English e-Portfolio Project – Lessons Learned

Successes

Instructors have found that the e-portfolio components have refreshed and added necessary rigour to courses that have for some years been in need of updating and revision.

Students have produced some of their best (most insightful, most polished and articulate) writing in the reflections that have done on the writing processes in which they are involved in English 301 and 303.

Challenges

For instructors, the reflections have added to the volume of assignments and to the overall workload of already writing-intensive (and therefore labour-intensive) courses.
We are working this summer on ways to streamline the design and the marking of portfolio assignments to alleviate this problem.

For instructors and students, the first year of the portfolio project in our courses has produced some initial confusion about the purpose(s) of the assignment. Is the project intended to be a learning portfolio? A teaching portfolio? A job application portfolio?

These are questions we are working to address in the revisions we are making to our courses this summer.

For instructors and students, questions have arisen about expectations and criteria for evaluation of the portfolio project. We have developed a more specific rubric for evaluating the portfolio. This document will be posted to instructors before the course begins again in September and to students in the course introductions, which contain extended discussions of the e-portfolio components.

User Feedback

At meetings of instructors and in online discussion with students, the feedback at mid-course and at course conclusion has been largely positive. Students have appreciated the opportunity to write about what they are learning about their writing processes and about how they are learning. They have reported that the writing of reflections is easeful (but not always easy) and that it allows them the best opportunities in both courses to "write in their authentic voices."

Early in the first term of 2005-06, a small number of students professed some skepticism or confusion about the e-portfolio and about reflective learning. One or two students were confused and believed initially that reflections were asking that they evaluate their instructors rather than their own learning. This confusion did dissipate as students became more comfortable with the practices of collaborative and reflective learning and peer review that are now so much a part of both courses.

The experience of the e-portfolio project is best captured in this comment provided to us by an English 301 student for an end-of-term focus group:

"At first, writing e-reflections felt onerous. It was not until the portfolio began to take form that I was able to see the benefits of my work. In particular, the portfolio has allowed me to see what I struggled with (e.g. argument and pronoun references!), where I improved (e.g., revising), and how my attitude toward the writing process has matured (e.g., now I consider the elements of page layout, typography, and forecasting statements in my writing). I imagine that, some day, this portfolio will provide the starting material for a much larger, online undergraduate e-portfolio. I envision adding to it graphics and selected works from other courses and Co-Op work terms."

Conclusion

The integration of the electronic portfolio into our newly designed writing courses has been a happy one. The courses as now re-designed are significantly more attentive to the great variety among students in their learning and practice of writing. We as instructors no longer ask students just to grind out a series of practical writing products; we now are able to engage our students in meaningful and important discussions about how they learn and about how we can learn from them how better to teach writing for a variety of audiences and purposes.