

# Migration Patterns: A Status Report on the Transition from Paper to Eportfolios and the Effect on Multimodal Composition Initiatives

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## 1. Introduction

In *Composition in Convergence* (2005), Diane Penrod argued the clash between new technologies used for composing and the existing apparatuses for writing assessment cause “various tensions to emerge and reemerge” (p. xvi). Within first-year composition (FYC), the complex relationship between evolving multimodal composing practices and electronic portfolios is a case in point. As part of new efforts by writing programs at Miami University (Digital Writing Collaborative, founded 2006) and Kent State University (The Writing Program Initiative, founded 2005), among others, today’s instructors assign podcasts, video essays, wikis, and webpages, expanding the range of what is considered “writing” in FYC. Though many programs historically have relied on a print-based exit portfolio to assess student work over the course of the semester (Estrem, 2004; Huot, 2002a, 2002b; Yancey & Weiser, 1997), this type of “paper”<sup>1</sup> portfolio cannot accommodate emerging composing practices. Therefore FYC programs must negotiate the following assessment tensions: forgo program assessment of exit portfolios to avoid the difficulty of including and exchanging multimodal projects, forgo inclusion of non print-based work, or try to make multimodal compositions “fit into” traditional paper-based portfolios (i.e. by printing webpages or transcripts). None of these options is viable for a pedagogically sound writing program. Instead, Penrod (2005) argued that tools such as FYC’s now-standard exit portfolios must adapt to the widening range of texts students produce, or “these practices and discourse will most likely cease to exist as a legitimate form [for discussing] student work” (p. xxix). For a field with a 30-year tradition of portfolio pedagogy (White, 1994), the e-portfolio seems like a natural evolution to accommodate new modes of composing, especially as the paper portfolio already has been theorized as a writing assessment technology (Huot, 2002a; Neal, 2011; Hawisher & Selfe, 1997; Inoue, 2009).

Composition leadership agrees. In 2004, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) wholeheartedly embraced the shift from paper to electronic portfolios, exhorting writing programs to “facilitate the development of electronic portfolios” when possible as a means to accommodate emerging modes of writing. Over the past eight years, many programs began transitioning to e-portfolios in response. For FYC programs such as my own working to incorporate new media texts, e-portfolios were an attractive starting point because they expanded the range of texts open to exit assessment. Moreover, depending on the type of system used, the e-portfolio functioned as an emerging multimodal composition itself as students created links, designed the interface, and “composed” using e-portfolio

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I purposely use the phrase *paper portfolio* to refer to the physical folder holding print essays versus *print portfolio* which can refer to an electronic portfolio that houses PDFs of print essays.

tools.<sup>2</sup> Even when programs remain print-focused, e-portfolios potentially solved many of the problems inherent in large scale assessment of FYC exit portfolios including data management, storage, and accessibility (Kimball, 2005), or logistical issues with communal exchange including how to physically exchange portfolios between readers (Eng, 2006). Because the e-portfolio offers something for FYC programs at various levels of multimodality, it “has become nearly as widespread as its paper counterpart” (Desmet et al., 2008, p. 16).

In theory, much of portfolio pedagogy should carry over to e-portfolios and/or be more efficient to execute. Like paper predecessors, e-portfolios are touted for encouraging revision and process pedagogy (Elbow, 1994; Desmet et al., 2008); student ownership, collaboration, and negotiation with instructors (Clark & Eynon, 2009); and reflection (Yancey, 2009). Both types tend to be similarly evaluated through holistic scoring to determine writing competence at the end of a course by the instructor, faculty, and/or writing program administrators. A transition to the e-portfolio is not a seamless move from print to screen, however, because the technology used to create, exchange, and evaluate the eportfolio mediates how the portfolio looks and functions. Paper portfolios, on the other hand, have changed very little since Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff’s 1980s’ experiments with portfolios in lieu of exit exams at Stony Brook and thus maintain easily identifiable characteristics (Elbow & Belanoff, 1997). They look physically similar (print essays in a folder or binder) and typically contain essays from standard genres, such as narrative or argument, written over a course or semester. The essays are usually accompanied by evidence of reflection.

Though local contexts have traditionally played a role in how exit portfolios were created and functioned within a FYC program, the e-portfolio tool chosen to create, exchange, and evaluate student work offers a vast range of assessment possibilities. As evidence, e-portfolios within FYC currently range from online expansions of print portfolios where static PDFs of print essays are housed for evaluation as at Seton Hall University, to completely redesigned exit assessments at University of Washington that include new media texts such as videos. Unlike paper versions, e-portfolios inevitably vary based local constraints that include financial resources, access to various technologies and infrastructure (e-portfolio tools, server space, labs), and/or expertise of support staff, and writing faculty and administrators. E-portfolios are also influenced by these larger issues that affect how portfolio pedagogy is executed:

- Who creates the interface (The student? The writing program? A course management system?)?
- Who determines the content and who can view it (The student? The writing program? The university?)?
- What artifacts can be showcased (PDFs of print essays? Videos? Webpages?) and how much storage is provided?
- Who is the audience for the e-portfolio and how are contents shared during the exit assessment process (Writing faculty? External readers?)?
- How does the e-portfolio fit within the existing FYC structure, including faculty development efforts and emerging multimodal composition initiatives?
- What program or university needs must also be served by the e-portfolio tool (Retention, accreditation, and/or course management?)?

These questions historically affected the paper portfolio to some extent, but physical limitations restricted potential answers. Because the exit paper portfolio has remained more or less the same for 30 years, it has come to serve as a symbol of “best practices” within FYC and has been heavily theorized as such in collections by Laurel Black, Daiker, Sommers, & Stygall (1994), Kathleen Yancey and Irwin Weiser (1997), and Robert Calfee and Pamela Perfumo (1996). To date, few studies have similarly explored what a discipline-wide move to the e-portfolio for exit assessment means in general for FYC and portfolio pedagogy,<sup>3</sup> though several studies describe local transitions (Corbett, 2012; Desmet et al., 2008; Day, 2009). This essay provides an overview of what these local, varied transitions to the e-portfolio, taken together, suggest about where we are heading with the portfolio as an exit tool including its relationship to multimodal composition. Using data about current patterns of FYC e-portfolio use culled from a combination of published research and a search of FYC program websites, I provide a sketch of four common approaches FYC programs have taken to replace paper portfolios with e-portfolios.

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<sup>3</sup> One early useful study of how multiple disciplines, including a few FYC locations, have moved from print to eportfolios is Cambridge, Cambridge, and Yancey (2009). Also see Corbett et al. (2012).

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