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ePortfolios

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ePortfolios: Reflecting Instead of Just Collecting

During my tenure as an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher in Howard County, portfolios have always been a required element. In the beginning, the portfolio was just a place to keep student writing. Later, it was used when I needed to make class recommendations or meet with a parent. Eventually, students charted their progress in various aspects of the 6+1 Writing Traits. Unfortunately, students rarely engaged in any meaningful reflection of their writing and thinking. Certainly, this practice did not lead to great improvements in their skills. Despite my best intentions, a lack of time and brain space prevented me from doing anything more with the portfolios. For this reason, I am intrigued by the ideas, experiences, and structures offered in the article, “ePortfolio as a Measure of Reflective Practice” by Parkes, Dredger, and Hicks (2013). The authors demonstrate that the use of technology facilitates strong meta-cognitive practices for arts and humanities teacher candidates as they chronicled their learning. Though my eighth grade ELA students are certainly not as mature and career-focused as these teacher candidates, the lens through which to view the portfolio process -- and the suggested structures -- might work very well in my ELA classroom as students monitor their growth.

The authors of the article propose that using ePortfolios are an effective way for students to identify and trace their “emerging knowledge, skills and dispositions as self-aware, reflective beginning teachers of not simply content, but also of children in today’s 21st century classroom. (p 99)” While my 8th grade students are not learning to be teachers, I am interested in helping my students chart their growth as readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers. Specifically, it is important for students to identify their passions, learning styles, and interests so they can use this knowledge to improve and grow. Parkes, Dredger, and Hicks (2013) state that there are some key elements involved in ensuring that an ePortfolio is effective in facilitating growth and meta-cognition. “...ePortfolio goes beyond simply collecting and storing artifacts towards leveraging digital technologies’ potential to make unique linkages, connections, and reflections among multiple experiences and artifacts in ways that would not otherwise be possible with a traditional paper portfolio” (p 101). Because tools such as Twitter, Video collages, Blogs, and Vlogs are used, students are actively engaged in reflection -- not just collection.

The authors assert that there are four key stages involved in creating ePortfolios: collecting, selecting, reflecting, and connecting. The paper portfolios that are a hallmark of a 20th century ELA classroom are stuck in the collecting stage. In the creation of a 21st century ePortfolio, collecting artifacts throughout the year is just the first step in a process that encourages collaborative problem solving and public sharing. As students review artifacts, they can gather input and ideas from their peers, since ePortfolios are meant for others to easily view and comment upon. This collaboration is crucial as students work through their thinking and growth as communicators and students.

Although Parkes, Dredger, and Hicks (2013) assert that this four staged portfolio process helps arts and humanities teacher candidates “present a ‘portrait’ of themselves as a beginning teacher” (p 102) the ideas presented in this article can easily transfer to the 8th graders in my charge. In fact, one universal quality of all middle school students is that they are very focused on themselves and searching to create their own identity. Although my teaching practice is firmly rooted in the writing, reading, speaking, and listening standards inherent in an ELA classroom, it must also consider the unique characteristics of the 8th grade student: curious about him/herself and others, eager to bridge the gap from childhood to adulthood, and ready to take on appropriate and meaningful challenges. The focus on the reflective possibilities of an ePortfolio, as outlined by Parkes, Dredger, and Hicks (2013) suggest that ePortfolios have a meaningful place in my ELA classroom.

Parkes, K., Dredger, K., & Hicks, D. (2013). ePortfolio as a Measure of Reflective Practice. *International Journal of ePortfolio*, *3*(2), 99–115. Retrieved from <http://www.theijep.com/pdf/IJEP110.pdf>