

Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

ePortfolios: A never-ending innovation

Ruth Benander

University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College

A common observation about pedagogy is that we teach how we were taught. A transformational change in my teaching came when I learned to use eportfolios in my English composition courses. The interesting twist is that although I teach English composition now, the undergraduate institution I went to practiced “writing across the curriculum” (WAC), so I never took a dedicated undergraduate composition course; we just wrote lots of papers in all of our courses, that, once written and graded, were over and done with. In my art classes, we created portfolios of our work throughout a course. At the end of a drawing or painting course, the final exam involved spreading the entire portfolio out on the studio floor and having the instructor critique your progress (or lack thereof). Then we had to write a short reflection on that progress, based on our portfolio review. As an undergraduate, I found this to be a profound experience, and it gave me a keen understanding of my progress and approach to being an artist. So, when I came to the University of Cincinnati to teach composition using the portfolio method, I was as influenced in my teaching by the WAC approach to teaching writing as the portfolio method of learning in my art classes.

In the 1990s, I used the classic paper portfolios to show progress in writing, showcase course work, and reflect on the processes and products of writing. The problem was that only a few students were invested in their portfolios. Stacks of these plastic binders would pile up in my office after the semester was over. I was astounded: to this day, I still have my art portfolios from the 1980s even after I have thrown away all my notes from graduate school. How could the students not treasure their portfolios the way I did?! These English composition portfolios were completed and then never “used” again. All that work....gathering dust on *my* bookshelves. I was looking for a way to make these portfolios more engaging and personally valued. Then I

learned about eportfolios (Yancey, 2009). ePortfolios solved both the problem of storage (no more binders taking up space on my shelves), and engagement (no more complaints about the binders full of papers being “busy work”). As I learned more about eportfolios, I realized they solved even more problems that I wasn’t even aware of.

I learned about eportfolios through conversations with colleagues. I jumped right on that bandwagon! I joined four other colleagues in the International Coalition for ePortfolio Research ([INCEPR](#)), and I learned a lot more about the many uses of eportfolios by creating a research program to study eportfolio use. I also learned a lot by attending the conference of the [Association for Authentic, Experiential, and Evidence-Based learning](#), the national conference for eportfolios. I learned about the various approaches to eportfolios and the various platforms available. Everything I learned about, I tried out with my students. In order to try out all these new ideas, I had to trust that the students would come along with me and muddle through each experiment.

For the most part, they did. I think an important part of the innovation at the start was being able to say, “I don’t know the answer to that question. Let’s figure it out together.” The first time I did an eportfolio with English composition students, we started with WordPress. Since I was learning along with them, I made sure they knew that we were experimenting together. We would work on building the portfolios in class so we could help each other figure out how WordPress worked. I made sure that there were course points associated with the efforts, and we all reflected on how having all their writing in the portfolio changed how they saw their papers. It was everything I wanted: engagement, authenticity, and easy storage.

Of course there were complaints at the start: it was scary to do this new thing with the internet, and it was scary to have your writing right out there where it can be read...potentially by anyone. It was that *frisson* of the authentic audience that I really appreciated the most. Also, at the end of the semester, students frequently commented that initially it was scary to make a website and put their writing on it, but looking back it was not so bad (Benander and Refaei, 2017). Since implementing eportfolios, I have had students write to me about how they have used the eportfolio as a writing sample in their job hunts, used them as evidence for the work they did in a course when transferring to other colleges, and as reference material when they ask for letters of recommendation. I also have more bookshelf space.

This innovation of eportfolios to reflect on the writing process and showcase one's best writing is sustainable because of the development of free software for web authoring. If it had been required to purchase the software, I do not think I would have been able to embrace this innovation as wholeheartedly as I have. The fact that there were free web authoring software applications available made this possible. I have moved from one free application to another as they develop in ease and stability. I used one platform that crashed a lot, and the students agreed that the eportfolio was useful, but the platform caused too many panic attacks. Then, I experimented with giving students a choice of platforms. That seemed to work fine, but dealing with all the various technology issues put the focus on the technology, rather more than on the writing, so I went back to specifying a platform. But I have to say, by the end of the first course in which I used eportfolios, I never looked back.

The innovation itself, of building a personalized website that includes process work, final projects, and reflection on the process, has changed my composition courses for the better. The technology itself has faded to the background as students come to college more accustomed to publishing things to the web and the free web design applications become more user-friendly. The innovation has also been sustainable because it makes my life easier: the portfolios are more interesting to read, easier to read, and easier to store. When students ask for letters of recommendation, I ask them to send me their portfolio link, and I can write much better letters.

So, this innovation, back in 2006, was effective and sustainable. Twelve years later, is it still innovative? I guess for me the practice is no longer innovative, and the site of innovation has moved to what I can actually *do* with an eportfolio. How can I use this tool to help students own their own writing, feel engaged in their own learning, and develop their identities as writers at different points in their writing careers in college? One innovation leads to the next.

References

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