



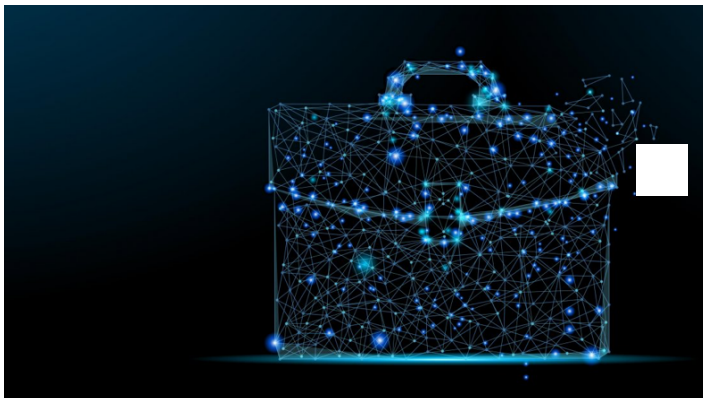
CLASSROOM TECHNOLOGY

11 Essentials for Excellent Digital Portfolios

Guiding your students to get the most out of digital portfolios takes careful planning, and we have ideas to help you get started.

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Portfolios have many benefits: They can aid students in metacognition, reflection, and ownership of learning. But if they're handled poorly, students and teachers may feel that portfolios are a waste of time. And while some see portfolios as **excellent qualitative measures** (<http://www.n->

pr.org/blogs/ed/2015/01/06/371659141/what-schools-could-use-instead-of-standardized-tests) instead of standardized tests, we know that the subjective nature of portfolio assessment can make it an unreliable comparison between schools.

You'll face 11 essential decisions in your pursuit of portfolio excellence.

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1. Know Your Purpose

According to **Dr. Helen Barrett** (<http://www.taskstream.com/reflect/whitepaper.pdf>) (PDF), portfolios fall into two categories: the positivist approach (using portfolios for learning), and the constructivist approach (using portfolios as learning).

A portfolio for learning is often a short-term capstone project that will be assessed summatively. At the end of the year, students put selections of their work into a portfolio so a teacher can assess their learning. This is often a showcase portfolio, or a sample of students' best work.

A portfolio as learning typically has an extended timeframe. This is often formative assessment, but students will also self-reflect and assess themselves. These process portfolios promote student reflection and ownership of the learning process.

On blending elements of positivism and constructivism, Barrett says, “In order to approach a balanced solution, we must envision a solution that makes it easy for students to maintain their own digital archive of work, where they can capture a large number of examples and add their reflections and notes in an ongoing way.”

The answer can be found in using different portions of the portfolio for different purposes, or in having students keep separate portfolios. So be crystal clear about your purpose, as it impacts how you design your portfolio.

2. Select Tools to Empower Students

Adding to the portfolio should be easy. It could be in your learning management system. I prefer my high school students to select the tool for their capstone portfolio. Here are some popular choices:

In their electronic notebook: Perhaps one of the best ways to incorporate a process portfolio is within shared notebooks using **OneNote** (<http://www.onenote.com>) or **Evernote** (<https://evernote.com>). The new **OneNote Class Notebook** (<https://blogs.office.com/en-us/2014/10/07/introducing-onenote-class-notebooks-flexible-digital-framework-teaching-learning/>) allows teachers and administrators see work in a process portfolio. Students can also keep a page linking to their best work.

Personal website: My older students select from **Weebly** (<http://www.weebly.com>) , **Webs** (<http://www.webs.com>) , **Wix** (<http://www.wix.com>) , or **Google Sites** (<https://sites.google.com/>) to build their personal portfolio website.

One-page collection: Sometimes students just want to link to their work published in other places. In this case, a tool like **Strikingly** (<https://www.strikingly.com>) , **Glogster** (<http://edu.glogster.com/?ref=com>) , or **LiveBinders** (<http://www.livebinders.com/welcome/home>) may be used. One of my former students created a one-page **wiki** (<http://westwood.wikispaces.com/Miller+efolio>) for this purpose.

Student blog: My eighth-grade students blog on a private Ning, so their portfolio is a blog post with links to their other blog posts that completed different tasks. Many teachers are using this method on **Edmodo** (<https://www.edmodo.com/>) , **KidBlogs** (<http://kid-blog.org/home/>) , **Edublogs** (<https://edublogs.org/>) , **Ning** (<http://www.ning.com/>) , or other class blogging tools.

Paper: Some teachers prefer some or all of the portfolio on paper. With private student work such as journal entries, this is often a good idea.

Whatever the tool, select it with your purpose in mind. Share sample portfolios from previous classes. Use templates to help students start. They should focus on selecting the work, so help them on the format.

3. Select a Variety of Content

In addition to print media represented by text and photos, you can use videos, screencasts, hyperlinks to student work, audio recordings, and annotated photographs. If you use only text and photographs, you're missing the authentic student voice you'd get from audio and video. Students struggling as writers could record a video journal as part of their process portfolio.

4. Empower Portfolio Review and Publish to an Audience

There's a reason elementary hallways are lined with student artwork—students love an audience. Privacy should always be protected and age-appropriate safeguards should be considered, but we know that **an audience for final work improves engagement (<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov08/vol66/num03/The-Power-of-Audience.aspx>)** . As part of revision, portfolio review might include students themselves, teachers, peers, other teachers, parents, or a global audience. Review and feedback should allow a student to grow and change.

When considering publication, online is the obvious choice. But if this isn't allowed for individual students, teachers can share screenshots on the class blog. Students could also publish part or all of their work in a protected online space for parents to see.

5. Know Your Timeline

You can do portfolios at a certain time of year or over a long period. If you're doing them throughout the year, make sure students organize themselves to put their portfolio in a place where they can reach it any time they need it. (Students often need to be reminded about putting their work in their portfolio.)

I have my students do their eighth-grade portfolios over a six-week period after they learn the keyboard. My high school students built their personal portfolio website in ninth grade and updated it again in tenth grade. Many of my students use these websites after they graduate from high school.

6. Empower Metacognition

How can your students reflect on their work (or think about their thinking)? Are there ways to ask **metacognitive questions** (<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/8-pathways-metacognition-in-classroom-marilyn-price-mitchell>) ? There are many **resources on metacognition** (<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/metacognition-gift-that-keeps-giving-donna-wilson-marcus-conyers>) because it's so critically important to learning, and **this level of reflection should be incorporated** (<http://pathbrite.com/blog/blog/achievement-gap/tips-getting-started-newsletter-one>) into any portfolio of student work.

For example, a writing portfolio may have students select different pieces that demonstrate how they've learned to use voice during the school year. As they write about how they improved in this ability, they're reflecting on how their thinking evolved. Metacognition lends itself to the process portion of the portfolio.

7. Relate Portfolios to Other Coursework

In *Identifying Critical Content* (<https://www.learningsciences.com/identifying-critical-content>) , Deana Senn, Amber Rutherford, and Robert Marzano discuss the importance of effectively cueing critical information. One of the concepts they discuss is the advance organization of content, a term coined by psychologist David Ausubel to describe helping students understand the content of a section before it is introduced.

For a science portfolio, you could introduce a unit on water quality by informing students that they'll be preparing a section of their portfolio where they'll explain how water quality can be assessed. They can write their opinion beforehand while quoting the data and charts from their learning. In this example, you've told students what will be covered so they can begin with the end in mind. So at the beginning of a unit, you can share what type of evidence they'll be collecting for their portfolio, and you can relate standards to outcomes more clearly using portfolios as advance organizers.

8. Don't Overwhelm Students

How can you share your rubric and assignment for a long-term portfolio project without overwhelming the student? It can be upsetting to give students the entire portfolio assignment at one time. If you hand out all portfolio requirements at once, assure students that you'll be guiding them section by section. You can instead give students the portfolio assignments as needed during the year.

9. Link Paper and Electronic Portfolios

How will you relate online and offline portions of the portfolio? Consider linking them **with a QR code (<http://www.coolcatteacher.com/qr-code-classroom-implementation-guide/>)** . This makes it easier to grade the paper portfolio and see the online work without having to type a long hyperlink in your web browser.

10. Consider the Portfolio's Longevity

How will you help students preserve their portfolios for future use? They often don't consider their need for the work they've done until they're applying for jobs or want to find it later. With many schools deleting data over the summer, we promote student ownership by

letting them take their portfolios with them. When the portfolio is created in an online space, students should save the files and burn them onto a CD or DVD.

11. Engage Teachers in Effective Portfolio Use

How will teachers learn and share best practices so that portfolios are implemented effectively? While perusing the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research, I came across a **finding from Clemson University** (<http://files.eric.ed.gov/full-text/EJ1108640.pdf>) (PDF) that one of their university's essential areas for improving portfolio use was "increased faculty support/buy-in." The Clemson paper notes, "Unfortunately, much of what has been done in the name of programmatic assessment has failed to engage large numbers of faculty in significant ways."

This emphasizes the importance of involving teachers in successful portfolio implementation.

Speaking From Experience

In my opinion, the best portfolios are part of the learning process. Students reflect on their work and learning. Two important aspects of teaching—metacognition and advance organizing of content—can be done powerfully through portfolios. Students can also have an audience of reviewers and readers. If done well, the final product can further their academic career or get them a job. A well-done portfolio is an essential tool in 21st-century learning. In my classroom, portfolios are essential, powerful means of learning and leveling up.

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