

Activate Your Student IEP Team
Member Using Technology:
How Electronic Portfolios Can Bring the
Student Voice to Life!

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An Article Published in

TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus

Volume 2, Issue 3, January 2006

Activate Your Student IEP Team Member Using Technology: How Electronic Portfolios Can Bring the Student Voice to Life!

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Abstract

The skills of self-determination and self-advocacy are essential for success in adult life. As educators, we want students with disabilities to participate and be significantly involved in the development and implementation of their IEPs, including involvement in IEP and transition planning meetings. By planning, preparing, and presenting an electronic portfolio at one's own IEP meeting, the student not only becomes an authentic participant, but a self-advocate who has decided, prior to the meeting, his or her strengths, skills, and preferences that he or she would like to share with other IEP team members. Making decisions about perceived strengths and preferences in the planning and preparation of one's electronic portfolio demonstrates self-determination. By showing an electronic portfolio at the beginning of an IEP meeting, the student ensures that his or her voice is heard, preferences articulated, and strengths and interests are brought before the team.

Keywords

transition, electronic portfolios, individualized education programs, IEP, self advocacy

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Glor-Scheib, S. & Telthorster, H. (2006). Activate your student IEP team member using technology: How electronic portfolios can bring the student voice to life! *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 2(3) Article 1. Retrieved [date] from <http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol2/iss3/art1>

For a student receiving special education services, particularly throughout transition planning, the attributes of self-determination and personal agency take on new meaning as the student prepares for adult life. Self-determination has been summarized by Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Weh-meyer (1998) as:

...a combination of skills, knowl-
edge and beliefs that enables a per-
son to engage in goal-directed, self-
regulated, autonomous behavior. An
understanding of one's strengths
and limitations together with a be-
lief in oneself as capable and effec-
tive are essential to self-
determination. When acting on the
basis of these skills and attitudes,
individuals have a greater ability to
take control of their lives and as-
sume the role of successful adults in
our society (p.2)

At question is how to provide opportunity, support, and assistance to students with disabilities in becoming more self-determined. Teaching students the various IEP components and how to participate in or lead their IEP meetings is one way of helping them become better self-advocates as they apply the skills of self-determination, goal setting and self-evaluation (Mason, McGahee-Kovac, & Johnson, 2004, McGahee, Mason, Wallace, & Jones, 2001). In many cases, however, students are invited but very few are prepared to participate as full team members. Students may feel overwhelmed or uncomfortable describing their goals and interests in the presence of numerous adults. Indeed, for many students with communication disorders, the idea of leading or even participating in a meeting may be too daunting to consider.

Why electronic portfolios?

This article describes a planning and presentation tool, an electronic portfolio, as it applies to participating in transition and IEP processes. Historically, as appreciation for authenticity in performance assessment has developed, the portfolio, defined as an organized collection of student products (Gal-lagher, 1998), has become a popular tool in documenting student performance and progress. Utilizing a range of technologies typically available to students, electronic portfo-
lios have also become more prominent in American school settings (Ahn, 2004). Stu-
dents are taught to use programs such as PowerPoint during their elementary years in order to display their work (D'Ambrosio, 2003). This mode of communication enables a student to tell a detailed story (Stiggins, 2001).

Shifting focus in the portfolio's mes-
sage from assessment of student work to evi-
dence of student strengths, interests, skills,
and goals has obvious benefits for the student
IEP team member. The use of technology for
students with limited communication allows
students to display preferences and goals
visually. Student motivation and first-hand
involvement in the portfolio process is en-
hanced by the use of technology. Deborah
Metcalf, CEC's Clarissa
Hug Teacher of the Year
(2004), when asked about
advantages for students in
creating electronic port-
folios, remarked, "They
take ownership of their
work. They pushed them-
selves a little harder...It
also gets parents involved
because their kids are excited." With the
added incentive of using various technologies
(e.g., PowerPoint software, digital photogra-

An electronic portfolio simply documents a student's interests, activities, job shadowing experiences, and ideas for future plans.

phy, scanners, etc.), the development of an electronic portfolio, which incorporates a student's interests, perceived abilities, job shadowing, work, or volunteer experiences, is a strategy to help students apply the critical skills of self-determination, goal setting, and self-evaluation.

The electronic portfolio can be considered a planned, prepared, personalized statement that is communicated to team members during the IEP meeting. What is included in the portfolio depends on the student. Students who are just beginning their participation in IEP and transition planning may have only a few slides that show images

Think about a scrapbook that has been digitized in which pictures and captions have been organized to document performances, activities, interests – anything that's important to the person creating it.

and text of job-related activities, accomplishments, and other activities they enjoy or that highlight their strengths. Students can create pages about responsibilities at home and in the community, specific skills, schooling history, job shadowing and work experiences, interests, accomplishments, awards - anything a student may want to communicate to the team.

Planning an e-portfolio

First, students need to be able to identify elements of their lives that are important to them currently and that may be instrumental to their future. Consider the following scenarios as examples of this process:

-a student babysits or has volunteered at a day care center or pre-school program, enjoyed care-giving activities, and wants to pursue course work in child development;

-a student has helped a landscaper plant decorative shrubs at a new office complex and would like to learn more about what landscapers do;

-a student has taken a high school course in photography and would like to pursue further experiences either through job shadowing or as work experience in a local film development business.

In every example, something has sparked a student's interest and he or she wants to pursue the interest through work, volunteer experience, or course work. In addition to vocational preferences, students also need to consider preferences, skills, activities, and needs related to home and community (i.e., aspects of daily living), recreation and leisure, and/or post-secondary school planning. So, as a first step, students need to be able to identify aspects of school, work, family, or community life that they find engaging, things that are necessary to maximize independence (e.g., learning to drive, mastering public transportation), as well as things they would like to learn more about.

Students need an opportunity to think about and reflect on experiences they've had, and through a process of self-evaluation, determine what is important to them currently that may also be important to their future. Students may require the assistance of a portfolio advisor at school or family member at home to plan and prepare a portfolio. Discussing their ideas with interested adults may help students articulate preferences, examine options, and reflect on their decisions. Without such opportunities, students might not realize the full potential of the e-portfolio process. Being reflective is a prerequisite for self-determination, a skill long embraced in the special education field that can help lead a student toward self-advocacy and successful transition outcomes.

Formatting an electronic portfolio

Although a variety of templates may be used in creating an electronic portfolio, the presentation software PowerPoint, is particularly useful for electronic portfolios, not just for the actual presentation during an IEP meeting, but also for a printed handout that will become part of the student's record. Team members can easily refer to the handout during the meeting for examining preferences the student has brought forward to be acted upon and considered by the team for goal writing. PowerPoint allows easy importation of digital images or scanned files and has abundant options for animation, color, and design. Students can personalize their portfolios while becoming increasingly adept in software applications and image and sound technologies. In addition to being user-friendly, PowerPoint allows the student flexibility when updating or making changes to his or her portfolio.

Students less familiar with computers and presentation software or students with increased challenges may need assistance in developing their electronic portfolios. Fortunately, many students with disabilities often use a variety of technologies for communication, academic performance, and vocation-related activities so developing an electronic portfolio may be easily accomplished with the help of others. Families may be a resource for the students. One parent who assisted her daughter in selecting areas of life to include the portfolio stated,

Heather and I had an opportunity to really discuss what she was interested in doing and what we needed to do to help her reach her goals and to build on her gifts...I used I-C-A-N to keep myself focused on her, too (I - Interests; C - Courses; A - Abilities; N - Neighborhood or

community). We found by using that, we were able to really build on her strengths and talk about what she felt was important rather than what I felt was important (B. Teltorster, personal communication, August 19, 2004).

An Electronic Portfolio as a Graduation Project

Most secondary students are required to successfully complete a graduation project. Although many districts have specific project guidelines, some consider an e-portfolio as full or at least partial credit in fulfilling graduation requirements. An electronic portfolio not only documents a student's goals, interests, skills, and accomplishments, it also communicates a student's development in technological tools and methods. The skill set required in creating an electronic portfolio will serve the student throughout high school course assignments as well as in post-secondary settings should the student desire further education. In fact, by creating and maintaining an electronic portfolio, students may discover new interests and skills in technologies otherwise unknown and untapped. Students intending to work after high school and who spend part of their school day at a technology center may focus their portfolio pages on products they've created or specialized work they've done. In viewing an electronic portfolio as a part of the interview

It may be that for their first year of IEP participation, usually in high school, sometimes in middle school, they have only three or four slides in their e-portfolio, but with continued experiences, job shadowing, community-based instruction, and academic accomplishments, students' portfolios will grow to reflect their preferences and dreams.

process, potential employers see the skills and commitment students bring to a work experience. For students intending to matriculate to a 2-year or 4-year college or university who plan to disclose their disability, the electronic portfolio can feature characteristics of their learning strengths, styles, and needs. Such information is certainly welcomed by college personnel who work with college students with disabilities.

An electronic portfolio as a communication device

For students with communication disorders an electronic portfolio may be a new avenue for participating on their IEP team. Heather, a young woman with central auditory processing problems and a communication disorder states the following about her electronic portfolio:

The people don't understand what I say when I was at the IEP meeting without an *e*-portfolio and my mom had to tell them what I said. Right now, my *e*-portfolio is re-

ally helpful to make people understand what I am trying to tell them. At a transition IEP meeting, they are talking about my future and they need to know what I like to do and what I can do well. As my life changes, it is easy to update my *e*-portfolio. My *e*-portfolio has become my voice at meetings (H. Telthorster, personal communication, October 20, 2005).

Adults on their team come to the IEP meeting prepared with files, notes, and voices while students may bring only anxiety and silence. By showing the team their electronic portfolio, a student brings voice and substance to their role as a team member. A principal, reflecting on what a student's electronic portfolio brings to the IEP meeting, stated:

The electronic portfolio is valuable in conveying the student's interests and abilities. These kinds of things aren't typically revealed in an IEP meeting by the kinds of questions we

Quotes from School and Agency IEP Team Members who have participated in IEP meetings in which a student's electronic portfolio was presented:

Mark – Office of Vocational Rehabilitation

"...the content of the portfolio would tell me what their skills are, what their background is, what their work or volunteer history is as well as what their interests are as far as...what kind of career they would like to have. It gives me some idea of whether job coaching might be appropriate or some level of post secondary training such as an associate degree, a bachelor's degree, or even an adult education program at the career technology center."

Patty – Special Education Supervisor

"...I really see it as getting the story out...it can provide information that a person with a communication problem could not communicate to others...I think it's a wonderful tool to use at an IEP meeting."

Theresa – Educator

"I have found that students have been very comfortable working with the electronic portfolios. [Without this communication tool,] many of the students were intimidated when they came to IEP meetings and very rarely have I gotten them to speak...I think it's really neat for their parents to see them as they present their portfolio because sometimes parents aren't aware that their student can actually present and do something at the meeting."

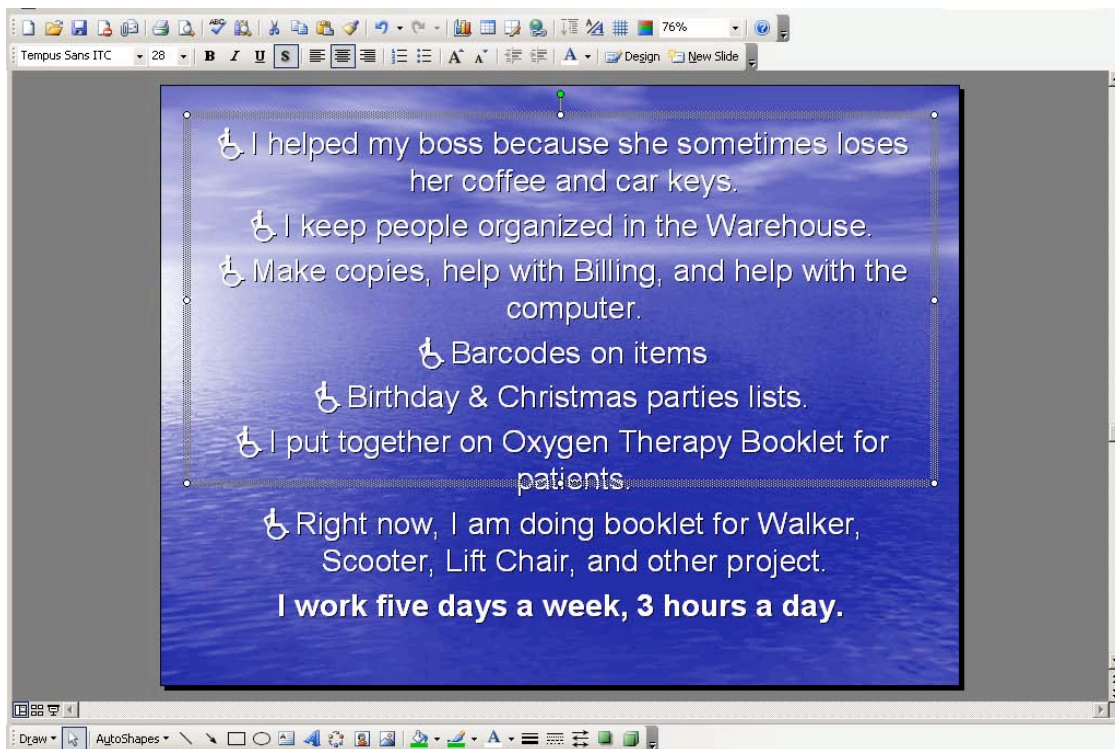
ask. So, for a student to compose his own portfolio gives a perspective we can't get by asking questions...and it's a better, more sincere profile of the student...It's an authentic perspective of the student engaged in real life activities that you don't [necessarily] see in a school environment (T. Haselhoff, personal communication, August 19, 2004).

An electronic portfolio as an IEP planning and preparatory tool

Electronic portfolios require planning and preparation. The student should begin to think about their portfolio and what they want to communicate several months before the actual meeting. The following are suggestions to initiate electronic portfolio planning from a person who has created and presented hers:

- Decide who will help you with your e-portfolio; your parents, family, teachers, and/or friends.
- Decide what story you want your portfolio to tell. How long do you want it to be?
- Choose some pictures that will help to tell your story. Examples:
 - Pictures of you at different ages
 - Family and friends
 - Community activities
 - Home
 - School
 - Work experiences (see Figure 1)
 - Volunteer experiences
 - Pets
 - Vacations
 - Sports
 - Hobbies
 - Clubs

Figure 1. Heather's responsibilities at work



- Take a camera (a disposable one is good) to your job shadowing, work experiences, community activities, and even use around the house doing chores. (Taking pictures will help you focus on what you are doing and if you like doing it or if you don't like doing it.) For example: with a picture of the student at a McDonald's store, job shadowing, is the caption, "I don't want to cook but I liked cleaning the tables." Or at home, "I don't like doing laundry but I know how to do it." or, "I really like doing laundry." Taking pictures of things you do helps you think about what you're doing and if it is something you want to learn more about.
- Ask your family and friends if they have any pictures of you they really like.
- Write a sentence about each picture.
- Decide the order of your pictures to tell your story. Do you want to organize your story by time or by category of activity?
- You can also use any awards or certificates you have received.
- Decide which computer program you are going to use for your e-portfolio.
- Scan the photos into files on the computer or import digital pictures.
- Type in the titles or sentences on the pages
- If you would like to add clip art, sound, or motion, go for it!
- You may want to save your e-portfolio on a disk or CD. If you used presentation software, you can also print handouts to distribute at your IEP meeting. Update your portfolio as often as you want.
- Be ready to answer questions about why you like some of the things you show.

Figure 2. Captioned photographs help tell your story

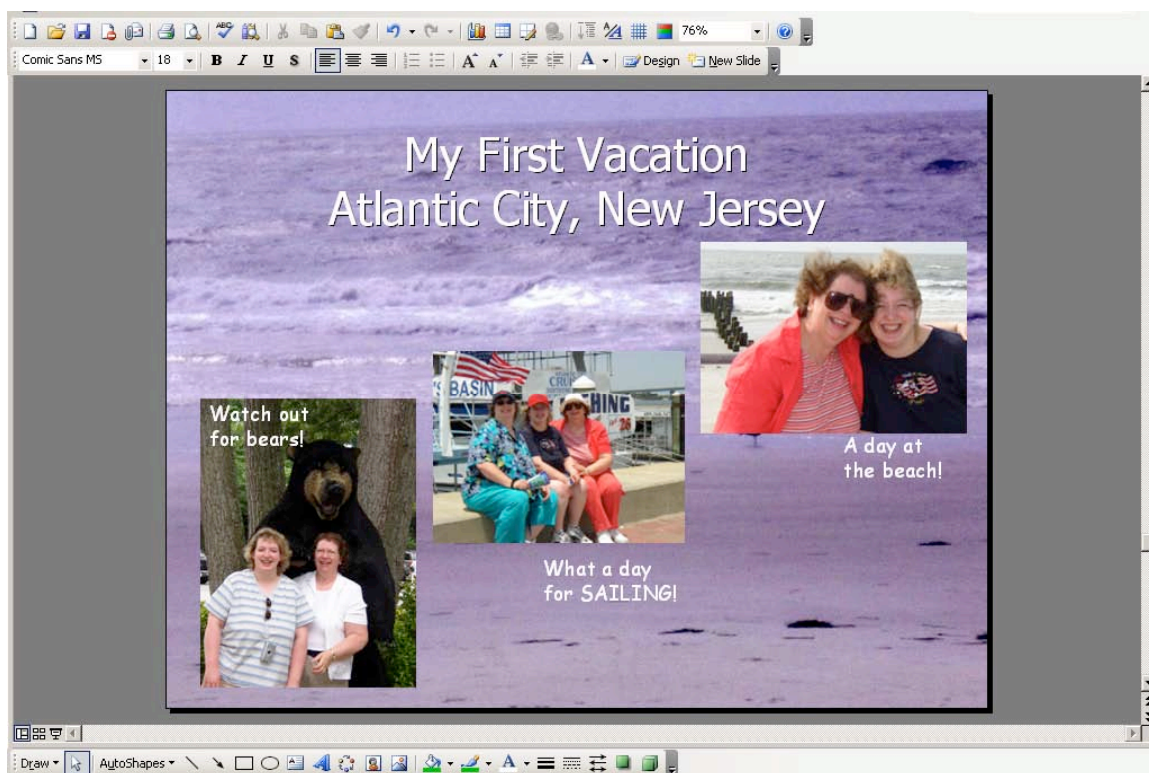
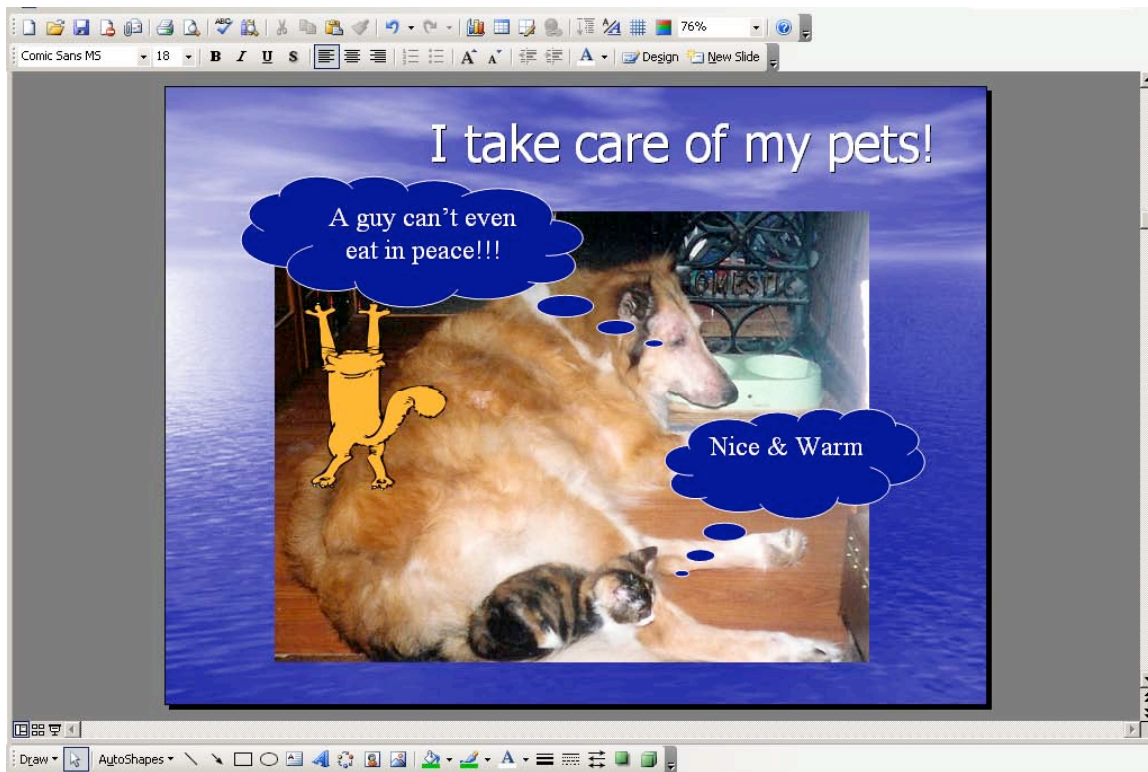


Figure 3. Clip art and animation are fun and personalize an electronic portfolio



Summary

The skills of self-determination and self-advocacy are essential for success in adult life. As educators, we want students with disabilities to participate and be significantly involved in the development and implementation of their IEPs, including involvement in their IEP and transition planning meetings. Creating and presenting an electronic portfolio at one's own IEP meeting demonstrates self-advocacy. Having made decisions about perceived strengths and preferences in the planning and preparation of one's electronic portfolio demonstrates self-determination. By showing an electronic portfolio at the beginning of an IEP meeting, the student ensures that his or her voice is heard, preferences articulated, and strengths and interests are brought before the team. The power of an electronic portfolio lies in image;

helping the team members "see" the student as his or her future is considered and discussed. Every other member comes to the meeting with files, reports, and varying forms of documentation;= why shouldn't the student be equally equipped?

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