only the ones who fail the PARCC exam, which is designated as the “main” assessment, and, second, this model of portfolio assessment is too limited to reach the project’s full potential.

More complex portfolio models can incorporate not only a collection of the student’s best work, but also the student’s self-reflection on the work completed. This more complex portfolio model is the one utilized in my class, which will be the dominant model referred to in this research. It is shaped by the conception of portfolios described by the Northwest Evaluation Association, an association formed by educators and researchers from Oregon and Washington State school districts in order to build a “new kind of testing system” (NWEA), which interprets portfolios as "a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress and achievements."
The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student self-reflection” (qtd. in Lankes). More specifically, my conception of the portfolio project incorporates a heavily-revised collection of student-selected work that spans different genres and includes writer reflections on each piece. These writer reflections address metacognition questions about process, revision, and self-evaluation.

A digital version of this project—referred to as a "computer-based portfolio," but more commonly as an e-portfolio (which will be the term utilized throughout this research)—also exists in a variety of formats. At its most basic level, the e-portfolio contains the same types of information as the traditional portfolio described above, but the information is “collected, stored and managed electronically” (Lankes). More advanced versions of the project may additionally incorporate varied media forms, including text, graphics, sound, and video. In my view, both in my classroom and in the model utilized for this research, e-portfolios contain the standard portfolio information—student-selected pieces that are heavily revised and multi-genred, along with metacognitive self-reflections of some sort—published on a self-promotional author website (using student-friendly websites like Wix or Weebly) that necessarily incorporates varied media forms.

It is my view that the e-portfolio project described above addresses college- and career-readiness on a variety of levels. In this chapter, I will argue for e-portfolio assessment on many grounds, including the various ways in which the project addresses college- and career-ready skills that are both addressed and overlooked in the Common
Core State Standards and on the PARCC test that assesses them. A close reading of the Standards suggests that the e-portfolio project addresses the following college- and career-ready goals, only the first of which is addressed on the PARCC:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience;

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach;

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.6: Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others; and

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

The e-portfolio project encourages students to accomplish these goals relating to composition, revision, internet use, and collaboration, which develops college- and career-readiness at its most basic level. However, additional research suggests that the e-portfolio project also moves beyond these limited college- and career-ready skills, towards a more full picture of overall student preparedness, including heightened composition skills, as well as general “studenting” skills and contemporary digital rhetoric skills. The remainder of this chapter will identify all of the different skills--both the general and more traditional, as well as the contemporary, and, thus, digital--that are promoted by e-portfolios, in order to make a case for the project’s primary benefit: to
promote college- and career- readiness that is addressed in the Standards and still moves beyond them better than the existing PARCC exam.

It is my belief that e-portfolios develop students’ general cognition and work ethic, which, without being acknowledged explicitly in the Standards, is important to college- and career- readiness, but is not addressed in any substantial way on the PARCC. On a general level, portfolios promote the development of more universally applicable skills—commonly referred to as “studenting” skills in the education sphere—such as time management, creative and critical thinking, and metacognition: time management is promoted through the longevity of the project, while creative and critical thinking are promoted by the composition process, through the selection of the best pieces, and in the self-reflections, which also promote metacognition (Mills-Court & Amiran). Many theorists believe metacognition is the most important skill developed through the use of portfolios. Portfolio theorists Karen Mills-Courts and Miranda Rae Amiran (1991) explain the benefits of these metacognitive skills: students become active learners that are engaged in the writing process, students are able to set goals for their education, and students take ownership over their work and feel empowered. As portfolio experts Roberta Camp and Denise Levine observe in their article “Portfolios Evolving: Background and Variations in Sixth- Through Twelfth-Grade Classrooms,”

When students look back on their work and their strategies for creating it, when they describe what they see and what they value in their work, they provide a strong basis for their own learning, for richer responses to peers’ writing, and for comparisons with their peers that lead to expanded
awareness of strategies for writing and criteria for evaluating writing.

Students who learn to reflect on their writing not only provide their teachers with information that can directly guide instruction, they engage in a form of assessment that has the greatest potential effect on their learning because it addresses directly their own awareness of what they have done and what they can do. (200)

The skills promoted through portfolio projects, unlike through the PARCC, require inquiry at the highest levels of Bloom’s taxonomy and can elevate performance in all subjects, in college courses, and in the workforce.

Creating writing portfolios can also develop college- and career-ready composition skills, specifically, in a more accelerated and authentic way than the PARCC. These composition skills include the development of an individualized process that incorporates collaboration, the ability to understand and respond to feedback, and grammar. Because composition is done entirely independently or in a workshop setting without a mandated process, portfolios help students develop their own individualized writing process. The PARCC exam also allows for this individualized writing process, but it eliminates the ability for students to consult with their teachers or peers for collaboration, which is a critical component of the writing process in the real world. Without this opportunity for collaboration, students also do not develop the skill of responding to and providing feedback on the PARCC; this use of feedback is another essential real world skill developed by portfolios, through the incessant revisions required by the project. Throughout the portfolio project, writing pieces are never
viewed as complete. Students are encouraged to revise over and over again, making both more substantive, content-level revisions and standard grammar and convention revisions that they can then apply elsewhere on additional assignments. These revision skills in general and language convention skills, specifically, are deemed essential for real world success. And the portfolio project does a much better job of developing these skills because, as grammar theorists Mary Ehrenworth and Vicki Vinton explain in their book *The Power of Grammar*,

> We cannot teach grammar in lasting ways if we teach it as a way to fix student writing, especially writing they view as already complete.

Students need to construct knowledge of grammar by practicing it as part of what it means to write, particularly in how it helps create a voice that engages a reader on the page. (10)

While some of these writing skills--grammar included--are addressed on the PARCC exam, the portfolio project addresses a greater number in a more effective way. The portfolio project is more of an instructional method than an assessment model. As a result, the teacher’s role is shifted from that of evaluator to that of facilitator, much in the way theorist Carol Booth Olson describes in her book *The Reading/Writing Connection*:

- to foster *ownership*; to create expectations that are *appropriate*; to provide ample *structure* through modeling his or her own writing process and through mini-lessons that focus on author’s craft and make strategies visible; to engage students in *collaboration* to improve one another’s
work; and, by delivering teacher feedback that is descriptive and instructive rather than exclusively evaluative, to help students develop and internalize a repertoire of effective writing strategies. (387)

This shift in roles used in the portfolio process allows students to be the agents of their own learning and assessment, which results in more effective learning than on the PARCC exam, where students are uninvolved in the process, except to be evaluated. This redefined role helps to better prepare them for college and careers.

By adding an electronic element to portfolios, these skills are developed even further, resulting in even greater preparedness. Digital rhetoric theorist Douglas Eyman explains the specific and numerous ways in which digital projects, much like e-portfolio websites, heighten the traditional “Canons of Classical Rhetoric” in the foundational “Theory” chapter of his book Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Method, Practice. By navigating website-design programs and their functions, students are able to explore different networks of information to examine their rhetorical moves before their actual website construction. They must choose among a variety of website construction sites after identifying the benefits and drawbacks of each. According to Eyman, doing this will help them figure out which tools are best, which will be helpful when students need to make similar determinations for college and their careers. When completing the actual project themselves, students will follow steps to, first, design, and then to arrange, improving their understanding of organization and style and the ways in which they are impacted by purpose and audience, all of which are traditional composition concepts. The purpose and audience of websites can sometimes be multiple and conflicting,
resulting in a more complex understanding of the traditional rhetorical situation. Finally
publishing their websites will be their delivery—though a more highly developed form
than traditional oration, due to the multiple levels of interwoven information and
separate audience considerations—at which point their websites will become a part of
their individual and, once they comment on each other’s projects after submitting,
collective memory. This more public, more interactive delivery for multiple, more
complex audiences heightens the importance of revision for students. In this sense, the
creation of e-portfolio websites promotes traditional rhetorical skills—and, thus, college-
and career- readiness—to a greater degree than the PARCC is capable of doing.

The added electronic element also fills an existing gap in education, that of digital
rhetoric. By designing a website, students must master a digital literacy that is, as
Porter, Rhodes and Alexander, suggest, along with digital rhetoric critic Elizabeth Losh,
in the article “Hacking Aristotle: What Is Digital Rhetoric?” more layered, requiring
students to utilize visual literacy, design literacy, and media literacy in addition to more
traditional composition skills. Students’ rhetorical choices far exceed mere text
considerations when working on websites: students must decide what the design of the
website should be, which layout they should use, what color scheme would be most
appropriate, which style of font is clearest, and whether they should include a picture or
a video clip to accomplish their purpose. Websites also introduce the more
contemporary concept of hyperlinked connectivity in writing: on websites, students can
use hyperlinks to weave multiple different rhetorical pathways. All of the possibilities
for digital rhetoric offered by e-portfolios develop students’ layered literacy—which is an
essential requirement for college, career, and real world readiness—in a way that paper
portfolios cannot, and that, without e-portfolios, students would not necessarily be
exposed to, by the requirements of the Common Core and the PARCC.

By addressing both general composition skills and more specialized digital
rhetoric skills, the e-portfolio project addresses college and career readiness better than
any existing model, including, and especially, the PARCC exam. However, their
benefits over the PARCC exam far exceed the promotion of CCR skills, moving students
towards a truly authentic, real world composition experience, while simultaneously
promoting independence and responsibility. As portfolio theorist Jeffrey Sommers
explains in his article “Bringing Practice in Line with Theory: Using Portfolio Grading
in the Composition Classroom,” “When students know that they can control their grades
through extra effort in revising and through the selection process available to them prior
to final evaluation, they become more responsible and more independent; in today’s
terminology, they become ‘empowered’” (163). Through this practice, grading becomes
more authentic; reward is based on effort, care, and responsibility, as it is in college, the
workforce, and beyond.

This method of grading also promotes greater psychological development than
the PARCC exam does. On a psychological level, portfolio projects promote
independence, ownership, and self-efficacy better than the PARCC exam, which leads to
better learning and college- and career-preparedness overall. As Anthony Thompson
and Lynsey Baumgartner observe in their portfolio study, “The personal construction
seemed to instill a sense of pride and ownership. These are students’ own portfolios,
they complete[d] the assignments independently and then put together their portfolios on their own.” This ownership leads to self-efficacy, or the perception of one’s own capabilities in accomplishing a goal or task. According to experts Mills-Courts and Amiran, self-efficacy is an influential factor in composition that can be fostered on a whole-class and individual level through the use of portfolios: “the portfolio process generates excitement, commitment, and a warm, relaxed sense of community in the classroom. It also builds confidence; even the weakest writer can experience success when the focus is kept steadily on improvement rather than on evaluating the product” (106). When students feel self-efficacy, they learn better and with more pleasure, which can promote ownership in a way that the PARCC exam is unable.

Self-efficacy is an especially important result of portfolios for unique learners, including students with learning disabilities and English language learners. Studies, such as one conducted by learning disability experts Thompson and Baumgartner, suggest that portfolios have a positive impact on the self-efficacy of students with learning disabilities and on their performance as a whole. Thompson and Baumgartner explain in their article “Exploring Portfolios in the Elementary Classroom with Students with Disabilities/Exceptionalities: Timely or Time-Consuming?” that many learning disabled students feel pride in just completing the portfolio. For learning-disabled students, particularly those with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder), whose lives can be “chaotic, changing, and maybe unstable,” a sense of completion can be extremely important. Since special education performance on the PARCC exam is an issue, a portfolio project offers one potential fix.
Additional research shows that portfolio assessments are also rewarding for students who are English language learners. As with learning disabled students, portfolios can promote self-efficacy and strengthen academic performance for non-native English speakers. With portfolios, the linguistic, cultural, and educational diversity of English as a second language (ESL) classrooms is easily addressed because the assessment is individualized. Unlike standardized tests, portfolio assessments respond to the necessity in ESL education to use a combination of formal and informal assessments in order to monitor language development (Moya & O’Malley). From a practical standpoint, portfolios can provide documentation of this language development, which can be useful for a variety of purposes outlined by ESL experts Sharon S. Moya and Michael O’Malley in their article “A Portfolio Assessment Model for ESL”: “monitoring student progress, placing students at the appropriate instructional level, assigning grades, designing future instructional interventions, and determining when it is appropriate to phase the student out of special instructional programs.” By promoting self-efficacy, a portfolio project might help to minimize the existing gap between English and ESL PARCC scores.

It is because of these benefits that some schools, even within the CCR culture, have introduced e-portfolios as a requirement for students. East Syracuse-Minoa High School in East Syracuse, New York, for example, now requires all students to create e-portfolios (Lankes). Students begin working on their e-portfolios during their sophomore year and continue updating and revising the project throughout the remainder of their high school careers. The students themselves are responsible for selecting and
updating the work samples they include in their e-portfolio; these work samples can be writing pieces, multimedia research papers, art work, video clips from a performance in the school play, or any other piece of work, multimedia or otherwise, that they believe best represents their skills. Once created, these e-portfolios were then sent to colleges as part of the admissions process, or to potential employers to help them determine the students’ workplace readiness. The study of this initiative, published in the article “Portfolios: a New Wave in Assessment” by Anna Maria D. Lankes, indicated that “In the fourth year of implementation, all students at East Syracuse-Minoa High School have portfolios. During the last two years, approximately 110 portfolios have been distributed along with college applications.” Lankes claims that colleges, universities, and employers all across the country have been “very receptive” to these e-portfolios, making the initiative a huge success. Other examples of schools with similar projects include Mt. Edgecumbe High School in Sitka, Alaska, where students learn HTML programming in order to create internet e-portfolios. Each e-portfolio, called an “Electronic Learner Portfolio,” includes a cover page, table of contents, resume, personal statement, and eight samples of student work representing at least four different academic subject areas. In Lankes’s discussion of this initiative, she indicates that “over 500 students at the school had created HTML portfolios.” Doing so promotes digital rhetoric and, thus, college and career-readiness.
Chapter Four: Hazards of E-portfolio Assessment

In Chapter Three, I hope to have made a convincing case for e-portfolios. However, there is much research that exists to remind us that electronic portfolios should not be viewed as a writing assessment cure-all; there are a number of hazards associated with the widespread implementation of e-portfolios, much like the ones at East Syracuse-Minoa High School and Mt. Edgecumbe High School that are described in Chapter Three. The implementation as a globalized evaluation model, for example, would create a whole new set of assessment problems. While e-portfolios are, in my view, mostly valid assessments that correspond to the common core standards and promote college- and career-readiness better than the PARCC exam, they raise issues of assessment validity and scoring reliability, of power dynamics that can un-do the benefits outlined in Chapter Three, and of implementation problems, including access and inequity leading to a widened achievement gap.

While the e-portfolio model is, overall, a more valid assessment than the PARCC, the project’s emphasis on general “studenting” skills makes it slightly less valid than it could be. According to writing assessment theorist Karen L. Greenberg in her article “Validity and Reliability Issues in the Direct Assessment of Writing,” validity in assessment means that “performance on the test corresponds to the actual behavior or knowledge that the test user wants to measure” (13). Because of the heavy emphasis on collaboration and revision, the portfolio project can end up rewarding the ability to work well with others or the amount of effort a student puts into their project, rather than actual writing ability, as it is intended to measure. As a result, an already talented writer
who makes few revisions based on individual readings may score worse than a bad writer who works with others to improve, but only to become a merely mediocre writer. This is especially troublesome for multiple reasons: first, if the goal of writing assessment is to measure an individual’s ability to compose, then the portfolio project—which allows and encourages collaboration and internet use and, as a result, can reflect work that is influenced by or, in some cases (particularly so with electronic portfolios), plagiarized off of others—does not necessarily accomplish this; and, second, placing emphasis on “studenting” skills such as self-management, organization, and collaboration might actually alienate the students with learning disabilities, who have trouble with these skills, the project is intended to help.

This heavy emphasis on “studenting” skills outside of the composition itself, combined with the complication of collaboration, also prevents portfolio assessments from being scored reliably. Reliability in assessment is defined by Greenberg, who explains that, in order for a scoring system to be of any value, it should yield the same relative magnitude of scores for the same group of writers under differing conditions. Reliability is an estimate of a test score's accuracy and consistency, an estimate of the extent to which the score measures the behavior being assessed rather than other sources of score variance. (7-8)

Portfolios provide multiple lenses for scorers to view student abilities, which is important, but their attempt to contextualize writing and highlight student growth is difficult to score with reader consistency (Broad). This lack of reliability in scoring
raises serious questions regarding the degree of importance that can ultimately be
granted to results; if e-portfolio performance is going to be used for teacher evaluation,
student graduation determination or class placement, or even just for a student grade, as
the PARCC currently is, then the project needs to be scored as reliably as possible.

In the article “Rethinking Portfolios for Evaluating Writing: Issues of Assessment
and Power,” writing assessment and portfolio theorists Brian Huot and Michael M.
Williamson offer other, more reliable means of grading portfolios. However, each of
these potential solutions offers additional problems. One recommendation, for example,
suggests that, instead of scoring by mandated guidelines, portfolios should be read by a
local board of teachers, parents, administrators, and students, who can decide on a
year-to-year basis what criteria most relates to their students and school. This is
problematic for a number of reasons: on a practical level, this has the potential to widen
the achievement gap. In low-income districts, parents might not have the necessary time
to dedicate to such a “board” and administration might not have the means to fund it.
And even if districts could reasonably form a local board for portfolio scoring, questions
arise regarding the expertise of the teachers, parents, administrators, and students that
comprise it: are they knowledgeable enough to select appropriate criteria for scoring and
objective enough to do so fairly, without gaming scoring for personal benefit? It creates
further reliability issues when potential lay-people from high-stakes groups are tasked
with scoring portfolios. Huot and Williamson suggest that, in evaluating this criteria, the
board can judge portfolios on the basis of whether a student is on track, ahead of the
game, or needs additional help, instead of providing numerical scores. The PARCC
currently uses a similar scoring system—defined by “did not yet meet expectations, partially met expectations, approached expectations, met expectations, and exceeded expectations”—but each level is defined by a numbered score. If Huot and Williamson’s non-numbered scoring were actually implemented, further questions would arise in defining more objectively what “on track, ahead of the game, or needs additional help” looks like for all students, despite differing backgrounds and abilities. This reliability is a primary concern in writing assessment and is something that the PARCC can offer over e-portfolios.

Even if it were possible to score portfolios reliably, research shows that placing any kind of requirements for grading on the project minimizes its value. From a student perspective, the value of portfolios is, to some degree, the freedom to write what you want for it and to choose what it includes. However, teachers are not always comfortable grading such freedom, nor can college- and career- readiness be guaranteed with the students in control—it is perhaps idealistic to suggest that students actually want to be agents of their own learning and assessment, and that they will always choose the most appropriate and challenging task when granted such freedom—so they often impose requirements upon students, for the sake of both reliability and rigor. As a result, though, students lose their agency. Once this happens, according to Watkins, portfolios lose their "transformative" power. When students are no longer granted choice or ownership over their assessment, it in many ways undoes the positive impact portfolios can have on self-efficacy.
This becomes even more true when the assessment is then granted higher stakes through state institutionalized testing. As e-portfolio theorist Darren Cambridge explains in his book *Eportfolios for Lifelong Learning and Assessment*,

Along with the focus on the individual comes the assumption that such personalized e-portfolios are not suited to play a role in institutional assessment and that employing them would retard or even negate the learning they are designed to support, necessarily imposing the constraints of the standardized portfolio on them to deleterious effect.

Huot and Williamson agree with Cambridge. They explain that high-stakes tests—including exams like the PARCC, but also the Kentucky portfolio assessment model, which requires a writing portfolio, graded according to the same rubric and anchors generated by the state, in place of a state test as a graduation requirement—are developed by the government, not by teachers, based on political, rather than educational, rationale. In this high-stakes context, one of the primary functions of portfolios is to promote accountability, which implies unequal power relations and disenfranchises both teachers and students, who have no say in the development of their portfolios and how they are used. So, even though e-portfolios are authentic and empowering in theory, once institutionalized, those benefits are lost. This became apparent with the implementation of the Kentucky evaluation model, where portfolios were not used for any other purpose but assessment and were thus perceived as stressful because students were responding to an external set of demands (Huot and Williamson).

In this sense, the institutionalized e-portfolio is equivalent to the PARCC exam; they are
merely tools for assessment. This is problematic because, as foundational portfolio theorist Peter Elbow explains in his article “Will the Virtues of Portfolios Blind Us to Their Potential Dangers?”, this foregrounds assessment and discourages students from taking risks, perhaps even encouraging, instead, the same “gaming” that occurred on the PARCC that was believed to have stripped the test of creativity and critical thinking. This foregrounding of assessment minimizes the value of the project as a whole to a potentially detrimental extent.

However, in the context of the data-driven college- and career-ready climate, it also is not realistic to suggest that portfolio projects can remain ungraded in order to lower the stakes for students and, thus, correct the issues described above. At a local level, few administrators, teachers, and students would be willing to grant the excessive amount of time required for e-portfolios to an un-graded project: teachers would struggle to explain to parents and administrators why, on a daily basis, there isn’t any evidence of student progress and, at the end of the marking period, the student does not have any grades, while students would have trouble seeing the value in completing endless, boring revisions over and over again for no reason other than their own development as writers. At a more globalized level, schools would struggle to participate in the competitive environment of modern education without grades and test scores for purposes of accountability and rank. These numerical measures of student performance are used for so much now—teacher evaluations, student placement, graduation determination—that it is nearly impossible to function in today’s culture of accountability without them. This culture of accountability extends outside of the education sphere and into the real
world, where bosses use data to determine job performance and to evaluate employment. Given this real world practice, students could not be considered truly college- and career-ready if their portfolios remained ungraded and they were deemed exempt from the culture of accountability in which they live.

Other practical concerns surrounding e-portfolio assessment include implementation logistics: the implementation of a widespread e-portfolio assessment may be just as problematic logistically as the PARCC has been. A mandated e-portfolio project would not fix—and may, in fact, worsen—the multiple logistical and technological implementation issues that have plagued the PARCC. The on-going nature of the e-portfolio project, though one of its benefits, also makes its implementation as a widespread assessment problematic, due to the fact that it increases the length of time and amount of resources—staffing as well as technological equipment—required for its implementation. As with the PARCC, these logistical concerns, particularly the requirement for technological resources, are especially problematic in schools with high numbers of lower-socioeconomic students. At these schools, students may not have physical (actual devices), functional (knowledge of how to use these devices), or experiential (familiarity with these devices for effective and efficient use) access to the technology required for successful test performance (Selfe). This lack of technological access may undo the strides made for unique learning groups—ESL and other minority students—through the project’s promotion of self-efficacy; if students don’t have access to the required technology, none of these psychological benefits are relevant. The essential use of technology may also, and
perhaps most problematically, widen the achievement gap, because, at schools with a majority of higher-socioeconomic students, most of the population has computers at home, which promotes the functional and experiential access required for success on the test. As a result, e-portfolio projects may actually widen the achievement gap even more than the PARCC exam has, particularly because of the advanced electronic component that makes the project most beneficial to students.
Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications

The existing PARCC exam is not a strong measure of college- and career-readiness for students, as much research has shown. Problems include challenges, due to logistical implementation issues, simplification of composition skills, failure to address both general “studenting” skills and contemporary digital rhetoric skills, and perpetuation of the challenges presented to unique learners and of the gap in their results. However, e-portfolios do not necessarily offer an entirely flawless alternative, despite the enthusiasm that many composition teachers and scholars, myself included, express. Although e-portfolios do address the “studenting” and digital rhetoric skills that the PARCC overlooks, despite research establishing them as necessary for college- and career-readiness, while also enhancing critical thinking skills and promoting student agency and self-efficacy, particularly among unique learners—and the state’s offering of a “portfolio appeal” project acknowledges this value—their assessment capabilities as a high-stakes alternative are weakened by many of the same problems that plague the PARCC exam: logistical implementation issues, gaps in results for socio-economically disadvantaged students, and also additional issues caused by the impossibility of reliable scoring of e-portfolios. Additionally, I imagine that if e-portfolios were standardized and became high-stakes assessments, the project would likely lose some of its benefits: by imposing universal requirements and objective grades for reliability, both students and teachers would be disenfranchised by the project, despite its potential for promoting agency and self-efficacy. Still, based on the research conducted in this study, it is my belief that the benefits of e-portfolios outweigh the project’s flaws to a greater degree.
than with the PARCC; however, more research—and, perhaps, empirical research—needs to be done in order to draw further conclusions.

One way of increasing the benefits of e-portfolios while minimizing the project’s flaws would be to implement it on a local level rather than a state-side or national one. As a result of this more localized implementation, students may still gain the benefits of e-portfolios—the development of general “studenting” skills, the enhancement of composition-specific skills, and the introduction of digital rhetoric skills—without the complication of implementation and scoring issues that surface once stakes are raised. Of course, without the high-stakes requirement for digital rhetoric, questions surrounding relevance appear: if teachers need to focus their time on test preparation, Will there room be time for an e-portfolio project alongside that test prep, deemed important by the state through its role in student graduation and teacher evaluation? Perhaps more research might be done surrounding the use of e-portfolio projects for and alongside formal test preparation and implementation.

The possibility exists for another test, outside of the limited scope of the two examined within this research. Hillocks offers an inquiry project as a potential alternative. He proposes that teachers use “inquiry learning,” a method that allows students to use their own questions as the basis of their learning and to develop their own means of assessment in order to reflect that learning (199). But even this type of project has its pros and cons. While it is more student-driven and, thus, authentic than any of the alternatives, this type of learning is hard to assess in a way considered reliable among scorers, much like the e-portfolio. It also does not acknowledge the needs of
diverse learners, like students with IEPs or ESL learners, who might require more explicit instruction. While more research needs to be done on these other alternative methods for assessment, each of them likely has its own benefits and drawbacks.

This suggests that there is no perfect one standard, applies to everyone, writing assessment, and that the best assessment alternative is, instead, to eliminate standardized tests altogether, replacing standardized tests with local assessments that have variety and are appropriate to local communities. Within the localized context of my classroom, I believe that e-portfolios are the best assessment method: my students typically enjoy the freedom they have in creating their e-portfolio project, and they take pride in finished product, while, as their teacher, I get to witness their development of important college- and career-ready skills, including general “studenting” skills, such as creativity, metacognition, and critical thinking; specific composition-related skills, including the development of a writing process, an understanding of audience, the development of writer’s voice and style, and strategies for revision; and digital rhetoric skills—which are overlooked in the educational sphere, but are becoming increasingly more important to today’s contemporary world—such as making a website, understanding networked composition, and employing varied and advanced media forms in composition. Even if these important “real world” skills are not necessarily incorporated into the Common Core Standards and the tests that assess them, the e-portfolio project I use in my classroom can help prepare students for their next step alongside—and, in some cases, in spite of—these CCR mandates. As a teacher, I may not be able to change the larger educational climate or the mandates that drive it, but I can adjust what I do in my
classroom in order to fill in the gaps those mandates leave. In my view, the e-portfolio project is an overall effective method for achieving the college- and career-readiness required by the CCR movement while still moving past it, in order to more truly prepare students for the real world and, thus, fulfill the purpose of education.
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