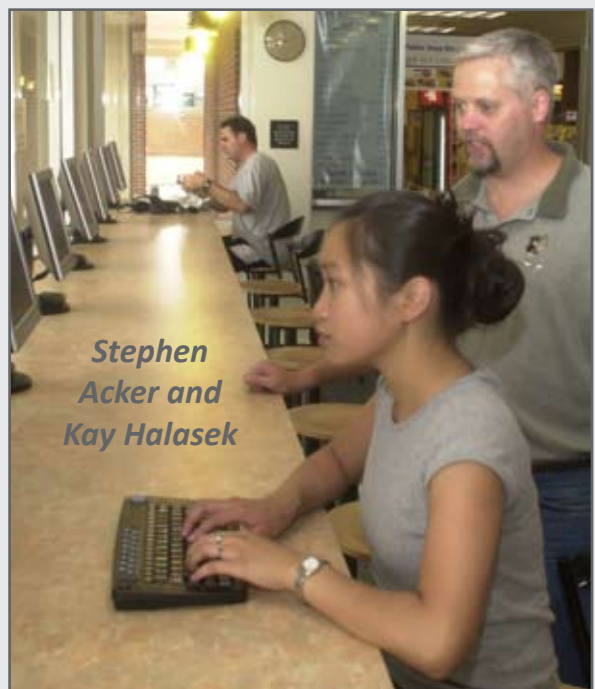


Preparing High School Students for College-Level Writing

High school teachers face many competing challenges, including preparing all students to pass state-mandated tests, while ensuring that “college prep” students are ready for the demands of college writing and Advanced Placement students for the essay-testing they will experience. Although these goals are not necessarily contradictory, the demands on accountability that teachers face regarding the state-mandated tests means that they often must place so much energy on that type of test preparation that they cannot be as creative as they could be in advancing the writing level of all the students.

Even students who pass the state-mandated exams and meet graduation requirements may experience difficulty navigating the demands of college-level writing. The lack of finely honed writing skills can be detrimental to a student’s self-concept and academic performance in all subjects. Colleges and universities generally seek students who will arrive at college with the basic tools they need to succeed. Students who are prepared well for college tend

Using ePortfolio to Support a Successful Transition



Stephen Acker and Kay Halasek

to be more successful and need less remedial coursework. The latter is important because state subsidies for remedial coursework at public institutions are either low or nonexistent.

Preparing for College Expectations

To address the issue of ensuring that high school students' writing experiences prepare them for college expectations, Dr. Stephen Acker and Dr. Kay Halasek launched a research project, "Preparing High School Students for College-Level Writing: Using ePortfolio to Support a Successful Transition." The ePortfolio Project was a joint research study between The Ohio State University and two local high schools from which Ohio State enrolls students. High school students wrote essays of three to five pages in length and posted them to their ePortfolios, where they received feedback from

The need to prepare students for state-mandated tests can compete with time spent working on "college prep" assignments.

both university and high school faculty. Receiving input from both the high school and university levels is important because it gives two different perspectives on their writing and helps students more clearly see the difference in expectations from high school to college. Using ePortfolio technology allows the entire writing and assessment project to be housed together, which allows for a more comprehensive view of the writing experience. Students can view past writing projects and work on continuously improving their writing. ePortfolios allow students the opportunity to build a


chronicle of their successes while providing a means for teacher and institutional accountability.

The team that worked together to frame the ePortfolio Project included university faculty in Communications and English, district technology coordinators, area high school teachers, and over 40 high school students. Using

Open Source Portfolio software (<http://sakaiproject.org>), the team worked to create authentic, observable, and shared writing tasks and assignments that would improve the alignment between what was expected of high school students and what college professors expect in first-year college courses. Through surveys, students commented that the ePortfolios helped them to develop skills in defining, managing, and assessing their own learning artifacts; to trace their own development and growth across disciplinary and educational boundaries; to draw connections across and among those disciplines; and to take responsibility for and authority over their own learning and writing.

The overall expectation was that the feedback students received from both high school and university faculty would help them improve their writing and achieve a level of writing more closely in line with the expectations of college faculty. High school and college teachers do look for different things when assessing their students' writing. High school teachers tend





ePortfolios can be used across all disciplines and can be an alternative to high-stakes testing.

to focus more on good writing having a thesis that is clearly stated in the introduction, followed by paragraphs supporting the thesis, and concluding logically. College teachers often view good writing as having features that vary from one situation to another, depending on the subject of the writing, the purpose of the writing, and the reader's expectations.

Portable Academic Accomplishments

Besides the focus on the students' actual writing, the ePortfolio Project led to pedagogical discussions among colleagues about writing topics, such as how to teach "voice" and how to improve the ePortfolio technology. Common software technology is also useful in today's mobile society because student portfolios are portable from one institution to another when a student moves. Limitations of the software are largely tied to the funding needed to train teachers and the time needed to master yet another skill of the teaching profession. ePortfolios can be used across all disciplines and can be a more effective measure of learning than traditional high-stakes tests. They also could become a means of lifelong learning if users are permitted to maintain their portfolios beyond the scope of their direct relationship with the institution. In Minnesota, lifelong and life-wide portfolios are avail-

ePortfolios help students take responsibility for and authority over their own learning and writing.



able to all citizens. The technology exists to make this happen nationally; however, there are issues of cost, scalability, and policy before this potential could become reality.

With the popularity of MySpace, many students are already familiar with an online “portfolio.” ePortfolios are like MySpace except that they tend to focus on academic endeavors and personal goal states. Unlike course-management programs like Blackboard or Carmen, students can pick who can view their ePortfolio. They can choose to share their work with former teachers who are not associated with their current institution or to share information with professors at a graduate school where they are seeking acceptance. In-

stitutions, however, are allowed only to share the portfolios anonymously unless students give their permission for attribution. The possibilities are many, but the impact remains that students can receive more input on their writing, thus offering more chances for improvement.

Dr. Acker shared a vision to have ePortfolios used across the state of Ohio at the college level. Many students attend more than one college, and having an ePortfolio that could travel with them from place to place could help to smooth that transition and to showcase some of what the student has already accomplished academically. ePortfolios can be created as a showcase portfolio, putting together only the best products the student has, or as a

learning portfolio, showing the entire history of the student’s writing that is available.

Students come to college with a set of expectations based on their high school experiences. Concerning writing, college expectations are different from those of high school, and students need to be aware of those differences as soon as possible in order to maximize their college writing abilities in all disciplines. Acker and Halasek’s research on ePortfolios could result in increased success in writing for college students. An electronic portfolio holds authentic evidence of learning attained and students can control and use that to show the world concrete examples of what they know. ■