Digital Portfolios: Documenting Student Growth

Type: Horace Feature
Author(s): Matthew Cramer
Source: *Horace* Summer 2009, Vol. 25 No. 1

🖨 print
✉ email
💾 save
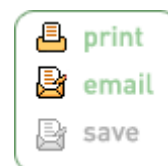
The digital portfolio process at Camino Nuevo High School (CNHS) offers an essential 21st century skill to our students. All students are trained in basic web design to build and maintain their digital portfolios. These skills equip them with tools they will likely use in their future endeavors in college and the professional world. We believe using the Internet as a tool to communicate and present ideas is a basic requirement of students heading into a future with a greater reliance on technology for a range of different careers. We also believe that the digital portfolios give the students the skills necessary to be independent and use their own knowledge to present themselves. We are also addressing the digital divide that exists between prosperous communities and less affluent, minority, or immigrant communities. We feel the digital portfolio process provides the students with two sets of skills: self-presentation and technology know-how. As Scott Weatherford, CNHS's principal and founder says, "Digital portfolios seemed a natural fit for our new school. We knew that students would be using portfolios as part of our ongoing assessment of their progress as learners, and integrating the technological piece created an authentic and public way for students to display their work while demonstrating a mastery of some basic new media skills."

Through creating and maintaining digital portfolios, CNHS students are engaged in a process of synthesizing and presenting their academic work and growth in an increasingly professional manner. These skills associated with web design competence are an important way we give the students the technological and professional resources that they will draw upon throughout their lives.

In use since 2004, Camino Nuevo's digital portfolios have been both an educational tool and a unifying aspect of the school culture and community. All students are required to build and maintain a website reflecting their academic work and growth. These portfolios are used across the curriculum of the school for these purposes. At the end of tenth grade, the students are required to present their digital portfolio to a panel of teachers, students, parents, and members of the surrounding community. Tenth grade humanities teacher Phalana Tiller notes, "Preparing for the presentation of the digital portfolio helps students to reflect on their work and, in many cases, review and relearn material that they didn't master when it was originally taught. Last year one student added images to an essay so the audience would have a visual focus while she discussed the work. DP presentation time is when we've seen students really step up and do some excellent work." These presentations are a right of passage into the eleventh and twelfth grade "Graduate Academy." The students are required to present these digital portfolios again at the end of their senior year as a culminating graduation requirement.

The Camino Nuevo digital portfolio is rooted in the traditional art education model of portfolio development. Approaches to portfolio development differ, depending upon its purpose: student portfolios are different from the professional portfolios the students will likely create as they move out of high school and into the professional world. Largely intended to be a reflection of personal and academic growth over time, the digital portfolios at our school are designed to reflect the process of learning students engage in during their formative high school years. Portfolios contain sections that correspond to each school year and contain work demonstrating the skills and concepts developed during that year. As the students progress this accumulation of work is a valuable record of the their abilities and improvement. For each assignment on their digital portfolio, students also must include a reflection about the content and skills they were supposed to master as well as the quality of their effort and product. We have really focused on lifting up the quality of these reflections. Students claim to hate them (like broccoli), so it must be good for them.

In the classes that I teach at CNHS—graphic design, journalism, and senior seminar—I have linked the digital portfolio closely with classroom expectations for posting work for critique, grading, and presentation, making the portfolio an integral part of the class routine. Using the "DP," as the digital portfolio is often

referred to, in this way gives the students practice updating and improving their skills in presenting work online. Much of the work the students complete in class is posted on the digital portfolio for grading. The students are engaged with their classmates' digital portfolios on a regular basis. For example, the students will look up another student's digital portfolio to grade projects and assignments. The students will also look at each other's work online to offer critiques and reflections. This peer assessment is a regular classroom practice that creates dialogue between students regarding their work. If a student's work does not appear or if necessary links do not work, they are encouraged to act as coaches, helping each other post and making suggestions for presenting the work online. This provides a forum for the students to share their understanding and help check each other. "Our digital portfolio is a showcase for our students' schoolwork as well as for webpage design skills. Most students personalize their pages and take a lot of pride in the work. The intense work of creating all of the links is, in itself, a feat of concentration and persistence," observes Jeanmarie DeQuiroz, Camino Nuevo's tenth grade biology teacher.

I have used my own interactive teacher website as a tool to teach Graphic Design. It is a place to experiment with posting daily assignments, linking to examples, and providing resources. A page called "Today's Assignments" is a daily log of classroom agendas, inquiry, and direction for the students. It is an important part of the classroom routine. Student use the site to get directions for class, view examples, and link to other resources within the context of projects. I have also developed the site as a resource for technology skills, links to outside resources, as well as posting assignments, projects, grading rubrics, and other information about the requirements in class. My own teaching website is a continuous work in progress, with which I experiment with new ideas to engage students and offer resources. I use the site to provide links to examples of work we are doing in class. It is also a good way to post examples of student's work that is a model for current projects and assignments.

At the very beginning of the ninth grade, or as soon as they enter the school, students are given a basic series of lessons to create a folder structure and web pages aligned with their classes. Each school year that follows begins with the creation of that year's portfolio, which is linked to ones from the past. At the beginning, we scaffold this portfolio creation process very closely and incrementally each year, we expect the students to exercise more independence. By the time students reach their senior year, creating and updating this portfolio are seen as expected norms of the school experience and an important way of demonstrating mastery of the school's expectations. Our goal is to help our students become literate, critical thinkers, and independent problem solvers who are agents of social justice with sensitivity toward the world around them.

There are many challenges making the digital portfolio process work on a school-wide scale. Uniformity, consistent standards, the quality of work, and a wide range of web design skills by both staff and students are some of the ongoing challenges that we deal with. Creating and maintaining the digital portfolios is often confusing and difficult. As a staff we have developed an in-house teacher training as part of our professional development. This professional development consists of training program in basic web design as well as an ongoing conversation about the uses of technology in the classroom. As a staff, we have worked hard and continue to develop consistent approaches and standards for these digital portfolios and the presentation of them. We frequently meet in committees to develop rubrics and other scaffolding tools to guide the students through a complicated process. Teacher checks and student-to-student checks are a continuous process in classes to help fix broken links, spelling and grammar issues, and develop a clear professional design. In terms of design, the students are exposed to websites that are models for presenting work in a professional manner, combating what we call the "MySpace aesthetic," which is often the model students are familiar with coming into the school. A digital portfolio handbook, located on the digital portfolio website page, is a comprehensive guide that is used in addition to classroom guidance and practice. This handbook gives technical guidance and contains rubrics used for classroom checks for functions, design, and content. It also includes guidelines for presenting at the end of tenth grade.

The tools we have been using are Dreamweaver and Adobe CS3 graphic software. Dreamweaver is an intuitive visual program that requires little understanding of HTML code to create pages and add content. We use Dreamweaver to teach the basics of web design, and to create the structure of students' sites. Students have accounts that provide access to two different drives to store class work. Students use the H drive for storage. The W drive is the online server that contains the student's website. The W drive is intentionally limited to teach students ways to create websites that are streamlined, using images and files that are

optimized for easy access. We emphasize presenting work in the most accessible manner for all Internet users by using photos that are reduced to proper sizes and saving files in Internet-compatible formats, like PDF and HTML versions of papers written in Word or presentations created in PowerPoint.

The digital portfolios have had a positive impact on student achievement across the curriculum. The public, high stakes of the digital portfolios is a powerful motivator. Parents, as well as members of the community are able to access students' work and students are able to share their work with possible employers or internship providers. The public, real world applications of creating and maintaining DPs as a long term process has also proved to be a powerful tool for the student to reflect on their growth through high school academically and personally.

Camino Nuevo High School (CNHS) is located in the greater MacArthur Park area just west of downtown Los Angeles. Our students are a microcosm of the area's population. 92 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The population is 92 percent Hispanic, one percent African American, five percent Asian, and two percent mixed origin/other ethnic groups. Our students and their families face substantial economic challenges and the social realities that accompany poverty and marginalization. The greater MacArthur Park census tracts have the highest percentage of severe overcrowding in the city, the greatest concentration of single-parent households (50 to 88 percent, more than twice the city average), highest non-fluency in English (40 to 66 percent speak English "not well" or "not at all"), and the lowest availability of automobiles (housing units with no vehicle available ranges from 46 to 90 percent, more than three times the city average). Sixty-one percent of residents are foreign-born, compared with 11 percent in the U.S. Annual income within this district is the lowest in Los Angeles: the median income is $11,475. The poverty rate in the area is 35 percent, compared with a citywide rate of 18 percent. Eighty-two percent of housing units in the neighborhood are rentals versus 34 percent nationally. CNHS is a community-based school, and, as such, our mission is driven largely by the needs and population of the surrounding community. CNHS's results are dramatic. CNHS ranks 16th among all schools within LAUSD, both charter and traditional. When compared to similar schools, CNHS scores a 10 out of 10 ranking from the State of California.

Related Links
Camino Nuevo High School website:
http://highschool.caminonuevo.org

Digital Portfolio Handbook:
http://highschool.caminonuevo.org/digitalportfolios.htm

Matthew Cramer teacher website:
http://highschool.caminonuevo.org/staff_website/mcramer/index.htm

Social Networking in Education
We also use technology in the classroom by tapping into various social networking forums. The three most successful so far are:

The CLIC Network, http://www.theclic.net, is a college focused social network.

Good Reads, http://www.goodreads.com, is a social network centered on books and reading.

Threadless, http://www.threadless.com, is a t-shirt printing company with a community for critique and scoring t-shirt designs.

I have used threadless.com in my classroom as both a platform to exhibit student work and as a forum to develop critical thinking skills. Threadless.com is a t-shirt printing company that encourages artists to post their own designs and, potentially, get them printed through a scoring system from an online community of other designers.

This resource last updated: July 21, 2009

Database Information:

Source: *Horace* Summer 2009, Vol. 25 No. 1
Publication Year: 2009
Publisher: CES National
School Level: All
Audience: New to CES, Teacher, Parent
Issue: 25.1
Focus Area: Classroom Practice
STRAND: Classroom Practice: instruction
Instruction: Technology and Information Literacy