

## Portfolio, Electronic, and the Links Between

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*If you build it, they will come.*

—*Field of Dreams*

We hear a lot of talk—in person, on listservs, and in hard copy—about the pioneers and front-runners who teach with advanced technology. And we hear a lot of talk—in person, on listservs, and in hard copy—about the radical changes in teaching and learning that portfolios can make possible.

What we learn here is about what can happen when we combine the two.<sup>1</sup>

### EDITING THIS ISSUE

In Spring 1994, Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe were gracious enough to ask me to guest edit this issue of *Computers and Composition*. Just after saying yes, however, I began to worry. Most of my teacher friends who “do” technology don’t “do” portfolios. And most of my portfolio pals who use technology do so for their own purposes; they don’t combine it with portfolios. As I ran through my mental Rolodex of teachers I knew in diverse educational contexts, and as I thought about all the conference presentations I’d attended over the last couple of years, I wondered: Would there be enough people who had worked with electronic portfolios to fill an issue like this? \*If\* these people actually existed—people not singly but doubly adventurous—would they be willing to share what they’d done? \*If\* they would share what they’d tried and what they’d learned, would the pieces form a coherent whole? Would their approaches be similar—so similar, perhaps, that they were redundant? Would they be different, so different as to seem chaotic? Could we make a portfolio out of them? I began to think of this task as analogous to the task in the movie *Field of Dreams*: If I just committed to this journal issue focused on the electronic portfolio, electronic portfolios (and the articles needed for this issue) would appear.

Now, another way to tell this story is to say that I got lucky :). I did. As is often the case, one person knows another. I had seen Gail talking on the WAC-L listserv with

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<sup>1</sup>For those more accustomed to hypertextual reading, let me suggest that you should feel free to read around the two texts that frame this issue. Within this introductory piece, there are four links:

- How I came to edit this issue of *Computers and Composition*: p. 129.
- What a portfolio is, a definition: p. 130.
- What happens when we cross electronic with portfolio (an overview of the contents of the issue): p. 130.
- The effect of the electronic portfolio, posed as “Learning With”: p. 132.

In “The Electronic Portfolio: Shifting Paradigms” (a companion introductory text that concludes this issue and that you also might want to read now :), I identify five paradigmatic shifts fostered by the electronic portfolio: pp. 259–262.

Beverly Wall about her electronic portfolio, so I e-mailed her. Becky Howard put me in touch with Tim Mayers. I heard Jo Campbell at an NCTE conference on portfolios. And so it went. What I learned, as this issue attests is, yes, electronic portfolios are being developed. And yes, again: with the electronic portfolio, we are designing pedagogy whose implications we are only now beginning to understand, appreciate, and interrogate.

### A DEFINITION OF PORTFOLIO

To begin: what is an electronic portfolio? Moving back further, what is any kind of portfolio? As I have argued elsewhere (Yancey, 1996), a portfolio is a metatext with seven defining features:

- It is a *collection* of work.
- It is a *selection* of work, culled from the archival collection, usually supplemented by additional texts created specifically for the portfolio. Such texts include reflective letters, annotations on individual texts, and other contextualizing texts such as a table of contents.
- It includes *reflection*, which typically allows the portfolio composer to guide the reader through the portfolio and assist in its evaluation.
- It presumes *development*, although texts demonstrating development aren't always included in the portfolio. (And, as we shall see, including such development can be a particular problem with electronic portfolios.)
- It documents *diversity*—both in its contents, which are various, and in its ability to show how different our students are, one to the next—individually, cognitively, culturally, institutionally.
- It is *communicative* in the sense that a portfolio always shares what is important to the portfolio's composer, what is valued in the context in which that student works, and so on.
- It is *evaluative*, as suggested before: The portfolio itself tells its observers what is valued by the participants who shaped it.

### CROSSING ELECTRONIC WITH PORTFOLIO

What happens when we cross electronic with portfolio? Do we get word processing, online, World Wide Web, hypertext? In a word, yes.

According to Alan Purves, whose article leads this issue, the portfolio is itself a hypertext: a collection open to multiple, cross-generic exhibits, a collection that can be read/written according to the reader's intent. As he says,

Portfolios represent a different way of construing the nature of curriculum and instruction. They refocus the course from teacher to student. They call for maturity and independence on the students' part and they make any course become a matter of student learning rather than of teacher instruction.

### Portfolios and Hypertexts Explain Each Other

For Tim Mayers, the electronic portfolio is variable—a hard copy portfolio created in a transitionally electronic classroom. Such a portfolio, according to Mayers, embodies what Cynthia Selfe (1989) has called “layered literacy.” Mayers explains it this way: Although

the students are working in an electronic classroom, most “still regard the portfolio, worth half their final grade, as a largely print-oriented project.” Some, however, combine both old and new technologies: “In each case, the cover letter informs me that I should retrieve the draft materials electronically, thus juxtaposing the fluid, unfinished screen versions with the fixed, polished page versions.” We begin to see how to move not just toward the electronic portfolio but also back and forth from paper to online and back, as we seek to determine what forms such a portfolio can take.

In Becky Howard’s class, *\*exchange\** is the key word, and to manage that among her students, she makes a different choice: that all students work in the same environment. Her metaphor for the role of the electronic portfolio shows how integral it is to her project of teaching writing: “the interaction of . . . electronic composition and portfolios . . . has become the endoskeleton of my writing classes” be they classes in first-year composition or writing across the curriculum. Still, although Howard has learned to write her advisory memo to us, she continues to struggle with next-generation kinds of questions, chief among them how to include interactive media in the electronic portfolio.

For Katie Fisher, hypertext portfolios of creative writing are themselves a second-generation activity, composed only after students have assembled paper portfolios of these creative texts. In moving from paper portfolio to hypertext portfolio, Fisher tells us, students rely on the “linking metaphors that would make the boundaries of space between pieces disappear.” Metaphor isn’t just poetic technique: It is a way of thinking, a mode of organizing, a rationale for representation. It is integral.

For Jo Campbell, portfolios on CD allow for a kind of record keeping—of everything from interviews with students to handwriting samples to episodes of jumping rope and reading—that isn’t possible otherwise, a record keeping that changes the assessment game. As Campbell explains, “The ability to *show* [in full-motion video, for instance]” what students can do means that teachers and students can move outside and beyond standardized assessment instruments. Through this portfolio, assessment becomes more personal, more authentic, less contingent upon some mythical norm.

For Cheryl Forbes, electronic portfolios initially presented an irresistible invitation to invade student textual space. Submitted to her, student texts became Forbes’ texts as she—almost invisibly—revised and rewrote them. Her article thus tells a cautionary tale: about using technology in the *\*best-intentioned\** way; about taking the time to review our own practice thoughtfully and reflectively; about being wise enough to see where our pedagogy goes wrong; and about being generous enough to share this reflection with others so that we might avoid this easily made error.

For Beverly Wall and Robert Peltier, the community and its desires drive the class. Their story embodies Purves’ claim about portfolios rearranging school goals and shifting school emphases, as school becomes synonymous with student. For Wall and Peltier, what rewrote the classes was the sharing that electronic media made possible. No longer, for instance, were peer reviews “random drive-by shots of criticism”; rather, peer reviews were part of the *\*process\** of becoming an electronic writer: a public writer with an audience that helps craft texts.

For Steve Watkins, the electronic portfolio is personal and public: It’s his portfolio, located on a Web site. As he says, the Web-based portfolio is “an intricately related set of documents, with multilayered, multiaudience ‘reflective introductions’” targeted to different audiences. The service that Watkins provides, as much as any, is the account he gives us of how such a Web-site portfolio is constructed, the recursive nature of the processes that go into its construction, and the authentic purposes to which reflection can be put.

For Brian Huot, the electronic portfolio brings the computer and assessment together in a way that serves the needs of students. Historically, he argues, the computer, when linked with assessment, has been a very sophisticated counter, one at several removes from student learning. Huot's take on the electronic portfolio, however, is that it can help us interrupt "a series of technological fixes that comprise a continuous, repetitive, and redundant cycle." To do this, he says, we must "step off the technological treadmill" and begin to consider how theory can help us understand how electronic and portfolio assessment can be fruitfully combined.

For Pam Takayoshi, the electronic portfolio raises serious questions as to what it is that we are evaluating and how we might go about it. She shows us that the assumptions we bring to bear in most composing classes—for example, that we can line up drafts one to the next—aren't valid in many composition classrooms. She shows us that in these classrooms new criteria like page design will need to play an evaluative role. She shows us that criteria we have used for paper portfolios may be obsolete for hypertext portfolios. In sum, she shows us that we will need to revise our assessment practices as new electronic literacies are defined.

### LEARNING WITH THE ELECTRONIC PORTFOLIO

Another way to think about the electronic portfolio is in terms of the effect that it has exerted on both teachers and learning. This special issue of *Computers and Composition* thus might be subtitled "Learning With," where the object of "with" is multiple: learning *with* students, learning *with* computers, learning *with* portfolios—and/or some combination thereof.

With their students, teachers are learning about new kinds of classroom practice. Currently, as the articles herein demonstrate, practice is divergent, with transitional classrooms and online classrooms, with Web-based pedagogy and CD-ROMs. But a central idea threads throughout these models: They all highlight *collaboration*, emphasizing in the bargain real purposes and real audiences and real communication, all of which grow out of particular rhetorical situations. And that leads to a second major thread: Each of the electronic portfolios here is designed for a specific population, thus the diverse applications. Electronic portfolios, like their paper cousins, are different one to the next, are local in their application.

The teachers designing classes centered on electronic portfolios are charting a new territory: working with technologies too new to permit much expertise, combining those with another technology, portfolios. They don't have the expertise that teachers often bring to the classroom—except, of course, for their expertise *as learners*, which (as it turns out) is the kind that seems to matter here. With their students, teachers also learn: modeling the many paths we take in learning; the frustration that often (and perhaps even ordinarily) accompanies learning; and the satisfaction that comes from having learned well.

As students learn, so, too, do teachers: about technology, of course—word processors and html and Docex file folders and e-mail; about portfolios and how to read them and then (sometimes) grade them; about different genres and kinds of writing and about what to do with those. *What to do with those* is an authentic problem, as Traci Gardner (1995) suggested:

Portfolios provide a way to assess documents which resist assessment in the current grading systems. It is difficult to know how to grade email, fragments of real-time

discussion, and other online writing. It's the problem of grading things which don't fit into the traditional ways of grading. What portfolio assessment can do is to allow writers to highlight the documents which they have produced among all the documents they have composed, a technique particularly helpful with email and realtime discussion where writers produce \*many\* pieces of varying quality.

Even for those teachers not using e-mail and real-time electronic discussions, word processing itself raises other kinds of assessment issues. Where does one draft begin and another end? In a system that privileges revision, as most portfolio programs do, how do we document the revision that, for many keyboard composers, is *invisible*—gone before it's fixed? What difference, if any, does it make when one student italicizes key points throughout, another uses borders in an appropriate way, and a third relies on bullets at key moments? It's not our mothers' text any more, not the text I produced on my (electric) Smith Corona with its pica and elite typefaces.

But too often we continue to evaluate as though it were.

This issue of *Computers and Composition* looks both backward and forward. It looks back at what we have done and are doing. It also points us to where we are headed and invites us to map it for ourselves—and with our students.

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