You Can Learn (Almost) Everything About "Free Websites for Schools" By Asking Students at High Tech High School in San Diego, California: *Assumptions, Myths and Tips about Digital Portfolios (with screenshots)*

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ABSTRACT

Digital portfolios or Electronic Portfolios have attracted attention from researchers. What can we learn from students at High Tech High Schools (where portfolios are part of the assessment process)? A lot. Problems of motivation and engagement that occupy professors at higher education can sometimes be solved by interviewing younger students. Screenshots are included. Advocates for portfolios have spent years promoting "work that a learner has selected and collected to show growth and change over time" (Bartlett 2001). The arrival of computers in classrooms made storage of these materials easier. However, numerous obstacles have kept portfolios from being adopted universally.

INTRODUCTION

Advocates for alternative assessments have spent years promoting portfolios, defined as "work that a learner has selected and collected to show growth and change over time" (Barrett 2001). The arrival of computers in classrooms made storage of these materials easier. However, numerous obstacles have kept electronic or digital portfolios from being adopted universally. Obstacles mentioned in the research literature include

- ✓ Some teachers are reluctant to change their methods to include portoflios as part of the assessment process;
- ✓ some students are reluctant to put time into curating their materials;
- ✓ some students are reluctant to learn how to use a free website;
- ✓ some administrators have concerns about privacy or exposure to liability (information divulged on a student-made website might lead to the harming of a student and a lawsuit againt the school);
- ✓ some students might lack access to technology to set up and maintain a website.

Dr. Barrett's collection of "Research on Electronic Portfolios" has nearly 100 questions for future research. Let's see how some of these questions can be answered by interviewing two students from High Tech High School.

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Research Question: Greater learner ownership and control over the contents, purpose and process of portfolio development will lead to more intrinsic motivation to use the portfolio to support lifelong learning" (Barrett's hypothesis).

Answer: True. Listen to how a student, Abel Thon, describes the process of learning a new system for making a free website. *"I probably would say that it didn't take me longer then a couple hours to complete it because it was easy to put everything in. But when I first made a weebly website it wasn't quite as good as the way it is right now. It went through many drafts and many edits. Sometimes I had to reformat my whole entire website because I felt that it wasn't good enough or it wasn't professional or I thought of a better idea."* Clearly Abel feels ownership over the contents.

Research Question: How do we get teacher "buy in"? The teacher must do more than just say, "This would be a good project to put in your portfolio."

Answer: The students at High Tech High are not prepared to answer this question because the teachers are convinced that projects are effective ways of teaching materials.

Research Question: How do we sell portfolios to students and parents?
How will portfolios help them get a job, scholarship, into college?
Is there any hard evidence of what portfolios have done for students?

Answer: Ben Staley and Abel Thon got work through their internships, in part because of the videos and slide shows that they displayed on their portfolios (free websites).
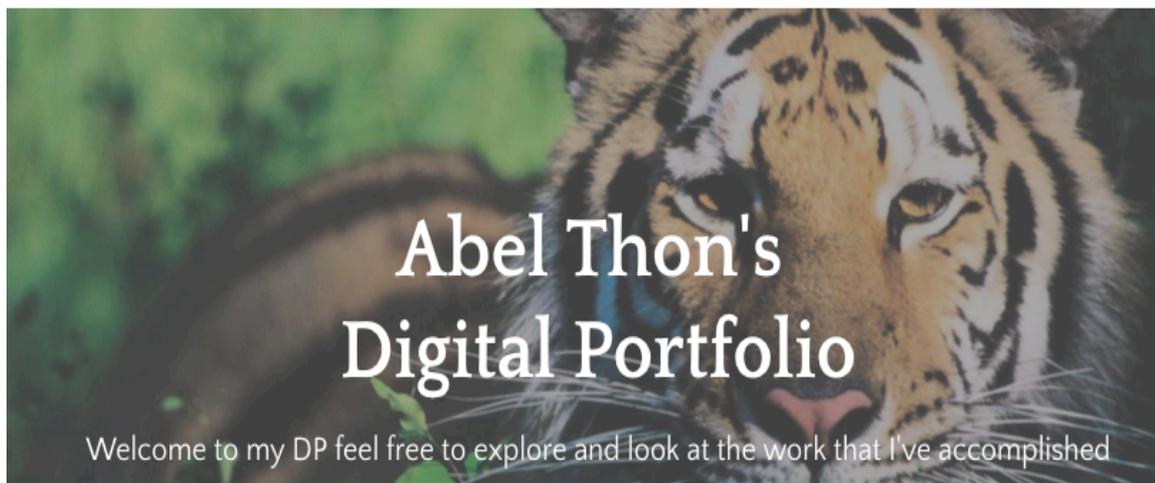
The "splash page" created by Abel Thon, High Tech High School.

Research Question: How do we find resources? Finding time, helpers, labs for student to use on "their" time.

Answer: It's in the culture of the High Tech Village to make the time to complete projects.

Research Question: Students don't care about keeping, reflecting on and exhibiting their work.

Answer: According to the students who were interviewed, the culture at High Tech High doesn't have room for such apathy.

Research Question: How important are grades and transcripts in eportfolio systems?

Answer: In the visits that I've made to High Tech High, I got the feeling that the system is not driven by grades but more by curiosity and a pursuit for "what can I do with this?" I wrote to Abel Thon the following question:

I noticed that you have just a few categories. It is so much easier to read your portfolio compared to other students. I can see your internship and your projects. That's easy. How did you come up with such a simple format? **Here's what Abel Thon replied: The way that I thought of making my website was something that was simple, easy to look at and easy to navigate. I made sure everything followed that. I also didn't want to cram every single page with loads of information that's why for my projects page you can see a description of a project and if you want to know more you simply click on the pictures. (Commentary: It's clear that pursuit of a grade and displaying transcripts are not central in Abel's world. He used the portfolio to show what he learned and to draw attention to his new skills of communication.)**

Research Question: How does e-portfolios provide evidence of deep learning?

Answer: Look at how Abel Thon responded to the task of creating a digital portfolio. He demonstrated deeper learning by restructuring his website and learning another website making software (weebly.com).

The opening page of Ben Staley's digital portfolio.

Research Question: How to set up the web site?

Here's what Ben Staley wrote (when asked for his system and secret to making a template): *The Adobe Master Collection is a series of programs used to manipulate photos and videos. I edited pictures and made others and implemented them into my DP.*

In the edit section of Google sites for any of the standard templates, you can replace images and settings. I recommend your students research using something like YouTube. The basic idea is find something you want to replace.

Use something like Photoshop or Illustrator (programs included in the Adobe Master Collection) to manipulate, create or enhance an image. Then find that section of the page in the template settings and replace or add the image you created. As a general rule of thumb for any graphic creations, I recommend a limited color palette. Too much color can distract from information and gives the onlooker a sense of messiness. I learned most of what I know about Google sites from online tutorials, so that's what I recommend you do. Thanks. Ben Staley.

Answer: Does this demonstrate "deeper learning"? I think "yes."

OTHER RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What kinds of barriers exist to introducing and maintaining portfolios?

Answer: Dr. Barrett's research and writings give lists of forces that work against creating robust portfolios. She describes in her blog (2016) the tension between a "standardized" portfolio system (which is easier for the institution) and a "free form" portfolio, which some students prefer. She recommends a point between the two.

Research Question: Who gains the most from the portfolios?
Answer: Directors of schools, teachers or guidance counselors? Are guidance counselors therefore the most likely person to initially provide support for digital portfolios? Who should be the target of advocates of portfolios? Who are most likely to be the agents of change within a school?

Research Question: What can High Schools learn from University research?
Answer: "I believe that if we integrate the concept of reflective recordkeeping through portfolios in the early years, there won't be a need to create buy-in at the elementary or secondary level.

The Portfolio will become a measure much like report cards and will be as institutional as parent teacher conferences." (Diane Demarest, University of Idaho, Parents as Teachers Demonstration Project.) Demarest continues, "Imagine what it might be like if this multi-dimensional story of the parent and child's journey through 18 years of learning replaced the one-dimensional unimaginative transcript that moves through the system with the student."

The Parents as Teachers Demonstration Project (University of Idaho) clearly has some data to support earlier attempts to train parents to collect "artifacts" from early years. The assumption is that parents and students will be used to the idea of a portfolio if the early collections of photos and videos can be curated into a useful collection. The process of collecting and curating can continue into elementary and secondary school, resulting in a natural habit (so that schools won't need to "train" students to build portfolios).

More research questions can be added to Dr. Barrett's list by writing to eportfolios@gmail.com.

SUMMARY

A 2015 press release from *Inside Higher Education* has revealed that 80 colleges in the USA "are creating a platform for new online portfolios for high school students." (Jaschik). Directors of high schools, teachers and guidance counselors (who advise their students about "what's next" in their academic work) might want to learn how to help students create free websites to display their stories. Much can be learned from students at High Tech High in San Diego.

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Thanks to Thomas Toch for his 2003 book *High Schools in the Human Scale*, which got me to notice HTH. To Bill Gates for pointing out "Projects are the way to go. To Dr. Helen Barrett for her focus on "portfolios as stories."

To the teacher who posted the HTH guidelines on the www.WhatKidsCanDo.org **website. The artifact (a seven page worksheet) preserved important procedure in the building of the culture that makes up the heart of High Tech High's system. Search terms To my principal who saw "Createspace" and said, "Projects are the way to get deeper learning." To Bill Gates, who said, "Projects are the way to go" during a visit with Oprah Winfrey to the High Tech High campus in San Diego. Search "Bill Gates Oprah High Tech High" on YouTube.My behavior has changed: A simpler website allows a story to emerge more easily than a crowded website. Curate, don't just collect.**

Clearly I have changed my approach.
The amount of information shown to the viewer is much reduced.

BEFORE: This is an example of a free website that I made before I interviewed Abel Thon.

AFTER: This is an example of my new format.

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Steve McCREA is a high school teacher in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He is in the middle of a yearlong experiment, set to end in May 2017, to encourage the principals of ten schools to post "a list of websites made by students" on each school's website (copying a procedure that High Tech High uses). As of May 2016, two schools have agreed to participate. McCrea can be reached at

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Skype: SteveEnglishTeacher. You can follow progress of the "Student Website" Project at portfolioswithsteve.blogspot.com and tinyurl.com/xydfbprojects (a Facebook page). http://tinyurl.com/sunportofolios5 Get the free ebook