



OPEN PORTFOLIOS AT HIGH TECH ELEMENTARY CHULA VISTA

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Project

RESEARCH
BRIEF

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This is the third of three cases of makerspaces using open portfolios. By makerspaces, we mean maker-centered, youth-oriented settings that focus on educational programming. The cases are deeper dives into the key sites of Open Portfolio Project (OPP) Phase 2 work and how each of the sites develops and maintains their portfolio assessment systems. These briefs also examine how each site balances tensions between assumptions of traditional and open portfolios.

This research brief focuses on the digital portfolio practices of an elementary school classroom, where tangible student work, regularly and beautifully displayed within the school building, translates to individual student portfolios online, accessed via QR codes. This case also looks closely at student privacy and the complex feedback and sharing practices that are scaffolded for elementary school students.

Discussion

High Tech Elementary Chula Vista (HTeCV) is one of 13 schools within the High Tech High charter school network and is located in the Chula Vista community outside of San Diego, California, near the U.S.-Mexico border. Surrounded by desert landscapes, the school serves socioeconomically and ethnically diverse students, especially Latino(a)s, across Chula Vista, in spite of limited bus transportation. Families provide transportation, and students commute up to 30 minutes each way.

Throughout the school in hallways and open areas, student work is beautifully displayed in in collections of picture frames and behind glass cases, mimicking elegant museum exhibits. In these exhibits, individual projects are clustered together to form larger art installations (Figure 1). In one area, woven tapestries made by individual students are combined together and attached to the wall to form a flowing art piece that wraps around a corner. The walls and ceilings are preset to enable for such display, including metal hooks and shelving. The exhibition practices are guided by Jeff Robin's approach, which focuses on teachers as curators of student work to display learning through collaborative pieces.



Figure 1: Tapestry art installation at High Tech Elementary Chula Vista.

Expanding Tangible Project Exhibitions Through Digital Portfolios

In a school that already incentivizes the curation of student work in the physical space, one HTeCV 4th grade teacher is particularly enthusiastic about portfolio creation. His classroom portfolio practice extends the school-wide practice of curating tangible student work on walls of the school building with the documentation and sharing of students' digital work online. On the wall in front of his classroom, three-panel black picture frames display the work of his students (Figure 2). Each student's frame includes his or her drawing of an apple, a sketched self-portrait, a screenshot of their online portfolio pages (with nickname), and a QR code and URL that link to their portfolios. Another copy of each student's page with the screenshots, QR codes, and short URLs is displayed inside the classroom.

When it's time to work on their portfolios, 3rd and 4th grade students who don't remember the exact URLs of their online portfolios walk outside the classroom to use the URL or QR code themselves. Student and classroom work is also displayed inside the classroom. Here, too, individual student projects are grouped and displayed together; still-life drawings of apples are taped to a bookshelf and student self-portraits outline the interactive whiteboard. In addition, professionally printed exhibition posters reference whole-classroom projects, such as redesigning a school lunch program.



Figure 2: Curation of student portfolios outside Taylor's classroom.

This elementary school teacher considers digital portfolios to be consistent with other HTeCV assessment practices, including narrative-based report cards, student-led conferences, and project exhibitions. All of these practices encourage student reflection and self-directed learning, make peer feedback and review possible, and provide opportunities for sharing schoolwork with an outside audience. The interlacing of student work online (i.e., through digital portfolios) and offline (i.e., through displays of student work in the classroom) ties into the goals of HTeCV to underscore projects as more meaningful than grades alone.

Students in his class begins capturing their work in online portfolios at the beginning of each school year. They are instructed to share their work using Google Sites through *Apps for Education* accounts, a structure often used in the middle and high school classrooms. Despite the technological similarities, documentation and sharing is more scaffolded, and the teacher regularly provides instructions on how and when to capture, share, and comment on work-in-progress. One example of this is “sentence starters” (Figure 3) that students can select from when leaving comments for others. Making use of the sentence starters is a form of scripting, described as a way of starting to foster a culture of sharing and critiquing. This method seems particularly appropriate for students who are still developing comfort and familiarity with critique, and peer feedback is scheduled into the school day, typically after students have individually updated their portfolios.

Every time you read digital portfolio reflections, please leave at least one comment for the writers to let them know that they have an audience that cares about their ideas and the quality of their writing. Every comment has five parts.

1. Identify the reflection you are commenting on and praise the content.
2. Offer a connection or ask a question about the same content.
3. Offer critique to help the writer revise the reflection.
4. Offer critique to help the writer edit the reflection.
5. Thank the writer for sharing their work.

You can choose the sentence frames that work best for your comment, or you can write your own!

Identify the reflection you are commenting on and praise the content.

- As I was reading your ___ reflection, I like how you wrote about ___.

Offer a connection or ask a question about the same content (choose one).

- It made me think about ___.
- Have you heard of ___?

Offer critique to help the writer revise the reflection (choose two).

- I really like your topic sentence because ___.
- I really like your conclusion because ___.
- I thought your decision to use transitions and other words, like ___, ___, and ___ made your writing strong.
- I was impressed with how much you wrote about ___.
- Have you considered changing your topic sentence to something more like ___?
- Maybe you could change some of your transitions and other words. For example, you could change ___ to ___ to make the writing stronger.
- Have you considered writing more about ___?

Offer critique to help the writer edit the reflection (choose two).

- I was impressed that you formatted your work correctly by ___.
- I was impressed that you capitalized ___ correctly.
- I was impressed that you used the ___ punctuation correctly.
- I was impressed that you spelled ___ correctly.
- Have you considered double-checking your formatting by ___?
- Have you considered double-checking your capitalization on the word ___?
- Have you considered double-checking your punctuation after the word ___?
- Have you considered double-checking your spelling on the word ___?

Thank the writer for sharing their work (choose one).

- I enjoyed reading your reflection!
- I look forward to reading your next reflection!
- Thank you for sharing your work!

Figure 3: Sentence starters to scaffold reflection and critique for elementary students.

The classroom's portfolio system supports diverse media, such as video and audio recordings of presentations, though the majority of artifacts are generally text-heavy. The teacher also specifies the media format for each activity. Every student's portfolio includes simple biographical information: self-chosen nickname, age, number of siblings, interests, personalities, and sketched self-portraits (Figure 4). The menu bar on the left side of the student portfolio provides links to nine pages that include reflections on classroom practices and field trips, presentations of goals and how they achieved them, as well as larger project-specific pages (see Appendix for details).



Figure 4: The portfolio of HTeCV student Purple Bubbles.

Similar to the other exhibits throughout the school, student work is highlighted and valued through adult facilitation in the digital portfolios. This means that student documentation is closely tied to classroom practice and assignments and requires time and attention. The portfolio process is a high-quality teacher-led practice that has commonalities with traditional portfolios. However, teachers and student grapple with the intersection of tangible documentation and digital documentation of student projects and how to best display final work as well as work-in-progress. In addition, on a digital platform, individual pieces are less obviously tied to a larger collaborative community of student work.

Many of the youth portfolio entries link back to projects that are exhibited in the classroom. For example, students worked together on a shared classroom project on healthy lunches, where they identified ways to provide more nutritious lunch food within the school's budget. Here, physical posters and flyers (Figure 5) serve to engage people at the school-wide showcase. Augmenting the print material, the QR codes on flyers link to project videos or simulations that are posted to students' online portfolios. These portfolio posts add new and different vantage points for the classroom projects, allowing students to add personal voice and highlight specific activities. These perspectives wouldn't be apparent from viewing the final product alone.

Figure 5: Flyers of whole classroom projects with QR codes that link to project videos.



Balancing Student Privacy and Open Sharing

As with all classrooms and learning environments, privacy of students’ personal information is a major concern in the design of any portfolio system. In this classroom, the goal of sharing student work is oriented towards only classmates and their parents. Each of the video clips and images that feature faces of the students are password-protected and viewable only with a High Tech school account. In addition, logging into an account is also required in order to leave comments. Students are instructed to use classroom nicknames based on their personal interests (e.g., Purple Bubbles) rather than their real names, to share a drawn self-portrait instead of a photograph, and to omit sensitive information, such as details about their homes (Figure 4; examples of student portfolios will follow in subsequent research briefs).

The teacher checks portfolios regularly to ensure that privacy is protected and asks parents and students for permission before including portfolios in a public-facing repository of current and past student portfolios. The public space is aimed at (a) broadening the audience, (b) promoting the practice in other school contexts, and (c) providing future students with examples to inspire their own portfolio creations from a more informed perspective.

Anonymity within this portfolio system serves less to avoid assessment bias—as the portfolios are assessed by the teacher only, and he knows the real identities behind each pseudonym—and more to protect youth identities outside the classroom. Understanding that the outward sharing of High Tech student work, whether tangibly or digitally, is a real possibility that would reach multiple audiences, privacy was a necessary deliberation in the initial conceptualization of the portfolio process. These best practices for student portfolios were developed by the teacher over the course of four years, in previous classrooms and while at HTeCV.

Discussion

Currently, the HTeCV school administration is aware of the teacher's digital portfolio efforts but haven't yet determined how the system can be more widely implemented across the school. Here, specifically, some of the assumptions and tensions seen elsewhere resonate in this setting as well.

The HTeCV portfolio system and practice is an interesting example of portfolios as a distinct way to bridge the presentation of tangible student work beyond the school through digital tools. The use of QR codes on physical displays (of tangible student work) that direct viewers to youth's digital work is unique. Open questions relate to how this classroom-level approach may scale to work across other classrooms within the elementary school and how it could be further refined to make it easier for youth to access their portfolios while maintaining control over privacy. There are a number of opportunities for the growth and development of portfolios at HTeCV, particularly because the charter school network's culture instills the importance of sharing and displaying student work around the school building.

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APPENDIX

The digital portfolios in the HTeCV classroom were organized into nine sections:

- Academic Reflections, where students describe their strengths, areas of growth, and interests in school subjects several times throughout the school year.
- Ask-Me-Anything, where students describe their facilitation of class discussion and how they would like to be approached by someone whom they haven't met before, as well as a video of students facilitating a discussion about themselves.
- Fieldwork Reflections, where students post every time they interact with someone outside school through digital drawings and writing.
- Goal Presentations, where students present personal learning goals, report their progress every two weeks, share notes taken during teacher-student conferences, and store video clips of their presentations.
- Math in Three Acts, a math lesson structure that shows short videos to get students engaged by asking for more information and creating drawings as representations of math challenges.
- Monthly Reflections, where students report at the end of month on their reading of choice and reflect on favorite things in school, and share what they learned.
- Oral Reading Fluency, which features audio recordings of students reading a book of their choice and a rubric for self-, teacher-, and peer-assessment of public speaking.
- Presentations of Learning, where students reflect on sharing their work in public showcases at the school.
- Project Reflections, where students reflect on their participation in whole-class projects.