

## Are Digital Portfolios a Realistic Alternative to Standardized Testing?

### Yes

Being active participants in the digital era, it is time for educators to re-evaluate the one-shot testing of a student's growth in learning and actively promote assessment that truly represents our students' progress. As educators, we continue to develop our best teaching practices based on research and pedagogy, including developing an understanding of the context in which our digital students will grow up. As a result, we realize that year-end standardized testing is not an authentic or comprehensive evaluation of what our students are learning.

Learning is a process that takes time and requires assessment for and of learning along the way. Digital portfolios lend themselves nicely to creating a multidisciplinary collection of artifacts that demonstrate a student's learning throughout a school year. At the beginning of the year, the portfolio shows the benchmark for that student's learning. As educators, it allows us to see the needs of our students and differentiate instruction accordingly. Goals are based on the learner's needs and interests within the parameters

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of the curriculum. By the end of the year, the portfolio reflects the overall growth. It also

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Discussing the use of standardized testing is a great way to open the debate among educators. Once we begin, we easily find ourselves mired in verbiage. One alternative for a beginning with thoughtful answers is to ask core questions. Several major questions arise initially: What are the purposes of standardized testing and a digital portfolio, and for what types of assessments are these tests used?

As stated by Richard Phelps, a proponent of standardized testing, "testing is a systematic means of collecting information." This applies to both the standardized testing and the digital portfolio, as both gather information about the student. Yet

here is where the similarity may end, because both "tests" have inherent structures that attempt to glean specific types of information. As our American education history evolved, no longer did the teacher rely on the Socratic teacher-student discourse or the time-consuming written exam. *Washington Post* edu-



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demonstrates the process and steps taken by the student to obtain his or her goals. Even if the student may not be meeting grade-level expectations or standards, it gives a realistic view of the whole learner, not just a snapshot.

The digital portfolio not only allows the involvement of the student but also includes the parent in the learning process. Parents can access these portfolios from home to have an ongoing picture of where their child performs without having to be in the school or restricted to scheduled interviews. From a student's perspective, portfolios are personal and celebratory of accomplishments, but are also designed to involve learners in the decision making regarding progress and goals. With guidance and support, they set task goals, criteria, and strategies. Final reflection of their own work is based on rubrics and standards set out in conjunction with the curriculum.

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Digital portfolios are ongoing; they move with the student from one year to the next and have the advantage of only taking up digital space. They provide valuable information to the receiving teacher, and unlike standardized test results, which arrive in late fall, portfolios give immediate and useful data to guide planning for the next school year. They also allow the student to go back and see his own growth over time and promote the feeling of control over his own learning. Learning is not being done “to” students; instead, they are active participants making decisions.

As educators, we want the most authentic and useful type of assessment of each student's learning. Our leap

into the world of digital portfolios has convinced us unequivocally that having a record of a year's worth of self-regulated learning is richer than the information that we could get from any one test score. We as educators must prepare our children for this world using the best that technology and education have to offer.

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cation columnist Jay Matthews says standardized testing was designed to “shortcut the old essay methods.” A well-designed test measuring how well students meet standards and objectives is easy to administer and quick to score within a narrow time frame. Its image is a pencil mark made by a solitary individual—static. It is a snapshot of where the student's learning is in time.

Student portfolios also measure how well the student is meeting standards and objectives. Here, time is the crucial element in measuring or evaluating learning. It is broad; it shows a progression over a carefully orchestrated time period. Although it can be transmitted quickly, it cannot be created quickly. It is composed of individual and collaborative work chosen by the student and/or teacher to best represent the student learning that has occurred. It accommodates all learning styles. Using a myriad of

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media, this “test” is personal at all times and fills the screen with images, sounds, and video—dynamic. It is a photo album, rather than one picture, of the student's academic life.

Standardized testing has generally revolved around multiple choice questions. In a well-designed test with many answer alternatives, reliability is high and reduces guessing. Unlike true/false, it demonstrates that the student is able to discriminate among choices for the best solution. Using digital portfolios to measure students' learning, the criteria must be clearly established for evaluation beforehand to minimize ambiguity and remove the bias in scoring. Can we use norm-referenced and criterion-referenced testing for the same assessment pur-

poses? Each test offers its own “reading” of a student's learning. At any point in time, each can be used for formative or summative assessment. Use of one does not invalidate the other.

Testing is there to help the learner—to see where gaps in learning occur; to determine where strengths in learning lie. No one test will ever be fair to all students. So, are student digital portfolios a realistic *alternative* to standardized tests? No. Digital portfolios are one realistic way to *augment* standardized tests in order to give our students the best opportunities to demonstrate where learning has occurred in their educational lives.

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