

Making 'Digital Portfolios' Work

A place for students to showcase their learning

A traditional report card or transcript often doesn't do enough to show students and parents—and later colleges and employers—what students know and can do. That's why digital portfolios are gaining popularity.

The portfolios can help students who have grown up with online content platforms showcasing their skills and interests.

Digital portfolios allow a teacher to tie aspects of in-person or online work to specific content standards or skills, and give students opportunities to reflect.

Portfolios often include personalization via personal essays and passion projects; highlights of the student’s art, writing, awards, or skill badges; and growth, demonstrated by the student’s journals, reflections, drafts, or other evidence. Here’s how Amber Chandler, a teacher-mentor in the Frontier Central district in New York and other experts suggest teachers structure and use digital portfolios effectively.

FIVE TIPS for making digital portfolios successful:

1 | Use an accessible platform.

At a minimum, your students, their parents, and future teachers should be able to access the electronic portfolios. It's helpful to work with teachers across grade levels and subjects to coordinate portfolios.

2 | Set clear learning goals.

Students should understand how the portfolio will be used (like documenting work for a specific project or course, or as an ongoing skills transcript) and how it will count for assessment or grades. Chandler uses a common checklist for her students' portfolio entries that includes a cover image, a title, a description, and then a section where students describe their challenges and takeaways.

3 | Cultivate a professional tone.

E-portfolios have become common in the workplace as well as schools. Guidance from Arizona State University advises students learn how to create a consistent format and tone when documenting their work and learn how to present information to different audiences. Students at Ponaganset High School in the Foster-Glocester regional school district in Rhode Island must reflect on and present their digital portfolios at the end of each year to both a teacher who knows their work and one who doesn't to get feedback from different perspectives.

4 | Go beyond digital work.

While e-portfolios lend themselves to digital badges and work, students can also take and upload pictures or videos of hands-on class projects. For example, Chandler asks her students to investigate a “burning question” over the course of the year, including original research and interviews.

5 | Include space for student ownership.

Chandler encourages her students to supplement academic work with awards and extracurricular projects to give a well-rounded sense of who they are. “I tell kids, if you’ve got a video of your violin solo, put it up,” she said. “Be school-appropriate, but put all the parts of you in this.”

