
Implementing ePortfolios in English Education: Delights, Dilemmas, and Recommendations

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“So, when I’m preparing to teach this novel, when do I read it? I skimmed it a month ago, but do I read it again?” Despite ample preparation in designing novel units and engaging students in meaningful discussion, a preservice teacher recently asked this question. Had we taught her nothing?

Instead of viewing the intern as unknowledgeable, one might interpret her question as part of a larger pattern of preservice teachers’ disavowing knowledge and expertise, as highlighted by the work of Whitney, Olan, and Fredrickson (2013). Preservice teachers may know very well what to do but do not see or experience themselves as knowing professionals when compared to more experienced colleagues. In an effort to help our preservice teachers *become knowing professionals* early in their coursework, we have implemented a summative, outward-facing ePortfolio assignment. Completed across courses, our version of ePortfolio is a Wix website, available for public view, featuring exemplars of students’ best work and reflective writing that argues for its relevance to professional practice.

ePortfolio Delights

In Sherry Turkle’s (2012) TED Talk “[Connected, but Alone](#),” she notes, “Technology is making a bid to redefine human connection—how we care for each other, how we care for ourselves—but it’s also giving us the opportunity to affirm our values and our direction.” Implementing ePortfolios within our program has helped our students affirm their teaching

values, to remember and refine skills necessary to teach English in twenty-first-century classrooms. NCTE recognizes the role that technology plays in forming and sustaining creative and critical communities of practice. The joint [NCTE/IRA standards](#) ask that “students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities” (NCTE/IRA, Standard 11) In order for our students, preservice teachers, to expect their future students to meet this standard, they must first experience using technology to form and sustain (in our case) a professional community of practice focused on the teaching of English. The ePortfolio allows our students to participate in the demands and possibilities of such a community.

Creating Teacher Identity

Over the past two years, we have researched our students’ attitudes on the course readings and assignments we ask them to complete. From this work, it is clear that students who view themselves as “only students” and not as “future teachers” or “teachers-in-training” experience courses and assignments very differently from

students who have a robust sense of teacher identity. Students who are “only students” rarely engaged the assigned reading and perform assignments perfunctorily, without a vision for how such work can be applied to their future classroom. Implementing the ePortfolio has helped our students move away from thinking of themselves as students only to forming their teacher identity. It is encouraging to receive comments that the ePortfolio “allowed me to figure out myself as a teacher more” and “helped me understand the teacher I am becoming.” Knowing their ePortfolios will be viewed by principals, department heads, and parents helps our students take themselves seriously as future teachers.

Gathering Forgotten but Essential Work

Creating an ePortfolio requires students to look back at previous courses, assignments, and field experiences to select the most important work they want to showcase. Many of our students had forgotten about prior essential work—and the knowledge, skills, and dispositions developed through that work—that could be used during their teaching careers and showcased on their websites. After thinking deliberately about a variety of English education courses and field experiences, many students realized just how much “work” they had done that could be used in their future classroom. ePortfolios prompted students to reflect on their academic pasts in order to be present to their current academic selves and to start thinking of themselves as future professionals, offering a boost of confidence to nervous novices.

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Composing for an Authentic Audience

Many students informed us that they had never completed an assignment for anyone other than their instructor and peers. Students had to use critical thinking and analysis as they read, reread, selected, revised, and reflected on their ePortfolio artifacts. Students seemed to take this assignment more seriously than other assignments because the intended audience is a professional one, specifically administrators in K–12 schools. Students put forth much time and effort as they carefully chose how to best represent themselves as teachers. As a genre itself, ePortfolio helps us and our students connect with school partners; administrators are able to see one example of how we are not only trying to assist preservice teachers with their professional identities, but also how we are encouraging them to use twenty-first-century skills that they will undoubtedly be expected to teach their students.

Writing Reflectively

Although several students struggled with reflecting about their artifacts, many of them did value this genre of writing. One student in particular stated, “When I took the time to use reflective writing to consider my past compositions, it helped me to realize something about myself . . . and that reflective writing can be a tool for learning.” Through reflective writing, students are able, as one student said, to “be aware of [their] thoughts that go deeper than the surface.” Yes, we want our students to be able to plan lessons, plan units, apply theories to practice, demonstrate content knowledge, and so on. We also want them to understand why they make instructional decisions within a unit or lesson; we want students to examine the relationship between process and product. Reflective writing encourages and allows them to do this, which, we hope, provides depth to their teacher knowledge and identity which may not have been realized otherwise.

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Developing Creative Composition Skills

In addition to encouraging our students to experience the possibilities that abound with technology through ePortfolios, students also experience composition pedagogy in an authentic assessment with a “real” audience. Specifically, the ePortfolio encourages students to experience “uncoverage in composition pedagogy” (Reid, 2004). According to Reid, focusing on uncoverage allows one “to emphasize discoveries that lead to long-term learning over immediate competencies.” As students compose, they begin to focus on the quality of their learning through uncoverage of the ideas and connections in their artifacts and reflections. This invites them to focus less on the quantity of assignments completed and, as a few students mentioned, “boxes checked off,” and more on analyzing the depth of their knowledge in a refreshing way. Uncoverage is needed in our current standards-driven world. As other programs have required a standards-based version of ePortfolios (see Hallman, 2007), we encourage our students to take risks as they select the artifacts that best represent themselves as teachers. In evaluating these, it is clear that, although we do not explicitly mandate that students select artifacts that meet a required number of standards, they are demonstrating their ability to meet these standards on their own. Our students begin to see that, using assignments like ePortfolios, standards are being met and, more importantly, critical

thinking, analysis, and creativity are evident.

ePortfolio Dilemmas

In this section, we will identify and reflect on challenges implementing ePortfolios. Naming these challenges has helped us rethink our course design and program emphases and commitments. We intend this section to be helpful to any reader thinking of using the ePortfolio inside courses or across their English education or teacher preparation programs.

Framing ePortfolio Work as Instrumental to Better Teaching

Most of our students experienced their ePortfolio work as a positive learning experience. However, one student was vocal in her resistance and displeasure, describing the portfolio as “high-falutin and juvenile.” These colorful and expressive adjectives accompanied her general complaint that the ePortfolio was completely unrelated to teaching and her developing knowledge of how to be a teacher; that reflection and reflective writing were unrelated to teaching or learning how to teach and that designing a website was a “foolish and silly” activity. Her comments are extreme but instructive.

Composing with Many Purposes

The student who viewed composing an ePortfolio as unrelated to the “real work” of teaching reading, literature, and writing highlights the need for contextualizing the ePortfolio as multimodal composition; a genre of composing that, potentially, has much to teach teachers about audience, reflection, design, and the interrelationship among image, text, and video. We found it easy, to talk about ePortfolio as a vehicle for obtaining employment, a website designed to “represent” one’s skills as a teacher. However, as a multimodal, multimedia form, it is composed *using* skills that every intern needs to teach. English education programs need to be prepared to frame ePortfolio as a multigenre compositional form

that teachers can use in grades 6–12 classrooms, especially in the context of employing alternative-portfolio assessment, reflective writing, and digital literacy. Using ePortfolio inside or across courses gives English educators and students opportunities to learn about and practice critical media literacy, multimodal composition, revision, and critical reflection. More than just “representing” a student’s pedagogical skills and preparation, the ePortfolio is a constitutive form of those same skills and practices.

Reframing English

Asking students to practice literacy in this way can be, potentially, a disruption of identity. It thus becomes vital to frame ePortfolio and multimodal practices not as a replacement of/for traditional print-centric literacies but as a necessary companion. An essential question that can and should be pursued during an English education program is “What literacy practices characterize our work as English teachers?”

Integrating Expertise across Courses and Disciplines

To our surprise, it was difficult for our students to select artifacts from the discipline of English as representing work and processes of inquiry useful for teaching. For the few students who did select artifacts produced in the discipline of English (e.g., most often a research-based, thesis-driven essay on works of literature), they had difficulty reflecting on how that work supported their teaching expertise. We suspect from interaction with our disciplinary colleagues and conversations with our students that these courses are filled with rich material, lively discussion, and engaging assignments. Implementing ePortfolio has the potential to change how our students pay attention to, understand, and use their experiences as students in the discipline. Such changed quality of attention has the potential to transform their understanding of disciplinary literacy

(Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008) and how they teach students to be critical readers and writers.

Recommendations for Implementing ePortfolio in Your Program

We continue to learn from our first semester of using ePortfolios. Our top three recommendations for readers considering using them are modeling ePortfolio composition by creating your own, reading and using important work on multimodal composition, and explicitly teaching reflective writing over time for various audiences and purposes.

Compose Your Own ePortfolio

“Do as I do” has long been the mantra of our favorite literacy teachers. Students need to see their professors going through the multimodal composing process, too. Modeling your processes of reflection, analysis, sense of audience, and design decisions can be the most important ingredient to successful implementation. Composing your own work as students compose theirs will give you an accurate sense of the time commitment required to not only select artifacts and write reflections but to *compose multimodally*, with a sense of the relationship among space, image, and text. Simply put, composing multimodally took more time than we thought. Slowing down leads to better composing and reflection and, ultimately, better ePortfolios.

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Study Up

If multimodal composition is outside your purview of expertise, we recommend reading the following texts and incorporating selections, when appropriate, into your courses.

Understanding and Composing Multimodal Projects. Danielle E. DeVoss..

Writer/Designer: A Guide to Making Multimodal Projects. Kristin L. Arola, Jennifer Sheppard, Cheryl E. Ball.

The Non-Designer’s Design Book: Design and Typographic Principles for the Visual Novice, 4th Edition. Robin Williams.

Teach, Model, and Require Reflection

We recommend explicitly teaching reflective writing and stressing its importance for a successful ePortfolio. According to Yancey (2009), reflection is the “centerpiece” for print and ePortfolio work. Many of our students had difficulty with reflective writing. The writing was often vague, an idle recapping of “what happened” instead of a critical examination of teacher decision-making. Reflective writing improved over time with peer and professor feedback. Many students, initially, doubted the importance of reflection, thinking the artifacts, ostensibly, would speak for themselves. Our reply to this criticism was to think of the portfolio as a collection of many “I’s”. The reflective “I” is the most current, present self compared to past selves who composed the artifacts. The reflective “I” exercises the most control over what the portfolio and artifacts communicate to a public audience—thus, the reflective “I” should have its say.

We also provide students multiple opportunities to critically reflect over time. In our version of a summative, outward-facing ePortfolio, students reflect for a public, professional audience about how their included work supports their professional competence. They need practice writing this

specific genre of reflection. Students also need space and time to critically reflect in different media (a learning journal, for example) and for different but no less important audiences, including self, peers, and teachers.

The relationship between private and public reflection raises important questions about the performance of inquiry, the role of self-assessment, and the potential tension between authenticity and marketability. Requiring students to reflect using an ePortfolio does not mean dispensing with reflective journals or daybooks. Most importantly, for students to be able to critically reflect on their own instruction, they need to see and hear professors and other teachers do the same. ●

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Call for Manuscripts August 2016 Approaches to Social Justice in the ELA Classroom

For this issue, *ELQ* takes its inspiration from the Conference on English Education (CEE) Position Statement, **Beliefs About Social Justice in English Education**. Authors are required to read and reflect upon these beliefs and to address them in detail in their manuscripts. Share manuscripts of no more than 3,000 words as editable Google Docs and write cover letters as a direct email to abramselq@gmail.com. **Deadline: May 15, 2016.**

October 2016 Call for Manuscripts: Connected Reading

In *Book Love: Developing Depth, Stamina, and Passion in Adolescent Readers*, Penny Kittle asserts: “Once students are reading regularly, voraciously, we can lead them further. Once students develop a loyalty to books and authors, creating identities as readers, they will move toward challenge.” This issue of *ELQ* is dedicated to pursuing the big questions related to reading instruction. How do we connect with students, colleagues, school, and local communities to create a community of readers? How do we encourage readers to share their reading lives in practical and real-world contexts? What struggles do ELA educators face in establishing and maintaining reading communities? What role does technology play in the cultivation of reading lives? Share manuscripts as Google Docs and cover letters in direct e-mail to abramselq@gmail.com. **Deadline: July 15, 2016.**



Call for Manuscripts/ Future Issues

The *English Leadership Quarterly*, a publication of the NCTE Conference on English Leadership (CEL), seeks articles of 500–3,000 words on topics of interest to those in positions of leadership in departments (elementary, secondary, or college) where English is taught. Informal, first-hand accounts of successful research, teaching, and learning activities related to themes of upcoming issues are encouraged. Themes of upcoming issues include:

August 2016: Approaches to Social Justice in the ELA Classroom

(deadline May 15, 2016)

(see call, p. 8)

October 2016: Connected Reading

(deadline July 15, 2016)

(see call, p. 8)

Upcoming issue themes

February 2017: Reflections on Coaching

(deadline November 15, 2016)

April 2017: Learning from Failure

(deadline January 15, 2017)

Submission Guidelines: 1) Manuscripts should address the theme listed in the call for manuscripts for that issue. 2) Manuscripts should be double-spaced with 1-inch margins in 12-point font. 3) Manuscripts should follow the current edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. 4) Manuscripts should be accompanied by a cover letter that includes the theme the article addresses, a bulleted list of key points the article addresses, author name(s), affiliation, work address, work phone number, fax number, and email address. Manuscripts will not be reviewed without the cover letter. Email a copy of your manuscript and a cover letter to abramselq@gmail.com. Make sure that when sending your electronic submission, you indicate in the subject line of the email the issue date for which you are submitting (e.g., August 2017 *ELQ*). ●

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