PORTFOLIOS FOR PROFESSIONAL WRITERS: A REFLECTION ON PREPARING CAPSTONE STUDENTS FOR PROFESSIONAL WRITING

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ABSTRACT

In this reflective practice piece, two instructors grapple with the unexpectedly disappointing results of a culminating digital portfolio in a professional writing program. Instructors had hoped students would approach the digital portfolio as a tool in the job market to showcase their writing skills and interests. Instead, we found that despite the program-wide emphasis on crafting and selecting pieces for this final capstone project, students' portfolios did not reflect the level of professionalism we anticipated regarding the selection of work and overall design. We were concerned that students viewed this as just another assignment instead of a tool that would support them in the job market. In reflecting on the disconnect between our expectations and the student's approach to the project, and in conversation with the theory of self-focus in the life-stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2016) and the need for additional guidance on large projects such as these (Lam, 2020; Ring et al., 2017), we instituted portfolio check-ins. These one-on-one meetings with the instructor augmented the peer reviews already in the course to provide the perspective of how a possible employer might evaluate their portfolio and other considerations for strengthening their work. Future research will look to survey program graduates to get a better sense of if and how the portfolios are used post-graduation.

Keywords: *digital portfolios, ePortfolios, capstone, professional writing, writing, undergraduate, career readiness, emerging adulthood*

PORTFOLIOS FOR PROFESSIONAL WRITERS: A REFLECTIVE PRACTICE PIECE

In 2014, Grand Canyon University created a new English program, the Bachelor of Arts in English with an Emphasis in Professional Writing. The new program was a response to research that showed an increasing demand from employers for graduates with skills and less emphasis on academic knowledge. The intent of the new program was to uniquely equip writing students with a broad program of skills-related courses, each focused on an area of professional writing in which students might expect to find employment after graduation.

The culminating course of the program was a capstone course that compiled work from four years in the major into an online portfolio, standard in the professional writing world, that would serve as a platform for pertinent student work. This assignment gathers all their work to help 'brand' graduating students and their work for potential employers. Students must take the capstone class and create a professional portfolio in order to graduate.

This portfolio serves as a calling card to show exemplary student work. From the start of the program, students are told that they will collect their work for a professional portfolio. The Pro-

fessional Writing Program Guide indicates that all courses include an assignment that could serve as an example of excellent work directly related to the discipline of professional writing. Students are encouraged to approach the assignments as future professionals, knowing that future potential employers will see the pieces.

The program identifies approximately 23 assignments from eight courses that might be appropriate for a professional portfolio. From these, students must choose a minimum of five. These selections are placed on a (typically) free platform, such as Squarespace, WordPress, Wix, etc., to serve as their portfolio. Students are also encouraged to include appropriate pieces from jobs or internships and multiple modalities such as video or audio stories. In addition to work created in these settings, students can also include speculative work, pieces created as additional examples of a student's expertise and creativity.

The first Professional Writing Capstone course was taught in 2017, and we immediately began to recognize several problems with the student portfolios. First, after viewing the final portfolios, it became apparent that although students had become polished writers, their instincts about design and appropriate portfolio elements were not as keen. Given the quality of the portfolios, it was clear that students had difficulty identifying what a professional writing portfolio site should look like. Although they were encouraged to find professional sites and view other students' final portfolios from previous years, the finished portfolio often lacked polish, resembling a personal website rather than a professional platform. Students seemed unaware that they should seek examples on which to model their portfolios. Even though these students had grown grow up with technology and continuously consume content, they could not create their own site based on other professional examples. The result was work that was poorly thought-out and consequently not designed cohesively.

A second issue we saw was that although students participated in five peer reviews conducted in class, and the instructor provided specific suggestions regarding choosing pieces at the start of the course, students still had difficulty ascertaining which pieces showed their best work. Over several semesters, informal discussions with capstone students garnered comments such as, "I'm not sure that any of my work really shows my best," "I don't know what I want to do with my degree—I just chose pieces from different classes to show a variety," "I don't know what platform to choose for my final portfolio," and "I'm not sure I will use this." This seemed counter-intuitive, given that a collection of work should be useful to those approaching a career in writing.

This suggested another issue regarding selecting work and organizing it into a cohesive portfolio focused on a specific area or discipline of writing. Graduating students have completed coursework in public relations, technical writing, journalism, creative writing, and literature. The portfolio is the culminating project of the capstone class and the entire program. Learning about and writing for several disciplines should give students an idea of a writing profession they like or excel in. If students did not understand or value the process and its final product and could not discern which pieces represented their best work, they might not find the portfolio valuable in the future. If they could not ascertain their area of expertise or the need for a collection of work, and if their materials were not presented professionally, then the portfolio project would become merely an exercise for the course—an assignment that is meaningless beyond fulfilling the requirements for graduation.

READINESS FOR REFLECTION

We created this course and the culminating portfolio assignment in the tradition of capstone or thesis-like projects that showcase students' accumulated work throughout the program to provide an artifact of their growth and professionalism. In creating the portfolio assignment, we did not anticipate the abovementioned issues. We assumed the assignment was straightforward, selection would be somewhat intuitive for students, and they could see the professional value of the portfolio to use it in future job searches as a representation of their best work.

As course creators, we took full responsibility for the disconnect between our expectations and the reality of students' work; however, identifying these questions led us back to our learning objective to understand better the distance between our expectations of the student portfolios and the actual submissions. We wanted to keep an open mind to understand how students were approach-

ing the assignment and how we could make the portfolio more meaningful to students.

Our ability and readiness to reflect on what was happening with the portfolios was enhanced by the fact that we had both worked to create and shape the course and had experience teaching it. In that way, we became supporters and sounding boards for each other when considering approaches. York-Barr et al. (2001) pointed out the value of "reflection partners" who "make a commitment to engage in a reflective learning process that is focused on improving educational practice and, therefore, student learning" (p. 60). In pairing up to reflect, we had a fuller picture of what was happening with the portfolio assignments and double the experience upon which to draw and reflect on the problems encountered. Additionally, the formal act of reflection and drawing on the existing literature would allow us to detach a bit from the outcomes and consider what was happening without prejudice.

OUR WORKING IDEAS

Professional portfolios are standard as a final product of many degree programs and are perceived as valuable, if not indispensable, in the professional world. Watson (2019) argued that ePortfolios help bridge the gap between a student's years of schooling and their post-student years by giving them a way to present themselves and their capabilities to potential employers. Cordie et al. (2019) argued that ePortfolios give potential employers an overview of a recent graduate's work. Furthermore, Holtzman et al. (2022) stated that both large and small employers want to see more universities equip graduates with an ePortfolio as it facilitates better candidate/employer match.

Portfolios are a necessity for those pursuing professional writing careers. Requiring a capstone course and portfolio implicitly assumes that students would understand the need for a final product. Students are informed from the start of the program and in every course that they should save specifically identified assignments for possible inclusion in their portfolio; because of this, instructors and the program's value of the portfolio should be prominent.

The first and perhaps most obvious question was why students would not see the portfolio as a professional tool. Presumably, this is because they are still part of the world of education and are not yet professionals. Even if they had participated in internships during their college years in positions where they contributed professional-level work, self-perception is often different than reality. As students progress in a program of study, they may perceive their skills changing or improving, but because they have not had what they consider professional experience, they do not see themselves as professionals yet. Indeed, anxiety accompanies students' transition to adulthood and the professional world (Landin, 2019), much of which has only been exacerbated by the overall stresses measured in college students from the COVID-19 pandemic (Hoyt et al., 2021). While not integral to this reflection, it seems important to note that it is another major societal factor that increases student stress during transitional years.

Another unexpected issue is that instructors often assume that students' tech abilities extend to knowing how to create websites, especially since our students gain this experience in prior coursework. For example, the Multicultural Literature course requires students to create a series of eight blog entries over the course of a semester. This provides experience with online platforms that should, in theory, transfer to subsequent courses. The assumption that students are technologically savvy may be generous. While students are seemingly constantly engaged with what instructors perceive in general as "technology," the sites to which students are attracted are social media platforms or sites with short posts, often about lifestyle. Auxier and Anderson (2021) stated that people ages 18 to 29 are primarily on social media sites such as Instagram and TikTok. Additionally, even though students are required to create a blog site and assigned written posts for assessment, it does not follow that they can or do go further and create a sophisticated and intentional site organized as a professional showcase for collected work or that they have thought beyond the current assignment requirements. With this information, it could be assumed that students do not know enough about using website platforms to do more complex work. This raised a question concerning students expanding their knowledge, expertise, and initiative to choose a platform independently rather than one identified by the instructor. Students did not

automatically desire to plunge in and create a site without detailed step-by-step instructions.

What was unexpected was that students did not necessarily consider how coursework might fit together into a portfolio focused on a specific discipline. Instructors assume that students engage in critical thinking throughout the program, considering how much they have enjoyed a class, whether they want to do more work in that discipline, or what assignments are high enough quality to be considered professional. Students' ability to assess which of their pieces are of professional quality assumes that students seek out professional work against which to compare their own or internship opportunities that develop skills in recognizing excellence in a writing discipline. This gap was unexpected. Based on early portfolios, it was clear that students did not understand or have experience evaluating their work as publishable. Also, students did not group work together into discipline-specific areas. Although many portfolios contained the required number of assignments, few had assignments unified around a writing discipline. For example, those focused on pursuing journalism should include both press releases and journalism articles, while a combination of research and creative work is suited for those intent on pursuing graduate work.

The questions concerning a student's ability to build a site and how their work fits together for that site may appear to overlap; however, one assumes students' motivation to acquire knowledge about technological assets; the other presupposes students' ability to think critically and plan. Regardless of instructor prompts and handouts provided with information about the appropriate pieces and their places in a portfolio, students are most likely engaged in their next assignment, not making long-term plans to create their portfolio. Only ascertaining students' engagement with the portfolio process could confirm or refute this.

REFLECTIVE NARRATIVE

Every semester, a college program manager requests examples of completed capstone course projects that stand out: projects that show exceptional execution and quality. These examples are shared with administration members, including the dean, who then, in turn, may choose to share examples with the provost or president. During the first few semesters, we found it challenging to find portfolio examples at the professional level. They all contained the required five writing pieces chosen from the materials created in professional writing courses. The portfolio assignment instructions were general, allowing students to have latitude and creativity in the portfolio, as well as the inclusion of other items created during an internship or job. Instructors encouraged students to seek professional portfolios online and brought in a guest speaker to show examples of strong portfolio sites. The students responded to the guest speaker enthusiastically, and all agreed they felt better equipped to tackle the project. However, the final products still showed less than professional work.

For example, one of the most apparent issues was a lack of a professional headshot on the site. Most portfolio sites included images of the students, but most were selfies, portraits, or candid shots. Some images were from high school graduations or formal photos taken for college graduations, which depicted students in cap and gowns or wearing stoles. Many current student photographs were not professional or polished. While a formal headshot was not a requirement of the assignment, students did not understand what was appropriate for a website. They often resisted changing the photo because "I just had this taken," "It shows me in my cap and gown," and "But I look really happy in this one!" These replies made us think that perhaps students did not know that the university offers professional headshots to graduating students, or, perhaps more likely, students did not perceive the need because they still saw themselves as students rather than pre-professionals.

Another example of this was on many of the portfolio "About" pages, where the writer introduces him or herself and their writing goals or achievements. The capstone is taught on a blended model, and one of the first blended assignments is writing a brief bio, which students then edit into an About page on their ePortfolio. Even in the final portfolio after receiving coaching, many introductions still included phrases such as, "I'm currently a senior at GCU, pursuing my degree in Professional Writing" or "I'm preparing to graduate from GCU at the end of [spring/fall] semester." Many students also delved into personal reasons for becoming a writer, such as a need for self-expression or writing as a response to a difficult adolescence, which

were not pertinent or appropriate for the professional world.

Other student feedback related to their attitudes and perceived difficulties with finding a design for an online template or theme. When we informally checked in with students throughout the semester to ascertain progress with the portfolio, the feedback often was "I haven't found anything I really like yet" or "Nothing works for writing." Students seemed to approach this assignment as a matter of aesthetics without considering their possible future audience, functionality, and content, looking first at what they liked rather than what best fit their work and how potential employers might view it. Many seemed stymied by the perceived complexity of building a website, even with pre-designed templates available on free platforms. We intuited that this related to not modeling their work on what other professionals' sites looked like or not interpreting what information the instructor and guest expert offered as pertinent to their own portfolio.

Because the final online portfolio was the last assignment due the final week of class, instructors did not always see the completed (or nearly completed) product until grading the work. Although the course includes a Portfolio Editing Workshop assignment, the editing and conferences were peer-to-peer. While the instructor guides the students, there often was not time to see all the portfolios in that workshop editing process. Additionally, once the portfolios were submitted and graded, the likelihood of a student checking comments and revising the work was slim, even if they intended to use the portfolio professionally.

Upon reflection, we realized that students saw this as a college assignment instead of a tool for a professional, as we had intended. We had hoped students would perceive the portfolio as useful to show potential employers and/or to serve as a way of branding once they left university. Ostensibly, that perception would generate more care for the final product—but that was not happening.

EVALUATION OF IDEAS

Using portfolios as assessment tools has been an important part of writing program curriculum for decades. Within disciplines, portfolios that capture student work to increase their chances of gaining an internship or entry-level job are common in fields such as Public Relations (Baum, 2019).

Because of these factors, we knew we were on firm ground in requiring this assignment; however, our intention in using portfolios as a professional tool did not match the student's perception of them as an assignment. This was demonstrated by their lack of attention to detail, such as low-quality photographs, unclear captions or lead lines with articles, poor organization of website content pages, and overly personal biographical information. In response, we paired our reflection with a consultation of existing literature to see what insights we might glean.

One theoretical approach that informed our reflection on our students' approach to portfolios was our increased understanding of the life phase of emerging adulthood. Arnett (2016) identifies the life stage for these 18–29-year-olds as having five features: (1) identity exploration, (2) instability, (3) self-focus, (4) feeling in-between, and (5) possibilities/optimism (p. 15). Some of these features may give a better understanding of our students' responses to the portfolio assignment. For example, Arnett (2016) noted that undergraduates "spend most of each day focused on their self-development, specifically, on obtaining knowledge and skills that will prepare them for the knowledge economy, by attending classes and doing homework" (p. 19). Consequently, asking students to change their perspective and create a portfolio to be assessed by those in the workplace in a position to hire them rather than a professor is likely unfamiliar. Writers generally have difficulty looking at their work objectively; how much harder must it be for an undergraduate who thinks about their work as anything other than classwork is a relatively foreign perspective.

Lam (2020) noted, "Writing teachers, administrators, and researchers should not take it for granted that students can manage [portfolios] efficiently without teacher's expert guidance and planned instruction" (p. 173). This belief is supported by Ring et al. (2017), finding that student digital portfolios benefitted from "participating in one-on-one ePortfolio consultations" (p. 231). They noted, "Engaging students in purposeful and iterative self-reflective dialogue centered on evidence positively improve their abilities to communicate their accomplishments..." (p. 232). This was crucial to our thinking about the task we asked of students. For students to move from their "self-focus" and better see their portfolios from the

perspective of a potential employee, we needed to offer additional guidance.

DECISION

Based upon our reflection, the literature, and student responses, we decided that whether or not students see the ePortfolio as a professional tool, we still wanted to see better quality work. If students invested more in their portfolios, they might see them as useful post-college.

To instructors, it seemed obvious that a portfolio was intended as a professional piece; however, based on the quality of the first few semesters' portfolios, the most plausible explanation for the problem and unexpected issues was that students treated this as just another assignment to finish to complete the requirements for the course rather than a branding tool that would become their future website. If students did not view this portfolio as important and approached it only as an assignment or another knowledge skill, then typical adolescent behavior such as procrastination is likely. Delaying work on a complex project would ostensibly result in less than excellent work.

As a result, instructors could then consider questions concerning how students were guided once they reached the capstone course, beyond handouts, blended assignments, and classwork to discuss and review choices for their portfolios. We started looking at how to better help students identify an emphasis area with their writing. To address all of what was unexpected and unknown about the problem and increase the work's quality, we instituted one-on-one portfolio check-ins with students either after class or during instructor office hours.

Working under the premise that students will not value what they do not understand, the instructors focused on students' perceptions of the portfolio by assisting learners more closely. A one-on-one meeting would also provide instructors with a chance to point out the value of the portfolio. We decided to require two portfolio check-ins to answer student questions, direct students toward appropriate platforms, help them select work with intention, and monitor their progress. These check-ins did not carry point value, although they were presented as required activities. Students selected times from a sign-up sheet that showed instructor availability, which allotted 20 minutes to present the information to the instructor.

The first check-in required students to show they had researched and worked through a critical thinking process to select pieces appropriate to their portfolio by drawing from their undergraduate work. Students were asked to list the five pieces and provide detailed information about each, explaining how the work showed or complemented their area of emphasis. They were also asked to give links to three examples of professional writers' online portfolios and links to three possible online web layouts for their portfolios.

At the second check-in, each student showed their in-progress portfolio. The portfolio did not have to be complete, but it had to include an About page with a brief biography and an appropriate headshot. The website needed to be aesthetically pleasing and well thought-out, with attention to a design that draws the viewer in, such as an action item on each page (e.g., *click here* prompts). Although the semi-finished portfolio did not need to include the same pieces discussed in the first portfolio check-in, it still had to have five pieces from the professional writing program and a clear discipline emphasis. Each student was required to explain the purpose of the portfolio, their intended audience, and how the layout assisted the viewer to experience the work.

The intention behind this decision was to provide students with a framework for progress. By scheduling one-on-one time with each student, the learner and educator were put in a setting devoted to one learner's questions and needs. Rather than assuming students have technological savvy or understand how to compile their best work into a professional tool—the unexpected issues related to the problem of portfolio quality—we could intervene meaningfully. This environment allowed us to facilitate a shift in perception that helped the students start to see themselves as entering a professional field rather than just completing an assignment. We hoped this guidance would help students see this portfolio as a platform they could take with them as professionals.

After implementing check-ins, the feedback was positive. These comments were made during an informal discussion during the final week of class:

"Me personally I don't generally start projects until nearly the due date. That's just how I am and how I function. I would have liked more check-ins."

"I agree—I also procrastinate. I think the check-ins were perfect."

Additionally, informal surveys administered at the end of each semester revealed that more than half of the students desire to continue working with their portfolio by adding to it regularly (weekly-monthly). More than half also said they found the creation of the portfolio useful, some stating that through the creation of the portfolio, they were able to brand themselves in a way to attract potential employment.

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

Often, teachers create assignments with the best of intentions and have clear or perhaps even implicit objectives and learning outcomes. These might look good on paper and may even be in keeping with best practices within the discipline. However, it is not until the assignment is in the classroom and completed in real-time that teachers can see how it plays out for students and whether the assignment is indeed helping students meet those stated learning outcomes. It can be challenging to pinpoint what aspect of the assignment is not working. Often, it is not until an informal or, in this case, more formal inquiry takes place through reflective practice that understanding is gained and the differential between the desired and actual outcomes is elucidated.

While we agree with Chambliss and Takacs (2014) that measurable skills are not the only beneficial outcomes of a college degree, we want our graduates to be both employable and competitive. Looking at the disconnect in this culminating assignment, breaking down possible reasons for that disconnect, consulting the literature, and deciding on a plan have been fruitful. We have instituted meaningful changes to improve the assignments' quality and ensure that students have more effective one-on-one guidance for how these portfolios can be used professionally, and we are pleased. However, this reflection led us to further questions and opened additional lines of inquiry that we will pursue.

In the coming months, we plan to survey graduates from our program to see if the portfolio continues to be useful after they leave the program, as intended. For example, if they are employed in a writing field, was their portfolio helpful in securing employment? Did employers ask to see their portfolio? Do they continue to update their portfolio? We have taken informal steps in that direction during discussions at the end of the semester once students work through the assignment and create the final portfolio. Additionally, we hope to see if they saw the process of creating the work (e.g., selecting pieces, deciding on an appropriate platform, honing branding, etc.) and the product itself as useful. We view the question about the process as valuable, as compiling the materials needed requires them to think critically about a vision for their future.

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