**Electronic Portfolio Learning at NIU: History, Rationale, and Practice**

The First-Year Composition Program at NIU is actively engaged in various forms of assessment, with the goal of using our assessment results to improve the program. In 2002-2003, we developed our own program outcomes based on the Council of Writing Program Administrators' Outcomes Statement. To support our development of authentic, evidence-based program assessment, we became a member of the first cohort of the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio research in 2004, and have been improving our electronic portfolio pedagogy and assessments ever since.

**Why portfolio pedagogy and assessment?**  Since the 1980s, portfolio assessment has been widely recognized as a best practice in composition pedagogy, since it offers an authentic assessment of process-based student writing over time, not a test or a timed essay.

**Further:**

- It helps us come to terms with growing pressure from administration and accrediting organizations for authentic assessment.
- It encourages students to **collect, select, and reflect** upon pieces that demonstrate their learning. Thus, the students become more actively involved in assessing their own learning, and can both **connect** it to other contexts and **project** from it to future life and career experiences.
- It helps students connect their learning in a class to other classes and life experiences. They look backward (reviewing), forward (projecting), and around (connecting).
- It allows students to use **writing** to demonstrate and reflect upon learning. According to Kathleen Yancey, reflecting in writing "makes thinking visible"; according to Walter Ong, "Writing objectifies thought," making it possible for students to see and manipulate the words that represent their learning process.
- It has the potential to change the climate of learning on campus. **Reflecting on how learning takes place** is the key to dialogue: student to student, student to teacher, students and teachers to administrators, and so on.

**Why electronic portfolios?** In the early 2000s, computers, software, and the World Wide Web became sophisticated enough to allow for the easy creation and storage of new kinds of document collections, in which relationships among ideas and texts could be represented through hypertext links.

**Further:**

- They take up infinitely less space than paper-based portfolios.
- They can be reproduced, shared, or sent at almost no cost (CD, email, the Web).
- They are iterative: they can be updated easily, yet previous copies can be archived.
- They can be repurposed for class and program assessment, graduation requirements, or the job search.
- They can include a variety of media that the computer is capable of displaying.
- They are interactive; students can link from document to document, or to outside resources, to show how the learning is embedded in a social and intellectual context. Hypertext allows students to discover new connections, new patterns, new possibilities.
- They can be set up with customized access features, ranging from completely private, to student/instructor, to the entire class, to prospective employers, or to the whole world.

**How does this work in practice?**

**Collect:** Early in the semester, remind students to save electronic copies of everything they write, for your class and for other classes, in multiple places, such as on a personal computer or flash drive, on Google Docs, and on their NIU-provided network storage space. Make sure that students label files and folders with a coherent naming system, so that they can find them again when they need them.

**Select:** In the second half of the semester use some of class peer review and office hour conference time to talk with students, and have them talk with each other, about which pieces of writing, and which passages in pieces of writing, best demonstrate both their strengths as writers and their fulfillment of program outcomes. As they begin to select pieces and passages, they should also begin jotting down reflections on these pieces and passages, assembling the parts of the story of their growth as writers throughout the semester.

**Reflect:** Research in composition has shown that students who reflect on their own composing processes not only show improvement in their writing, but are also able to transfer the procedural knowledge they gain in our classes to other writing tasks in other domains. Thus, reflection should be part of every assignment sequence, even if some reflections are less formal and ungraded. If you build reflection into early assignments, the overall reflection for the electronic portfolio will not come as a surprise; instead, it will be a natural outgrowth of the class's dual focus: 1) writing the main assignments, and 2) telling the story of their writing process and growth as writers.

**Connect:** One of the biggest complaints from both students and their teachers is that they don't see how the work they do in our classes connects with the writing, reading, critical thinking, and problem-solving they do, not only in the context of their other classes, but also in the context of their lives and work. Ideally, the electronic portfolio should be a space in which students can identify patterns in their writing, learning, and expression that extend outward from the writing class into other domains. Encourage students to see how the writing, reading, critical thinking, and problem-solving they do in your class connects to tasks, challenges, and assignments in their other classes, lives, and work, and to reflect on these connections. Some teachers also encourage students to link to examples of their writing from outside the composition class, particularly when those examples demonstrate how the student is meeting program outcomes.

**Project:** Just as we can ask students to find connections that extend outward from our writing classes, we can also ask students to reflect back on who they were as writers before our classes (in elementary and secondary education, for example), and to look forward to who they will become as writers after our classes. This process extends the students' reflective practice to embrace both history and future. We can ask questions about such things as how teachers commented on their writing in high school, as well as how they see themselves growing and changing as writers, not only at NIU, but in their future lives and careers.