

**Project Name**

Cultivating a Composing Process: Growing Critical Thinking and Student Success with ePortfolios

**Principal Investigator** Timothy W. Gerken

**Campus** Morrisville State College

**Year of Project** 2013

**Tier** Tier Two

**Project Team**

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**Overview Summary**

Use of e-Portfolios to support interdisciplinary composition courses.

**Outcomes Summary**

Use of ePortfolio documented grade improvement during pilot phase across the curriculums. See SUNY Council [Report](#) on Writing.

**Project Abstract**

Electronic portfolios (ePortfolios) are well established learning tools that correlate well with student success. With this project, we plan to introduce them at Morrisville State College (MSC), targeting two specific areas that reflect barriers to student success within our population – complex thinking demonstrated through writing and its development across courses and semesters, and engagement with the writing process within first-year composition courses as it relates to retention. MSC's student population includes both a large portion who are considered underprepared for college and students considered "non-traditional." While we are committed to

these students, many of them have experienced a lack of success in developing and retaining their written communication skills, leading to struggles throughout their college careers and to discouragement in their college experience. Changes in the administration and concern about low retention numbers have led us to look for more effective ways to cultivate student success.

Freshman composition is a gateway course to college success. Many of our students are not making it through the gate. Over the last five semesters almost 40% of students who begin COMP 101 do not meet the outcomes or withdraw from the course. Research suggests that students who fail introductory college courses are also most likely to fail out. Students who do meet the course outcomes and move on to other courses have shown they have trouble using the complex thinking and skills learned in COMP 101. Students who cannot transfer this knowledge will be less successful in their major courses, and those looking to transfer will have fewer options. We are working to develop a modified ePortfolio system to help tackle these two issues.

We believe ePortfolios may be a way to intervene and improve student success. Portfolios were designed to provide a more authentic assessment tool to measure students. Students have some say in the work submitted, submit work they collect over a period of time, and reflect on that work. While ePortfolios expand composing options for students and collecting opportunities for instructors, they are still mostly used for assessment. We want to expand the use of ePortfolios to emphasize targeted student success related to composition. While we are concerned and dedicated to the importance of learning through writing, we understand a 21st century composing process must allow for dynamic shifts in literacy pedagogy. Ag/Tech Colleges should be especially aware of pedagogical opportunities that allow students to show through practical means how they produce and nurture ideas. We will show how ePortfolios can be used creatively to develop active, integrative learning across our curriculum and over time.

Students compose a stronger self-identity through ePortfolios as they have a variety of composing methods available to them. By including video, audio, and images—in addition to writing—in their portfolios, students can present a more complicated process of idea development. ePortfolios also allow students to make connections to ideas outside of their collected artifacts through hyperlinks to blogs, social media, etc. Our ePortfolios will be focused on the composing process. They will be student-centered with an interface that represents, supports, and tracks the evolution of an individual student's composing strategies.

Our initial goals are to both improve our students' success in COMP 101 and their ability to integrate learned outcomes and grow as thinkers as they progress through their academic life and beyond. Our innovation in ePortfolios is to incorporate a stronger "one on one" student/mentor component into the ePortfolio experience, to create a student-centered, writing focused atmosphere of creativity and connectedness through new models of composing, and to use ePortfolios and Banner to monitor student success and retention.

#### Composing Interface

That writing is a process has been the common pedagogical metaphor for at least the last 30 years. The writing process includes both how students learn to develop and complete a particular essay, and also how their own writing develops over the course of their academic careers and beyond. It has been easy to show the former but difficult to show the latter. Through intra- and inter-departmental discussions we know the writing abilities developed by a student within the curricular confines of one course are not always transported or translated by that student into subsequent courses. This lack of integration is especially acute in contexts where no explicit multi-course writing sequence exists, or where students may have a gap of a semester or two between courses that use writing as a primary mode of evaluation. Our ePortfolio interface will enhance integration by having students explicitly demonstrate, describe, and reflect critically on their own composing process. This enables students to both trace their writing development across courses and through time, and to archive examples of work that exemplify a specific program-related competency.

We know complex thinking and skills develop simultaneously. Our composing interface will capture this simultaneous growth and its development. We will build off the pedagogical description of the writing

process—PREWRITING, DRAFTING, REVISING, EDITING—with the understanding that the way we compose whether in print or digitally will not be sequential. We want students to demonstrate both the complex thinking and the skills necessary to support and accomplish a finished product demonstrating this thinking. Students will submit artifacts in each of the above categories as they encounter/create them. Their reflective experience in the ePortfolio will be represented through the categories of Strengths, Struggles, Strategies, and Goals (SSSG) for each of the above composing stages.

Students (in collaboration with their first-year composition (FYC) instructor) will be able to articulate their composing/writing abilities at the end of their FYC course—identifying specific aspects of complex thinking and skills that they excel at, as well as ones that they desire to improve. These aspects, representative of their work over the semester and present in an electronic format, will be cultivated in classes the next semester. Instructors will be able to ask that students interact with the ePortfolio Coordinator, setting specific goals for specific assignments. At the end of each term, students will have both a new set of artifacts demonstrating their learning and critical reflections on their composing process. Instructors can submit feedback to the students and program coordinator reflecting the students' achievements in composing writing and other assignments. Then, in consultation with the coordinator, the students will modify their SWG to reflect the semester's work. The process then would start again the subsequent semester providing the students with explicit examples of how they learn and how the process of learning is connected across their courses. ePortfolios show the cross curricular links many of our students seem to not recognize.

This composing process interface would exist in addition to more traditional ePortfolio components, including full-length student written work. This work will be organized and segmented around core competencies (to be decided by the relevant program) enabling students to ensure that their composing and writing abilities are meeting the outcomes of their upper-division courses. Students would choose to upload selections of work that reflect their most accomplished work to date, and add their reflection about why that work represents that core competency. These samples can iterate over time, with students offering later, "better" examples, with reflection on why "better." The more extended portfolio can be reviewable at some prescribed time (2nd/4th year in 4 year program), in consultation with faculty either in some designated class (Methods/Capstone) or as external review process in an effort to have students engage their composing competency and growth. This instructional tool will be especially relevant for those four-year programs that culminate in a thesis project.

The ePortfolio provides concrete examples, so they serve as a meaningful assessment tool for programmatic outcomes, enabling program coordinators to discover whether students' composing capacities are improving through time, and if not where specific improvements are not being demonstrated.

#### Retention Instrument

The employment of ePortfolios has correlated with increased student success and improved retention rates among particular student populations. In this pilot study we intend explicitly to track the retention effects of this technology. Using BANNER, a familiar program on campus, we will follow the students in the two ePortfolio sections and those in the two control groups. We plan to monitor and compare their success in COMP 101, COMP 102, and other comparable courses.

A bibliography of supporting sources is available upon request.

#### Reports and Resources

- [Project outcomes report](#)
- [Presentation at SUNY Council on Writing](#)
- [Mid-project report](#)

**Assessment, Understanding, Monitoring Student Progress**

- E-Portfolios

**Discipline Specific Pedagogy**

- Developmental Education

**Instructional Design**

- Student Learning Support