Chapter L
Can We Talk? Electronic Portfolios as Collaborative Learning Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the Northwestern University Collaboratory Project’s ePortfolio. As a resource in the Collaboratory, a Web-based collaborative learning environment, it provides collaborative learning spaces where K-12 students in Illinois can share and discuss their work. Web document templates are used by students to create media-rich documents that can be viewed with only a Web browser. Of particular significance is how the ePortfolio’s document-based communication model is being used to support mentoring, peer review, feedback, and reflection, and to facilitate a community of learning that motivates and encourages students.

INTRODUCTION

The Collaboratory Project

Many portfolio projects today are focused on collecting and organizing student work to showcase achievement. However, the Northwestern University Collaboratory Project’s ePortfolio was designed to be a learning portfolio (Greenberg, 2004). It provides collaborative learning spaces to support the evolution of work; encourages interaction and collaboration among students, teachers, and mentors; and serves as a resource for teacher professional development. The ePortfolio is one of a number of resources and services available to K-12 teachers and their students in the Collaboratory, a Web-based collaborative learning environment.
Can We Talk? Electronic Portfolios as Collaborative Learning Spaces

The Collaboratory Project (http://collaboratory.nunet.net) was established in 1996 with a $1.8 million grant from the Ameritech Foundation as a technology outreach initiative for Northwestern University. In creating a network-based collaborative learning environment for K-12 students, the goal was to bring together a large, diverse community of students and their teachers to share information and experience, collaborate on projects, and learn from each other. By removing technical barriers to accomplishing objectives and delivering services, the Collaboratory is making it possible for educators to carry out significant educational activities that would otherwise be technically impossible or prohibitively expensive. The project currently receives support from the Illinois State Board of Education to provide education technology infrastructure for state professional development efforts, for district curriculum integration initiatives, as well as for school and teacher classroom projects.

The project provides consulting, training, and support to Illinois educators who wish to use the Collaboratory to engage students in project-based learning activities that can be aligned with Illinois Learning Standards. Teachers create and manage projects as well as student accounts, give students access to projects and resources, and approve student work through password-protected accounts. Students submit text, graphics, sound, and video files that are saved in a database and are used to dynamically create Web pages.

The Collaboratory is available through a standard Web browser from servers at Northwestern University seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Today, more than 6,200 Illinois teachers, over 550 Illinois technology coordinators and media specialists, and almost 34,000 students representing over 1,200 Illinois schools have accounts in the Collaboratory.

Creating a Collaborative Learning Environment

Projects in the Collaboratory are composed of activities that use the ePortfolio and other Collaboratory resources as well as resources available on the Internet. These activities and classroom events appear on each project’s calendar. The Project Page provides a framework for teachers to develop engaged learning activities for their students. These are made available to students through their Collaboratory accounts, created by teachers or by the Collaboratory Project for the school or district.

Collaboratory Communication Services include messaging, conferencing, discussion forums, invitations, and announcements—all used to support collaboration among teachers and students. Automatic alerts and notifications keep participants up to date about activities, new projects, and events. Search capabilities enable participants to easily find other people and projects.

The ePortfolio is one of the Collaboratory Resources teachers use to develop innovative project-based curricular activities that can be aligned to Illinois Learning Standards. In addition to the ePortfolio, there is a Cybrary that teachers use to create customized, curriculum-specific virtual libraries of Internet resources. MediaSpace is where “electronic multimedia postcards” containing text, graphics, sound, and/or video are used to share projects and information. In the Internet Book Club, teachers create reading lists, and students share book reviews and essays. The Survey Studio is used to create online surveys, questionnaires, and data collection forms for project activities. Teachers can also create Nexus Communities to bring together people with common interests in interactive online learning communities. Nexus Communities take the same approach to