

## **Social Media Convergence: How A Blog Assignment Can Be A Professional e-Portfolio**

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### **Abstract**

Developing an electronic portfolio as a course assignment provides multiple beneficial outcomes. First, e-Portfolio creation permits an in-depth view of student learning as well as a concise vehicle to access academic progress. Second, the e-Portfolio provides a useful repository of creative artifacts that can be a lasting achievement showcase. Third, an e-Portfolio course assignment allows students to effectively work with new digital literacy tools, such as social media weblogs. The planning, implementation and assessment processes required to integrate a career e-Portfolio into a collegiate course can be integrated across numerous disciplines.

### **Introduction**

College professors constantly seek innovative, meaningful and relevant topics to enhance classroom instruction. This search, moreover, often leads to a discovery of new methods and applications that enable both the student and the teacher to learn and grow. Clearly, realistic and relational assignments are the best methods to propel learning, promote effective teaching and evaluate outcomes. A blending of these instructive assignments with the focused use of Web 2.0 technologies, such as social media, provides a fresh approach for teachers. Moreover, this melding of learning actions with the increasingly familiar technology tools of today encourages an engaging environment for learners. The powerful, yet, versatile qualities of weblogs are well suited for this dynamic. A student's use of digital technologies, such as weblogs, presents a valuable venue for creating, sharing, storing and accessing course assignments (Abbott, 2010; McCoy, 2012).

Weblogs are increasingly useful learning tools with comprehensive curricular applications. These pedagogical blogs (Pimpare & Fast, 2008) effectively work in numerous disciplines, such as political science, art, english and communication studies. Beyond the apparent utility of blogs within an educational technology curriculum, the multi-disciplinary role of academic weblogs has immense potential (Larsson & Hrastinski, 2011). In

this capacity, course-related blog projects can increase digital fluency (Huffaker, 2005).

### **Weblogs as e-Portfolios**

This article explores the role of weblogs, or blogs, as a valuable class assignment platform for the establishment of a personal professional e-Portfolio. Blogs are popular social media sites that allow for descriptive multimodal digital narratives complete with an archive of autobiographical writing, video, audio, still images, and hyperlinks. A recent study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010) found that 72% of American young adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine use social networking websites while 15% of this group maintain a personal blog site. Many college students, therefore, hold a working understanding and relationship with social media and blogs. Yet, some of those students have little training regarding the myriad possibilities of the technology. Blogs are more than personal journals filled with insipid observations. As flexible repositories of student work, blogs offer essential components for the creation of a successful professional e-Portfolio.

The use of electronic portfolios in higher education has grown steadily over the past decade (Ring, Weaver, & Jones, 2008). Portfolios feature a demonstration of individual competencies and a place to showcase achievements. Barrett (2010) suggests that an electronic portfolio is a valuable and versatile “collection of evidence that shows your learning journey over time” (p. 6) while artifacts of learning, such as writing samples, research projects, photos, videos, multimedia journals and assessments, provide a contextual and concrete description of experience. An electronic portfolio can be defined as a set of rules, ideas, beliefs and information, collected for a particular aim or as tangible home for an individual’s or a group’s achievements (Challis, 2005). They are more than just electronic resumes; rather, e-Portfolios typify the rising importance of mastering social media platforms as personal professional convergence outcomes.

### **Implementation into a course**

As professors, our role is to provide students with both the solid foundations of subject matter and the insight needed for critical analysis. Good teaching, however, does not live in a vacuum. Twenty-first century instructors must be adaptable in designing a curricular approach that embraces new forms of teaching and learning, such as project

communication creation and the fluid mastery of new technology. This blend of creativity and technology aspects fuels a constant need for students to stay current, because current means career. Teachers, moreover, should stay up-to-date with new instructional techniques and technologies because current means relevant.

Many higher education faculty members are Digital Immigrant teachers instructing Digital Native students (Prensky, 2001). While more than 90% of surveyed collegiate faculty (Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, 2011) claim that they are aware of social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs, some instructors are, at first, fearful of introducing a technology-based exercise in which scant expertise is located. My early professional and academic careers pre-dated the Internet. However, I decided to learn as much as I could about weblogs so I could feel confident in designing a prudent path for students to follow. In my research, I learned that blogs are low or no cost alternatives to having a personal website. With Blogger and WordPress, no fee for a domain name was required. This open source toolware was designed for those without advanced web design or programming skills; yet, each software company provided quick set-up, ample professional look templates and intuitive menu displays.

In my Writing for the Media course, I adopted the creation of a blog as a new assignment. Students need to be literate in Internet and digital technologies to work as media professionals. Web 2.0 technologies, such as blogs, are rapidly becoming the standard means for work-related features and stories in journalism (Switzer, 2008). Blogging informs idea generation and propels multiliteracies that help students in storytelling creation skills, such as organization, research, information gathering, writing and audio-visual acuity.

Students were required to set up a weblog site, provide a personal photograph and short biography, design a professional look from provided templates, create text posts, devise and generate multiple relevant still images and hyperlink to sites for additive content. They were evaluated on content, quality, clarity and organization.

While the blog assignment worked well in my course, I realized that weblogs held a great deal more potential for the media student. Students need a defined place to showcase their works and their academic progress. Clearly, a portfolio was needed. Based upon the work of Yuksel (2010), I decided to integrate and expand my curriculum to more fully represent the totality of student work in the writing course.

The electronic portfolio assignment was not difficult to add to the course. I explained that the portfolio could be based from the pre-existing writing blog site and it would deliver extra credit points. A few additions were needed to entail an effective and professional e-Portfolio. An important feature was a link to a PDF version of the student's resume. Class time was devoted both to the examination of the essential components of a concise and explanatory resume and the electronic creation of such a document. Another inclusion was the recording of a short video testimonial from at least one of the student's listed references. On this aspect, students worked in teams to produce the video. This facet worked toward speeding up the process of completion due to the late stage of the semester. While the resume writing and video reference recording provided solid substance, the most important consideration was the utility of an e-Portfolio---long-lasting effect, autonomy, social media mastery and showcase of achievements.

### **Subsequent course applications**

The following semester I designed a graded capstone e-Portfolio assignment for both the media writing and the video/audio aesthetics courses. The improved design called for multiple achievement mileposts during the semester. At the quarter semester mark, all students needed a working blog with personal biographies, a photograph and an introductory post included. During the midterm week, all e-Portfolio blogs were required to contain a one-page resume, a cover letter, four descriptive posts that each related to the resume, current coursework, student media participation and non-curricular activities. When the semester was at week twelve, hyperlinks to one's academic department, student media affiliation, non-curricular clubs and activities and off-campus jobs were to be finalized. During the last week of classes, students would present their electronic portfolios to classmates.

The overarching purpose was to assure that all digital media and journalism students would create an assessment site that could be reviewed by faculty at the end of sophomore, junior and senior terms. Both courses were perfect for the structure, as they were filled with freshmen and sophomores. Our faculty, in turn, could review each student in the major and critically evaluate the professional progress via e-Portfolio artifacts. Suggestions would be given to each student as to specific items, context and alternative measures to include in the site. These refinements

demonstrated a student's willingness to accept critique and adapt correspondingly which are highly prized attributes in any profession.

### **Recommendations**

Based upon the experience gained from these assignments, a few essential steps are recommended for implementing a blog as a student-generated e-Portfolio.

- Research and learn blog basics
- Use an open-source (free) blog site
- Design assignments that work with the technology's accessibility advantage

First, an instructor should discover a basic understanding about the appearance and functionality of blogs. One does not need to be a computer science expert; however, a good comprehension about how to create and update posts, how to add still images and video and how to hyperlink to YouTube or other sites is highly suggested. Second, research and employ an open-source platform, such as Blogger or WordPress, to house the student blogs. University-maintained sites often are often limited to only those currently enrolled; therefore, an outside entity is preferable for longer-lasting reasons. Third, design a workable flow that coincides with active course assignments. In this manner, assignments get completed and loaded to the electronic portfolio site. Thus, faculty evaluation is simpler and the additive effect of building a strong site is achieved.

### **Conclusion**

This article examined the key steps required for the design and production of a course-related blog assignment as an e-Portfolio. Examples drawn from two different collegiate courses served as both a foundation and a bridge to further inquiry. Blogs are a relatively recent addition to the growing technology and communication tools available to educators. As the use of blogs becomes more and more prevalent in higher education, faculty can discover new ways to incorporate social media, like blogs, into the curriculum and ensure third millennium educational quality and relevance for students of all disciplines.

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