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Assigning An E-Portfolio

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Education

First of all, I want to make clear that I am not a “techie” in the common sense of the term. I still have trouble programming the DVD recorder correctly. That said as both a disclaimer and, hopefully, an encouragement to try incorporating webpage technology into your courses, concentration or program, I will explain the electronic portfolio assignment we have introduced in the Teacher Education MAT/UTEP program. It’s an example of an evolving assignment that has benefited greatly from its digital format.

E-Portfolios

What is an electronic or e-portfolio? Rather than a paper or binder version of the collected works presented in a portfolio, the e-portfolio is a digitally stored version that resides on a computer, a CD or, in the best of cases, on a server for easy and public access. A portfolio can be many things—from a “file cabinet” of every piece of work generated by an individual for a course or a program to a purposeful selection of works, annotated by the author as to why they are included in the portfolio, to show thematic aspects of the individual’s work.

The e-portfolio we assign in the Teacher Education (TE) program is the latter. We require our students to demonstrate their proficiency in the seven Brown Practice Based Standards that cover the attitudes, knowledge and practices necessary to qualify for initial licensing as a professional teacher. Students must write a reflective overview of their accomplishments in each of the seven standards and link evidence they have selected to demonstrate proficiency in particular aspects of the standards. They can select any number of artifacts from their coursework, professional journals, and classroom experiences for inclusion. These e-portfolios are constructed twice or three times a year, depending on the particular division of the TE program the student is enrolled in, and evaluated, using a rubric which is provided to students beforehand. They serve as

formative and summative assessments of their progress in meeting professional teaching standards. If you are curious about what these portfolios look like you can check them out on the Education Department website <http://www.brown.edu/Students/MAT/2005/>.

A Brief History of TE Portfolios

The portfolio has long been a requirement of the Teacher Education program as the cumulative reflective assessment and demonstration of our students' proficiency as beginning teachers. It began as a paper portfolio, collected in a binder, which was evaluated and returned to students. It took a tremendous amount of time and paper, as well as copying costs, to pull together writings, assignments, lesson plans, photographs, samples of student work, etc., and often resulted in several inches of collected work. Since we are a program that requires state accreditation, we required students to submit a copy of their portfolio that we could keep on file for the accreditation committee to review every 5 years. There were several problems with this physical portfolio: large colorful portfolios were expensive to reproduce, so students occasionally left their only copy with us—making the reflective self-assessment a product for their professors rather than a personal documentation that could be used in their job search or an initial record that could be built upon during their teaching career. We have a small, overcrowded department building with a curriculum library that could not accommodate 5 years worth of collected portfolios. Professors stored portfolio binders in boxes, under tables, and on top of file cabinets in their small offices, not much bigger than the horse stalls that divided the ground floor of Barus-Holley Hall when it was a carriage house for the manor on George Street. Another drawback of the paper portfolio, which we discovered after going digital, was that it tended to look more like a scrapbook of evidence than a coherent, reflective accounting of students' newly acquired competencies.

In 2001, we began to pilot an electronic version of the portfolio. It solved the reproduction and storage problem, did not minimize the time involved, and generated benefits as well as difficulties to overcome. Most of the software available for portfolios resembles the file drawer model. They allow for the electronic storage on a server (which must be paid for) of multiple documents, photos and other multi-media products arranged through a table of contents/index and accessible for viewing to either the public or designated guests via a password. We wanted a more cohesive document that followed a tree structure with an overall introduction, the overview of each of the standards (our objectives) and multiple pieces of evidence introduced and linked to one or more standard through a reflective commentary by the student. This required internal linking capabilities as well as an ability to digitize and present multiple types of artifacts.

In the first year, we opted for a pre-designed template "program" that provided the structure we were looking for and required students to merely fill in the slots with their digitized products. Quickly, however, we discovered the drawbacks of a rigid template that required a lot of computer work on the part of the students but left them with no transportable ability to create their

own webpage. We also had numerous platform difficulties because the e-portfolios were not on a web-based server.

From that first year and its inconveniences, we made modifications each year to the process of creating the desired product—the e-portfolio. We finally, albeit gradually, got to the point of having our students trained in Dreamweaver, a webpage construction program supported by Brown with VPN (virtual private network) and key access. The other major facilitation for this assignment was securing server space at Brown to host multiple students' portfolios for a year. The websites constructed on the link provided above were mostly done using Dreamweaver, with a suggested organization for the page (instead of a template). This required several workshops taught by CIS and our Education department's DCCs to train the students in using the program as well as how to present their work in multi-media formats.

Benefits of the Webpage E-Portfolio

Very few of our students enter the MAT program knowing how to construct a webpage. As a result of this assignment, however, which is stored on a publicly accessed website, students have created thoughtful, multi-faceted products that demonstrate their knowledge and practice as beginning teachers. Increasingly, these e-portfolios, or selections from them, have been submitted before or during job interviews and in numerous cases, have helped land a teaching job in a competitive market.

While we are very satisfied with the outcome of the current e-portfolio assignment, we are still making adjustments to the process. One of the drawbacks of using Dreamweaver as the webpage publisher is that it requires training and then intensive practice to consolidate one's knowledge of the program. We find that many students need a refresher course if they don't use it from the end of one semester to the end of the next. At the end of the semester, when multiple demands coincide, the frustration of not remembering how the software works can discourage rather than support continued use of webpage technology. Additionally, once the students graduate from Brown, they no longer have free access to the Dreamweaver program or to their web space on the Brown server.

Future Improvements

As a result of the wrinkles we have encountered using a sophisticated webpage publishing program such as Dreamweaver, this year we will switch to using wiki technology for constructing the websites. Wiki software, without bells and whistles, is available for free through several hosting sites on the web. The webpage created using wiki software is housed on the web at no charge, it can be made public or restricted to users through a password, and best of all, it is simple enough to understand and use that a brief tutorial—available through the site—is all one needs to be up and running. We think this latest improvement to our e-portfolio process will encourage students to keep their professional portfolio going once they leave Brown, and to update it frequently, given the

ease of use. It might also result in more creative presentations of students' accomplishments, since the ease of use will leave more time for content creation and manipulation. They may even incorporate webpage construction more readily in their professional practice. You can check out the web address above for MAT portfolios at the end of August to compare the results of wiki-generated e-portfolios.¹

Getting Started with E-portfolios

For anyone interested in creating an e-portfolio kind of assignment, I've compiled this list of advice and observations on introducing new multi-media assignments into your courses.

1. Be prepared to try something and adjust what doesn't work. Technology gets better each year.
2. Don't think of a technology assignment as static. Students build on the experience and enrich it over time.
3. Make it voluntary the first time. Students sign on for experimenting with you on the first trial and forgive the inevitable glitches they'll encounter.
4. Have students collaborate if possible. It reinforces the learning of the technology.
5. When you introduce an application, make sure students use it regularly or intensively right away. Nothing disappears faster than the contents of a technology workshop that doesn't require immediate trials.
6. Contact your ITG representative because he/she will be your greatest ally.
7. Stress the technology aspect of the assignment as much as the content (advantages, importance of the medium). Have a public presentation/exhibition of the work.
8. It's OK to explore with students as a learner of technology yourself, but don't communicate a fear of technology or Luddite tendencies that privilege the paper/text version (content only) of assignments. Evaluate the technology aspect of an assignment on its own merits— aesthetics, ease of navigation, images and links in working order, etc.

If you are interested in trying this type of assignment or introducing a multi-media version of a current one, you can contact me for any advice I might be able to offer at [Polly Ulichny@brown.edu](mailto:Polly.Ulichny@brown.edu), or contact your ITG representative for other faculty and departments with similar assignments. The initial learning curve is steep, but brief. The results are something students take pride in, too often a rarity in course assignments.

¹ If you are interested in trying wiki software for your own courses or programs, contact Stewart Mader (smader@brown.edu) from CIS/ ITG for an introduction and recommended sites to use.