Chapter XXIV
Purpose, Audience, and Engagement in Spelman College’s eFolio Project

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on the pilot phase of a longitudinal study that tracks Spelman College’s transition from a paper-based First-Year Writing Portfolio to an electronically based one. It presents data from interviews with students, faculty, and administrators, as well as surveys administered to a pilot section of students composing eFolios. These data indicate that the transition will require a re-evaluation of the First-Year Writing Portfolio’s current conception of audience and purpose. Further, they indicate that assigners of eFolios should discuss audience and purpose directly with all stakeholders in the eFolio composition process, including students, administration, and faculty, since these elements may be differently conceptualized by different individuals and/or across different contexts.

Unless we develop a habit of thinking in new ways about technology and technologically-based texts, electronic portfolios are as likely to be used by teachers to support those practices we now see as reprehensible in our educational system (e.g., surveillance, competition, outdated assessment methods, and the continued oppression of women and students from underrepresented groups in our culture) as they are by teachers who employ those practices we see as positive (e.g., collaboration, the valuing of individual expression and creativity, and the productive exploration of difference).

—Hawisher and Selfe (1997, p. 318)
My feelings are more or less honestly “Why do we have to do this again?”
—Dee, Student Participant in Spelman College’s eFolio Pilot Project

INTRODUCTION

Electronic portfolios (eFolios) have exploded in popularity across college campuses. In 1996, Kathleen Blake Yancey guest-edited a special issue of Computers and Composition on electronic portfolios, but remarked in her introduction that she had begun the task wondering, “Would there be enough people who had worked with electronic portfolios to fill an issue like this?” (p. 129). Only six years later, Batson (2002) noted a surge in momentum, with eFolio programs already in place at many schools, and technology vendors including WebCT and BlackBoard scrambling to develop and market eFolio tools. However, critical consumers of these products—and indeed, critical consumers of the notion of eFolios in general—are stepping back to ask questions. Early in the process of eFolio development, Hawisher and Selfe (1997) called for “a more tempered view of what we can and cannot expect from writing portfolios and computers” (p. 308). The existence of this collection speaks to the rise of interest in eFolios as well as the urgent need for critical research on eFolios.

Two concerns highlighted in this chapter are audience and purpose. We need to consider carefully how imagined and real audiences may impact the development and success of eFolio programs. The faculty and/or administration who sponsor electronic-composing projects often assume that their notion of a “real audience,” such as users on the Web, is the same as students’ (Price & Warner, in press). This leads to divergent senses of purpose for the eFolio, with faculty and administration viewing an eFolio as a marvelous tool to facilitate critical reflection, assessment, and “real-world” preparation, while students may view it, at best, as simply another bureaucratic hoop through which they must jump, or at worst, as an updated version of the ominous “permanent record” that follows one through school.

The purpose of this chapter is to report on the pilot phase of a longitudinal study in progress at Spelman College. The study tracks Spelman’s transition from a paper-based First-Year Writing Portfolio to an electronically based one. Presenting data from the first pilot group to have completed eFolios, this chapter shows how the issues of audience and purpose have impacted the implementation of Spelman’s eFolio program thus far, describes revisions being made to the program on the basis of this research, and offers suggestions aimed at “temper[ing]” (Hawisher & Selfe, 1997) our continued teaching and research in these areas.

DEFINING “eFOLIO”

Definitions of eFolios may be quite general, like the one offered by Chen and Mazow (2002): “... purposeful collections of artifacts that characterize the learning experiences of the portfolio owner.” Or they may be quite specific, like Batson’s (2002) distinction between the “Webfolio,” which he identifies as static and HTML-driven, and the “electronic portfolio,” dynamic and database-driven. Often, as a starting point, researchers cite the portfolio catchphrase “collection, selection, reflection,” but it is also recognized that the shift into an electronic medium has brought changes to that familiar triad.

In her earlier work on electronic portfolios, Yancey (1996) defines a portfolio as a “metatext with seven defining features”: collection of work; selection of work; reflection upon work; demonstration of development, whether implicitly or explicitly; demonstration of diversity...