ePortfolios in Introductory Composition: Enlarging Conceptions of Composing

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Project Information
Building on last year’s Electronic Portfolio Contest, Catalyst Research & Development is currently partnering with the Expository Writing Program to study how students learn to compose in the format of an ePortfolio. EWP currently uses a well-developed paper portfolio assignment as part of its introductory composition course. Within this context, we are studying what effects the transition from paper to electronic portfolios has on teaching and learning. Graduate student instructors (TAs) piloted the use of ePortfolios in three sections of English 131 in winter 2006 and are using ePortfolios in six sections this spring. Students in these sections are using Catalyst Portfolio to assemble and comment on their writing for the course.

Challenges
English 131: Introduction to Expository Writing is built around four course learning outcomes. For the portfolio, students choose five to seven papers to demonstrate how they have achieved the outcomes. Currently, for the paper portfolio, students write their argument in the form of a cover letter to their instructor. One challenge has been translating the genre of a cover letter to a multi-page online portfolio format and encouraging the use of a wider range of artifacts as evidence for a claim.

We have attached selected pages from our template here (created in Portfolio Project Builder). In writing the directions for the ePortfolio, we sought to integrate the lessons we learned from our contest study. Specifically, we sought to:

1. make clear what a portfolio is and how it is similar/different from other types of writing.
2. help students to think about audience as they create each page.
3. remind students about the criteria being used to evaluate their work.
4. provide scaffolding to help students write effective reflections and make explicit connections between their artifacts and the course outcomes.
5. provide information about how students can use HTML to produce a more professional look in the ePortfolio presentation.

Preliminary findings: Ask us about what we are seeing and hearing from instructors and students!