

Chapter 4- Background Information on Portfolios

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Chapter 2: Background Information on Portfolios

The Growing Popularity of Portfolios

It seems that everywhere we go we read about the need for school reform and hear about some of the exciting developments that are being undertaken to make schools more effective and responsive. One of the common themes that seems to keep popping up is the need for something called "authentic assessment". This term refers to the goal of getting a more accurate portrait of student achievement and ability than report cards or written tests have afforded. Student portfolios have been recommended as an effective way of assessing student achievement. The value of portfolios for authentic assessment is nicely summarized by David Niguidula of the Coalition of Essential Schools who writes:

"What do we really know about a high school graduate's academic career? If we can't talk to the student personally - and even if we can - we rely on records. For the most part, a student record consists of two things: grades on a transcript and standardized test scores. We have a tendency to reduce academic careers to just a few numbers.

We can gain a better understanding of a student's abilities and accomplishments by simply looking at the student's work, rather than the abstracted final grade. This, of course, is the primary idea behind portfolio assessment."

[A Richer Picture of Student Performance](#)

Portfolios can demonstrate work in one subject or a variety of subjects. They can contain work from one semester or a range of several years. The most common use for portfolios in schools (outside of art classes) has been to document writing progress. Certainly, portfolios are a very good way to document a student's development of creative and technical writing skills, but they can be used in so many other ways. With the multimedia capabilities of today's computers, digital portfolios can be used to showcase artwork, models, musical performances, speeches, presentations, athletic performances, community service and even students' feelings and thoughts.

Another advantage that digital portfolios have over paper-based ones is that they can be randomly accessed and cross referenced. In a paper-based portfolio an evaluator might need to look through the entire portfolio to find a project demonstrating a particular skill, such as analytical thinking. With the PowerPoint PB, the portfolio evaluator could use the

"Find" command to have the computer search for any entries identified as demonstrating that skill. Or, in another vein, the student could easily pull up all of her work relating to Native Americans, for example, and display that as a "showcase". Or, one project on Native Americans might be a good example of both writing and history; a digital portfolio allows this to be cross referenced.

Paper-based portfolios can also occupy vast amounts of space. They are often kept in three-ring notebooks or in boxes. You can imagine if a school is required to keep on file a portfolio for every student for every year they were at the school. There is a report of a school purchasing a hundred filing cabinets in which to store their student's portfolios. Digital portfolios can be kept on convenient removable storage media, such as Iomega's Zip disks or recordable CD-ROMs. Additionally, a duplicate copy of the portfolio can be easily made for safety and distribution purposes.

School districts are also using portfolios to document student achievement throughout their student population. They can demonstrate how the work of this year's students compares to the work from other years. Portfolios can serve to demonstrate authentic "benchmarks" for student goals.

Why Use Portfolios?

Are digital portfolios really just high tech scrapbooks? We think not. In addition to serving as a vehicle for exhibiting samples of students' work in a powerful and convenient form, the process of compiling portfolios can lead to students, teachers, and administrators examining what is the real function of education, what constitutes an educated citizen, and what things do our schools need to teach. The Coalition for Essential Schools has identified three questions that a school can address about its system of education.

1. What should a graduate of this school know and be able to do? The answer to this question is the "vision" of the qualities that a graduate - any graduate - should possess. The vision needs to be created by the school community, led by the faculty that will be looking for those qualities in their classrooms.
2. How can a student demonstrate the skills and knowledge that a graduate should have? In other words, how would we know that a student has the qualities to fulfill our vision? Here, the answer might take the form of "exhibitions" or other performance-based assessments completed either individually or collaboratively.
3. How can the school arrange its systems so that all students can exhibit the desired skills and knowledge? This is where the real work of school change begins. The school needs to look at all its systems -curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, scheduling, administration, and so on - in an honest attempt to determine if the decisions it makes are helping students fulfill the vision."

David Niguidula,

Thus, a portfolio can demonstrate not only what a student can do but what the school itself is doing. It can provide a focal point for schools and communities to examine goals, systems; values and visions. Joe McDonald has stated that a portfolio exhibition "faces inward, points out-ward, and presses deeper" (Exhibitions: Facing Outward, Pointiniz Inward).

A Portfolio is a Work in Progress

It should be remembered that a student portfolio not only documents student achievement but also student development. As such, it might be just as useful to exhibit the student's developmental work as it is to include their final work. Indeed, portfolios might be more about the journey than the destination, more about the process than the product.

A Note About Confidentiality

Portfolios can afford a wealth of information about a student, some of which should remain confidential. The PB tries to keep this information away from prying eyes by placing this data in a separate teacher template file and shielding viewing by "hiding" selected slides. Teachers and administrators have traditionally needed to be careful with handling comments to students and parents. That also applies here. Unfortunately, PP does not afford password protection.

While it is essential to keep a backup copy of any electronic portfolio, keep track of the copies so others will not alter or tamper with them. If a portfolio is going to be exhibited on the World Wide Web, student addresses and perhaps last names should not be displayed.

But beyond the issue of tampering, and student safety there is another aspect to confidentiality. Students should have a right to privacy. They should have input over who sees their work and what work is exhibited. Some work (such as poetry) may be of a personal nature and students might be embarrassed by some of their work. Other students might not want to have their less successful or early efforts at a skill displayed. Teachers might require certain types of projects for the portfolio but give their students control over which pieces of their work to included. Students should be thought of as the owners of their own work.

For accomplished students, such as university students, copyright issues might come into play. Some students might be concerned about public exhibition and ownership of their artistic or intellectual efforts. In these instances it is important to have a clear understanding of the issues before the institution keeps a copy of a digital portfolio. It seems reasonable that a school should be able to retain a copy of some of a student's work as evidence of a student's performance.

How To Use Portfolios

Obviously a portfolio cannot contain all of a student's work, nor should it. We feel it should be a showcase of the student's accomplishments and growth. Again, we note that the portfolio should reflect the student's progress, experimentation, and even difficulties, not just his or her successes. It is in some ways a documentary on the student. In this mode of thinking, the portfolio is more than just a transcript. For that purpose it might be useful to prepare a copy of the portfolio which contains only the student's best work. This is another advantage of a digital portfolio, the same work can be arranged into different portfolio formats.

How does one decide which work goes into the portfolio? Again, we take a constructivist approach, and recommend that the student decide this, with the guidance and advice or teachers and parents.

Although many schools, districts, and states are agreeing on common curriculum goals, we feel that there is still room in portfolios for individual expression. Certainly the teacher can provide a required list of subjects or projects that are to be included in the portfolio by laying these out in the student template. But beyond this, the individuality of the appearance, composition and content of the student's portfolios can reflect the student's own individuality. In a world of standardized tests, we don't need to require standardized portfolios. Donald H. Graves has these thoughts:

As educators we are mere infants in the use of portfolios... But as young as this notion is, there are already signs that using portfolios in education is becoming a rigid process... Portfolios are simply too good an idea to be limited to an evaluation instrument. Early data that show their use as a medium for instruction is more than promising... The portfolio movement promises one of the best opportunities for students to learn how to examine their own work and participate in the entire literacy/learning process... Our race to use portfolios with large populations runs the risk of bypassing the participation of the people most vital to its success: teachers and students.

Portfolio Portraits, 1992

It is important to note that although the templates included in the PB display a list of subject areas as the main menu, you can easily modify this index to reflect core concepts, goals, skills, or any other major categories you wish the portfolio to exhibit.

One of the most valuable, yet least appreciated aspects of digital portfolios is their ability to provide random access and cross references to students' work. The file can provide various "table of contents" and showcases" of the work. Copies of the students' portfolios can easily be made and distributed as desired.

Work from cooperative learning teams can be combined into one portfolio, and as noted earlier, portfolios can show a student's progress over a period of several years. The same work can be accessed from different contexts without having to make copies of the work and projects done in multiple media can be included. This gives a showcase for "multiple intelligences" as espoused in Howard Gardner's ground breaking book. For many more ideas on how to use portfolios in the classroom check out the section on 50 Uses for the PB later in this manual.

A more difficult question than "how do I use portfolios in the classroom?", is "how will the structure of schools change to accommodate authentic assessment?". No one really can predict this, but the answer will be a key element in the school reform movement. One way to answer this question is to keep conducting action research on portfolios, and to view the portfolio movement as being in a state of growth. In Portfolio Portraits, Donald Graves lists seven principles for insuring growth:

1. Involve the students.
2. Help the staff keep portfolios of their own.
3. Broaden the purpose of portfolios.
4. Keep instructional opportunities open.
5. Reexamine issues in comparability.
6. Study the effect of school policy on portfolio practice.
7. Enlist the ingenuity of teachers.

School change requires strategic planning, involvement, and reflection. The portfolio movement prompts us to be in touch with these efforts.

Rubrics and Alternative Assessment

"Alternative assessment" or "authentic assessment" does not mean an end to measurement or accountability. In the world of performance based assessment, educators are turning to the use of rubrics to describe and measure a student's performance. A rubric has been defined as "a set of descriptors by which a particular aspect of performance is measured" (Grady Profile manual). Many universities are now accepting written rubrics as an alternative to traditional grade point averages as indicators of student achievement. In fact some schools are doing away with letter grades entirely, and replacing them with rubrics. One common set of measurement rubrics (standards) is: "exceeds requirements", "marginally exceeds requirements", "meets requirements", "does not meet requirements", and "incomplete or missing". A more descriptive set of rubrics would explain exactly what skills were demonstrated and how they were demonstrated. Explaining "how well" the skills were demonstrated leads many educators in search of a thesaurus. The science of defining rubrics is an emerging field with great importance tied to it. We invite you to try your hand at it.

The PB is primarily a set of "fill-in-the-blanks" templates, as opposed to ones with delineated and detailed sets of curriculum goals and rubrics. It is an arduous and dissentious task to agree on a set of standardized curriculum goals and assessment rubrics for a school or school district. To do so for an entire state or nation seems to be a nearly impossible task. Thus, we have chosen not do that for this product, instead we have provided you with a canvas for you to define your subject areas and assessment measures. We hope to compile and publish (via the World Wide Web) examples of completed templates reflecting a diversity of goals and measures which have been filled out by students, teachers, and administrators from all over.

With that disclaimer, we invite those of you looking for some assistance with rubrics to take a look at the Grady Profile Portfolio Assessment program (Aurbach and Associates, Inc.). This excellent program provides an

extensive set of rubrics and performance indicators that can be used to measure student achievement and ability. We feel that the Grady Portfolio serves as a complement to this program in its ability to "computerize" the observation and assessment process.

Examples of Schools Using Portfolios

In practice, the application of portfolios is almost as varied as the format of the portfolios themselves. Several states are using student portfolios in combination with other information on student accomplishments in their accountability systems. For example, Vermont is assessing 4th and 8th grade students in writing and mathematics using three methods: a portfolio, a "best piece" from the portfolio, and a set of equivalent performance tasks. California has launched 21 pilot projects (11 with portfolios) involving the collaborative efforts of school districts for improving alternatives in assessment. Kentucky will be monitoring schools on the changes, over time, in their percentage of successful students and has established an elaborate system that includes portfolio work for measuring success. In order to profile just how varied the use of portfolios is, let's take a look at a few schools as examples:

A First Grade Class-

Laurie Mansfield, a first grade teacher, set out to use portfolios for record keeping and discovered that she learned about her students as individual decision makers and learners via their work on their portfolios. She got her feet wet by starting with just five students. She has students keep two portfolios; a working portfolio (with projects the kids are still working on), and a cumulative one (with completed work). Because of the perceived complexity of digitizing the work, she has **not tried to put the** portfolios into electronic form, but other primary level teachers have used older students to digitize the younger children's portfolios.

An Eighth Grade Class-

In Linda Reif's eighth grade class, students learn to evaluate their own reading and writing through their portfolio selections. Although her class is an English class, many of the students included pieces that they had written for other classes. The students have to write about why they include particular selections, and this writing becomes an assignment in and of itself.

High School Seniors-

At Eastern High School, in Kentucky, members of the senior class put together digital portfolios. These serve as a type of "capstone experience". Students include pieces that are part of the required state portfolio for twelfth-graders in writing. In addition, students select pieces from other classes. The goal is to exhibit some of the 75 outcomes that the state has identified for graduation.

When a student enters a project into the portfolio, he or she needs to identify what outcomes are being demonstrated. The faculty has started to use faculty members as "portfolio advisors" to help students determine which outcomes have been exhibited.

Access to computer equipment has been an issue. Seniors who are compiling their own portfolios are responsible for getting their work into digital form. When possible, they word-process or otherwise use computers to generate their work in the first place. However, they also have access to the school's scanners to input work that they have not previously digitized. The school also has a video camera and audio recording devices, which are used by the students to record performances or to annotate their work. The students who are

putting portfolios together are responsible for making sure a video camera is in the room when a performance is being given or for recording significant elements in the process of a project.

A second group of about twenty students is providing support for the first group. This second group is taking a class in multimedia, learning the intricacies of hypermedia. An analogy has been made between this production staff and the school newspaper staff. Just as some students write articles and other students lay out the paper, the seniors get their work into digital form and the multimedia students provide the technical support to complete the portfolio. The process of constructing the digital portfolios becomes a cooperative learning experience.

An Entire High School-

At Fayer High School in New Hampshire there is a more systemic approach to portfolio production and school change. Thayer has identified a list of nineteen graduation skills. Almost all the teachers belong to teams that work with one group of students in all of their subject areas. Computer support is provided by a teacher and the area computing coordinator.

At Thayer, the development of digital portfolios represents an addition of technology to a culture of change which it is committed to. The portfolio makes assessment much more public and thus fosters conversation in the school on the issues of standards and student achievement.

A University Program-

Portfolio preparation does not end with high school. At Pepperdine University in Malibu, California the staff selects students from each incoming freshman class at random. Each student's work- ranging from quizzes and tests, to essays and speeches, and even focus group audio/ video tapes- is collected and compiled into personal digital portfolios. These portfolios are then recorded onto CD-ROM. The uses of these portfolios include student development, long term student assessment, and archiving. They have created a standard template exhibiting into four main categories: academics, personal work (poems, free writing, amateur video production), work experience, and interests (social clubs, volunteer work, personal interests). The University received computers donated by Silicon Graphics Inc. They are now concentrating on getting the portfolios prepared for exhibit on the World Wide Web.

Some schools of Education use portfolios as a chance for pre-service teachers to explore and model grade school portfolios. Their own portfolios can also serve as an important part of their resumes. Portfolios might include lesson plans that they have created, as well as creative and expressive work. The artwork and poetry they include are often examples of the types of work that they might someday assign in their own classrooms. Some students even include excerpts from their personal journals.

50 Ways to Use the PB

- 1 Use a portfolio as a holding tank for group projects.
- 2 Compile a portfolio to present the work done by a group of students working cooperatively.
- 3 Use it as a way to electronically publish student projects via **CD-ROM or the World Wide Web**.
- 4 Create "one off" CD-ROMs for students to keep by using a **CD-ROM recorder or by** sending the files to a service bureau.

- 5 Output the running of a portfolio on to videotape for students to take home.
- 6 Demonstrate one student's achievement over several years. Keep one portfolio file per year or one file per subject over a multi-year period.
- 7 Have student's compile two different versions of their portfolios; a "personal" one for their own keeping, and a "professional" one, which is retained by the school for assessment and record keeping purposes.
- 8 Compile a "best of" portfolio from work sampled over a multi-year period. This can exhibit the longitudinal dimension of a student's education.
- 9 Compile different versions of the template for different purposes; such as a transcript portfolio, a personal portfolio, or a college admission's portfolio.
- 10 Have students keep two portfolios, one for work in progress and one for completed work.
- 11 Compile portfolios to contain work from one subject, one teacher, or one school.
- 12 Compile a best of the class file, comprised of work from each student in a class.
- 13 Record and exhibit excerpts from oral presentations over a several year period to demonstrate a student's developing oral communication skills.
- 14 Copy and paste projects from individual student portfolios into a class portfolio, containing work samples from many of the students in a class.
- 15 Compile a school or district portfolio to showcase achievements from an entire educational community.
- 16 Digitize student artwork into a digital art portfolio.
- 17 Create a "writing showcase" portfolio.
- 18 Include a screen to display the student's personal reading list.
- 19 Compile all of the work from an integrated unit into a Unit of Study Showcase.
- 20 Submit an electronic portfolio as a work sample to an accreditation or certification committee.
- 21 Submit an electronic portfolio as part of a college admissions process.
- 22 Create an electronic portfolio to supplement a printed résumé.
- 23 Examine student portfolios when awarding scholarships or academic honors.
- 24 Have students add comments to other students portfolios to foster their thinking about benchmarks.
- 25 Use the teacher template to delineate a set of achievement rubrics.
- 26 Use the administrative data portion of the teacher template to store student records and document contacts with parents.
- 27 Use an electronic portfolio to manage an Independent Educational Plan (IEP) for Special Education students.
- 28 Use a video projector or large monitor for students to present their portfolios to the class.
- 29 Have students from a computer class or crew digitize younger student's projects.
- 30 Have students make a digital portfolio as an assignment in a computer class.
- 31 Have students make a small portfolio of a historical figure as part of a report on that person.
- 32 Have students make a portfolio for a fictional person or character as part of a creativity lesson.
- 33 Have student's type their portfolio's text in a foreign language as part of an assignment.
- 34 Have students write up their own evaluation of their portfolios as an assignment and attach the evaluation to the end of the portfolio.

- 35 Have students create a cover for their portfolios as an art assignment.
- 36 Print out the screens on paper and compile them into a booklet.
- 37 Have students help other students compile their portfolios as a project in a computer class.
- 38 Use a portfolio to compile the findings of a research study or independent learning project.
- 39 Use a portfolio in a college class or other class in place of a term paper.
- 40 Create a portfolio for a student's summer vacation learning activities.
- 41 Use a digital portfolio as a way to present a student project to a class.
- 42 Exhibit student portfolios as part of an open house.
- 43 Use PP's Find command to display all of the screens containing a certain term. For example Find all instances of "dinosaur" to see any work a student did concerning dinosaurs.
- 44 Drag and drop slides from different portfolios to merge them into a compilation.
- 45 Use PowerPoint's Export to HTML command to post portfolios on the Web as part of a virtual open house or create links to URl:s to have the portfolio link to a student web site.
- 46 Have the teacher compile examples of a particular assignment from previous classes. This can serve as examples or benchmarks for cur-rent classes.
- 47 Have the teacher keep a portfolio of pictures of science projects, art projects, or music projects to serve as an example for future classes.
- 48 Let student's use PP's animation and other high-end capabilities to include PowerPoint skills as a project.
- 49 Use PP's slide timing feature to create self-running timed presentations.
- 50 Create a database in Excel to keep track of which student's have completed which projects.

Send us your ideas so we can expand this list in the future!

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