A New Intensity of Gaze: Portfolios and the Performance of Learning

Hello, my name is Letitia Henville, and I've been working fairly hands-on in the Arts online portfolio TLEF project for the past two years. I've spent one day a week on this project, designing scaffolded assignments, drafting rubrics, making videos to generate student buy-in, leading workshops, and chatting one-on-one with students and faculty about how they can use an online portfolio to achieve their goals. Because my own academic background is in the study of poetry, I use a lot of metaphors that come from literary criticism when I talk about portfolios: I like to think of the assignments and artworks and maps and objects and 'stuff' and 'things' that student put in their portfolios as similar to a corpus of texts, that students then can close read, analyze, tell me if its in iambic pentameter or trochaic trimeter, look for patterns and deviations from patterns in their work, and draw on the evidence of these patterns to craft a compelling argument about who they are and what they've done and what they can do. The same way that I can make an argument about the representation of femininity in Shakespeare's Sonnet 16, a student like Christa can make an argument about her work by closely analyzing her own primary sources.

Of course, there's a problem in my metaphor: the argument that Christa makes about herself has a different kind of personal resonance than the argument that I make about a Shakespeare poem. I'm not Shakespeare. I'm nothing like Shakespeare. But Christa is a lot like Christa. There's a great article published in *Teaching in Higher Education* in 2011, by a Scottish scholar name Jen Ross. Ross draws on Foucault and Derrida to encourage those of us who use portfolios to avoid requiring students to perform authenticity in searchable, publicly-accessible online spaces. Emphasizing the power imbalance between student and professor, she encourages a "critical stance [that can] support students and teachers to engage creatively and carefully with digital practices and cultures." Ross speaks of digital portfolios as bringing a "new intensity of gaze" to student work—a gaze that in infinitely reproducible and indexed in the Internet archive—and this gaze is focused not on some abstract consideration of the poems of some guy who has been dead for 400 years, but now on Christa, and what she thinks of what she has learned, and the argument that's she's making about what she's done, and what she can do, and who she is. Ross's whole point is that it's problematic to demand that students perform a "knowable, malleable yet cohesive self" in order to do well in a second-year Geography course. (This is also Dave Gaertner's concern: who takes what shit online?)

And while I appreciate Ross's caution—we and our students should think carefully about the privacy settings that we use, and of the digital traces we leave behind—I also think that Ross does a disservice to her students by omitting a consideration of the portfolio as performance. To use an example of performance: here's me, standing in a library, performing the role of "person who knows things", and that's a mask I wear. Yet I'm not somehow separable from that mask. I'm not being inauthentic because I wear that mask; there's no singular identifiable Letitia who is as separate from this performance of the self as she is from Shakespeare. I think it was the Ancient Greeks who wore big masks on stage, not to cover their faces but to amplify their expressions – this is the mask not as covering but as magnifying glass. Or, to move away from the confusing postmodernists, to put it another way: the criticism that Ross puts forward is that, in asking our students to create, curate, and present portfolios, we're asking our students to tell a story. We're asking them to tell a personal story, a story about themselves. Ross's point is: be aware of the implications of that ask. My point is: yes, we're asking our students to be storytellers, but we can equip them with an understanding of the literary techniques, the formal decisions, the generic conventions, and the editing skillset so that they're able to craft a story that they can publish deliberately, consciously, and still honestly.

One of the questions that unifies our group of speakers is, "How should educators pedagogically distinguish between using e-portfolios as a tool for personal versus professional identity development?" For me, I'm happy to let the students choose: tell them they can use the portfolio as an archive, a journal, a personal repository, or as a showcase, a stage—let them choose what makes sense for them. But bring the same intellectual rigor that you bring to the subjects that you study to the portfolio—approach it the same way you approach any other subject of your scholarly gaze—and thereby prepare your students to present an honest, authentic, well-crafted mask.

For me, I often use the metaphors of literary criticism when I'm talking to students about how they can use portfolios to reflect on their learning and to construct an argument about who they are and what they've done – but that's me. My question for you is: what's your metaphor? How can you draw on the language and the systems of your own discipline's background to help your students understand the overlap between critical analysis and scholarly reflection? What theoretical approaches in your discipline rightly raise red flags over assessment structures that ask students to perform an authentic, singular, coherent self, and how can your disciplinary knowledge help students to perform with appropriate, honest, yet deliberately-selected masks – and lighting, and backdrops, and costuming? As an Educational Programmer, I've had the pleasure of working with faculty and students in First Nations and Indigenous Studies, Geography, Visual Arts, Library and Information Systems, Philosophy – but I don't have these disciplinary backgrounds. I don't know how you can best equip your students in your discipline to construct a narrative or a mask that is both truth and artifice. But what I can do is suggest to you that the best practice guidelines say that a good portfolio assignment is one that is integrated in with the course and the program and the discipline, rather than an assignment that is tacked on or additional or secondary.

If you are thinking of bringing a portfolio component into your course or your program, and if you want your students to reflect on what they have learned—as you should; it's a great way to access deeper learning—I encourage you to integrate it thoroughly with your teaching. It's just another form, another genre, another narrative, another way of mapping a journey. To help your students perform best, show them how to set a stage.