TRANSITIONING TO EPORTFOLIOS IN A FIRST-YEAR WRITING PROGRAM

Brittany Barger Cottrill

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of
The requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2010

Committee:

Dr. Kristine L. Blair, Advisor

Dr. Paul A. Cesarini
Graduate Faculty Representative

Dr. Richard Gebhardt

Dr. Lee Nickoson
ABSTRACT

Building off the scholarship of paper-based portfolio systems, electronic portfolios have been a topic of scholarly conversation across the university, particularly in writing studies, education, and distance education. Much of current portfolio scholarship focuses on one of three areas. First, there is increased attention being paid to how instructors can use electronic portfolios in their professional development. Second, there is a focus on reflection of the use of electronic portfolios. And finally, research is being conducted about how electronic portfolios may lead to life-long learning for students. What seems to be missing, however, is a clear discussion of how programs are using electronic portfolios and how the use of such portfolios in a specific program may help other institutions implement new assessment standards. Guided by ethnographically-informed research, and through a combination of observations, interviews, and textual analyses, this dissertation examined a small, private liberal arts university as it transitioned to digital portfolios in their first-year writing program. Working with multiple stakeholders, including the Writing Program Administrator, instructors, students, and portfolio evaluators, this study generates a rich picture of the transition as a way to generate suggestions and implications for others to follow in a similar transition.
DEDICATION

For my mom, Kristina, Alex, and Gabe who have loved and believed in me unconditionally.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge the incredible support and encouragement from my entire committee. Their generosity with their time, feedback, and support has helped throughout the entire process. I appreciate their careful, thoughtful reading and commenting. I am especially grateful for my committee chair, Dr. Kristine Blair, for her suggestions, guidance, and support throughout this study from the inception to the completion. Her attention to my dissertation and demonstration of professionalism made her more than a dissertation chair – she’s an inspiration and a wonderful mentor. I am also thankful for the continued support from Dr. Rick Gebhardt, Dr. Lee Nickoson, and Dr. Paul Cesarini as members of my committee, faculty mentors, and colleagues.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank my amazing family and friends. Their belief in my project and me helped me through the long nights of writing and revising. My family’s sense of humor and understanding as I embarked on the long process that has gotten me to this point has been a driving force in my success. I am equally grateful for my dear, supportive friends including, Melanie Benjamin, Emily Beard, Kristina Cottrill, Vanessa Cozza, and Erin Dietel-McLaughlin who listened to me as I worked through ideas, read through chapters as I wrote them, and helped me not take myself too seriously.

Finally, I wish to thank those at “Midwestern University” – past and present. Without even knowing it, the amazing, supportive faculty helped put me on the path to my dissertation many years ago, and it has been an honor to work with them again during this project.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER ONE: HOW NEW DEFINITIONS OF LITERACY CALL FOR NEW ASSESSMENT METHODS

- Grounding This Project ................................................................................................................... 1
- Understanding the Role of Multimodality in the Writing Classroom ............................................. 7
- Electronic Portfolios ......................................................................................................................... 10
- The Project ......................................................................................................................................... 11
- Goals of Study ..................................................................................................................................... 16
- Research Questions ............................................................................................................................ 16
- Methods and Methodologies of Study .............................................................................................. 17
- Dissertation Summary ....................................................................................................................... 19

## CHAPTER TWO: A NEW WAVE OF ASSESSMENT: MOVING TOWARD EPORfolios

- Assessment and the Process Movement ............................................................................................ 21
- Portfolios ............................................................................................................................................. 30
- Looking Forward: Acknowledging Changes to the Teaching of Writing ........................................... 40
- Eportfolios as Assessment Solution .................................................................................................. 44

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS, METHODOLOGIES, AND DATA COLLECTION

- Research Questions ........................................................................................................................... 51
- Site of Study ....................................................................................................................................... 65
- Content Management System ........................................................................................................... 80
- ENGL 106 .......................................................................................................................................... 80
- ENGL 107 .......................................................................................................................................... 90
- Portfolio Evaluators ............................................................................................................................ 100
- Students ............................................................................................................................................. 117
- Ethnographic Research ..................................................................................................................... 124
- Data Analysis ..................................................................................................................................... 137
- Variables and Limitations ................................................................................................................... 141
- Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 150

## CHAPTER FOUR: MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY’S PILOT

- Introducing Digital Portfolios .......................................................................................................... 165
- Dr. Teague’s Introduction to Digital Portfolios ...................................................................................... 180
- Dr. Longman’s Introduction to Digital Portfolios .................................................................................. 190
- A Discussion of Portfolios ................................................................................................................... 200
- Portfolio Review Process ................................................................................................................... 210
- Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................... 220

## CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS, FINDINGS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

- Coming To an Understanding of Eportfolios ..................................................................................... 230
- Moving Forward With Eportfolios ....................................................................................................... 240
- Implications for the Field ...................................................................................................................... 250
- Classroom Implications ..................................................................................................................... 260
Future Research and Conclusion ............................................................................................ 145
REFERENCES .......................................................................................................................... 148
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure/Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.1 How ENGL 106 (2007) learning outcomes correspond to WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (2000)</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 4.1 ENGL 107 Sample Portfolio</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 4.2 Sample ENGL 107 portfolio “Revised Argument” button</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 4.3 Sample ENGL 106 Portfolio</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 4.4 Sample ENGL 106 Portfolio “Proposal/Ann. Bib” button</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 4.5 ENGL 106 Sample Portfolio Opening Prompt</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 4.6 Arthur’s portfolio created in ENGL 107</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 4.7 Liddy’s portfolio created in ENGL 107</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 4.8 Mike’s “Introduction” page from ENGL 106 portfolio</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 4.9 Mike’s ENGL 106 Portfolio</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 4.10 Mike’s “Argument Paper” page from ENGL 106 portfolio</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 4.11 Anne’s ENGL 106 Portfolio “Title Page”</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPER ONE: HOW NEW DEFINITIONS OF LITERACY CALL FOR NEW ASSESSMENT METHODS

In the final year of my undergraduate career I was at a crossroads. I knew that I wanted to go on to graduate school, and I knew I wanted to be a part of academia, but how I was going to get to that point was unclear. I had wanted to be a writer from the time I was in elementary school, but my time in college had made me question the type of writing I wanted to do. While I had always thought creative writing was the path I would take, I found myself drawn more and more to academic writing. Because of this I applied to a broad range of Masters programs and then waited.

As I waited to hear from programs I took a course designed for English majors that looked at writing online. The course, made up of all English majors, met several times a week and explored what it meant to write in online spaces as an English major. The class introduced me to blogging as an academic exercise, to the idea of creating academic websites, to designing multimedia texts, and to web-based academic publishing. I came to the class with previous personal experiences with some of these skills, but the course made me realize for the first time that something I saw as a hobby or past time could in fact align with what I saw as a future career. My time in that course helped me realize that there were connections between what I was already doing and what I wanted to do.

I became aware of scholarship surrounding the relationship between computers and writing because of this class. Like many emerging scholars, I was introduced to some of the founders of the computers and writing discipline. We read books and articles by James Paul Gee (2003) and Cynthia Selfe (2003; 2004), and this experience helped spark my interest in the field of computers and writing and the larger field of rhetoric. Even though I had taken a handful of
online classes throughout my undergraduate studies, in no other class had I been asked to use a computer to create a text that wasn’t meant to be opened in Microsoft Word or as an email. Outside of the classroom I was already interested in designing websites and blogging, but this class helped me see that I could merge something I saw as a hobby with something that I saw as a career.

Only a few months after that class ended I found myself a Master’s student and began to work on ways to incorporate my interest in technology with my studies. Like many new teacher-scholars, I found myself working to not only understand the field but also to find my place in the field. Because I entered my graduate studies following the web writing course, I realized there was a possibility to approach my studies with a technology slant that interested me. And, perhaps even more importantly, because I grew up in a time when computers were in most homes, and the Internet was a tool I had been using for research and fun since at least junior high, I had a level of comfort with technology that made approaching the discipline-specific conversations less daunting. This of course is not unique to my experience; across the country novice scholars are entering the conversation with a similar interest and coming from similar backgrounds. In reading about the necessity to better understand how technology affects writing, I was able to connect on both the teacher-scholar level and the personal level by reflecting on the role technologies had played in my writing. The following study stems from my interest in the role technology plays in the way people communicate, learn to write, and teach writing. Building on these interests, as well as research conducted during a graduate seminar on writing assessment, led me to take up Carl Whithaus’ (2001) call to “think hard about how we can assess communication and encourage learning in computer-mediated environments” (p. 1). Considering the need to better understand how technology is changing our understanding of
writing and assessment, this project aims to explore how electronic portfolios are being used and may be used in the future to account for changing understandings of writing and teaching writing.

In the spring of 2007 I took a seminar on assessment. In that class I read Carl Whithaus’s 2001 article where he proposes ways to assess text created in computer-mediated composition courses. Whithaus raises questions of validity in assessing text produced in non-traditional settings and calls for instructors to ask themselves “[h]ow can we measure students’ abilities in valid and reliable ways without reproducing the engines of assessment that evaluate students’ deficits rather than what they know and can do” (2001, p.1). While I had spent years thinking about how technology could be used to support my pedagogical beliefs and how technology was altering the way we write and hence must teach writing, in coming to Whithaus’s article and later his book, *Teaching and Evaluating Writing in the Age of Computers and High-Stakes Testing* (2005), I realized that making changes in the tools we use to teach was more complicated. Like others in the same place, through my own teaching I had faced issues of access, experience, working within programmatic restrictions, and other issues of practicality, but as I began to study assessment scholarship, I realized there were more issues that needed to be considered and addressed when including multimodality in the classroom – specifically how we assess changing texts.

For years, computers and writing specialists have been speaking about the shift in our field toward incorporating computers into the writing classroom. However, this change, like many changes, has been slow to gain wide-spread support. Even so, scholars continue to point out the need for an understanding that “[w]riting is no longer a purely text-driven practice. Writing requires carefully and critically analyzing and selecting among multiple media elements.
Digital writers rely on words, motion, interactivity, and visuals to make meaning” (DigiRhet, 2006, p. 240). Even with extensive books, journal articles, and conference presentations on the role of multimodality in the writing classroom, there continues to be resistance to incorporating multimodality into writing programs. One place this resistance continues to be vocalized is in regard to assessment.

Just as the process movement made the field reevaluate assessment based exclusively on product, the changes in what we are teaching asks us to change how we are assessing. Recently, NCTE and the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) released the “White Paper on Writing Assessment in Colleges and Universities” (2008) as a way to find a common ground regarding assessment practices in higher education. This document, though not directly geared towards finding a single best way to assess writing, states that “writing assessment should be locally grown and implemented” while at the same time staying “informed of current developments in the field of writing assessment, composition theory, and literacy studies” (NCTE-WPA, 2008, p. 2). When an institution then addresses issues of multimodality, as discussed in the NCTE 21st-Century definition of literacy (2008)\(^1\), they must consider what this means for assessment and must address these issues on a local level; as our understanding of what it means to be literate changes so too must our assessment methods. It is not appropriate to

\(^1\) In 2008, the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) published their position statement on 21st-century literacy where they argued that “the twenty-first century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies – from reading online newspapers to participating in virtual classrooms – are multiple, dynamic, and malleable” (NCTE, 2008). In addition to acknowledging the changes in literacy expectations, the position statement included a list of bullet points that addressed what readers and writers in the 21st-Century need to be able to do. This includes being able to “[d]evelop proficiency with the tools of technology” and to “[c]reate, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts” (NCTE, 2008).
assume that the same understanding and assumptions about what makes a good text applies to
the new types of multimodal assignments we are giving our students and the new types of
writing they are expected to take part. In other words, changes to what we are teaching and how
we are teaching must directly influence changes to how we assess.

Because of this, as I have engaged further in the larger field of rhetoric and composition,
my interests have grown to include not only how technology changes our approach to teaching
writing, but also issues of practicality and application. Specifically, I am interested in exploring
what it means for our understanding of assessment when technology is incorporated into
classrooms, programs, and entire institutions. Since our understanding of writing is changing,
and because “[w]riting instruction must equip students with the tools, skills, and strategies not
just to produce traditional texts using computer technology, but also to produce documents
appropriate to the global and dispersed reach of the web” (WIDE Research Center Collective,
2005), it seems appropriate that our understanding of how we assess writing must change too.
Traditional forms of assessment, such as paper-based portfolios, no longer meet the needs of
students or instructors. As multimodal texts become more prominent in writing classrooms,
alternative methods of assessment must be considered. One such alternative that has been
suggested is the electronic portfolio, which this project aims to explore.

This project looks at electronic portfolios for several reasons. To begin with, paper-based
portfolios\(^2\) have long played an important role in writing assessment. Scholars such as Yancey
(1996a; 1996b; 2004), Reynolds & Rice (2006), Cambridge, Kahn, Tompkins, and Yancey
(2001), and Cambridge, Cambridge, & Yancey, (2009) agree that portfolios have played an
important role in the development of the composition discipline. According to Brian Huot, “one

\(^2\) Definitions of portfolios will be discussed in more detail in future chapters.
of the most important catalyst for real change and growth in writing assessment was the introduction of the portfolio” (2002, p.14). Portfolios can be seen as a response to the process movement where both product and process are taken into consideration, while also giving students agency and a voice in the assessment process. While this project does not intend to suggest that portfolios, either electronic or paper-based, are the best tool for assessment or appropriate for all instances, the fact that portfolios have played an important role in writing assessment in recent years is undeniable.

Scholars across the field continue to acknowledge the changes to literacy. As literacy changes so too does our understanding of what “texts” are and also what we are asking our students to produce in the classroom. Because what we teach changes, and because traditional assessment doesn’t necessarily correspond to the changes, the electronic portfolio has been an easy tool to turn to because of its close relationship to a commonly accepted assessment method. The paper-based portfolio remains a popular assessment tool for writing classrooms, and while the understanding of an electronic portfolio can be very different from its paper-based counterpart, the fact that the eportfolio corresponds in many cases to traditional portfolios may very well help its acceptance among teachers of writing. Future chapters will explore the similarities and differences between paper-based and electronic portfolios. Such issues include the commonly held belief that the eportfolio can be understood in relation to the paper-based portfolio, and this belief makes the newer assessment method one that is likely to initially be accepted. Because the paper-based portfolio has a long history in writing studies, the electronic portfolio can be seen as a new version of this familiar tool. Familiarity is important to build off of as changes to assessment are made because this perceived knowledge base lessens the potential for resistance. At the same time, however, this familiarity also highlights the
importance of this research and the significance of digital portfolio scholarship because of the necessity for truly understanding the full scope of digitizing portfolios.

It is clear that the concern about how to assess new media and multimodal texts remains a prominent question, and though electronic portfolios have been suggested as one way of assessing multimodal products, because of issues of access, cost, and knowledge, eportfolios are not necessarily seeing wide-spread implementations. Furthermore, portfolios, whether paper-based or electronic, can be difficult to set up for a single class, let alone an entire program or institution. While the goal of this research is not to propose an answer to these difficulties, it does aim to explore how a single, specific institution moved to include electronic portfolios.

The following project focuses on a specific institution’s transition to electronic portfolios as a means to accommodate the inclusion of multimodal assignments into a standardized program. Looking at the transition from multiple perspectives, including program director, instructor, student, and portfolio evaluator, this project aims to explore how digital portfolios are being used to assess new media in the writing classroom and how a specific institution’s transition may help others make similar moves.

Grounding This Project

While past discussions about what is writing, what role technology plays in writing, and what writers ought to be doing have surfaced and disappeared for many years, recent scholarship surrounding the changing definition of writing has been more direct, and at times has seemed more urgent. Charles Moran (2002) once said that composition instructors need to “re-think the writing classroom” because of technology (p. 274). Cynthia Selfe (2003) made a similar claim when she stated:
we need to do a much better job of paying critical attention to technology issues that affect us . . . By paying particular attention to lessons about technology, we can relearn important lessons about literacy. It is the different perspective on literacy that technology issues provide us that can encourage such insights. (p. 508)

As pointed out in the introduction of their book, Sidler, Morris, and Smith (2008) remind us that while we may be in the late age of print, “computer technology changes the environment in which learning and writing occur” (p 3). Many would agree that technology can no longer be ignored, but incorporating the changes that have been addressed raises questions, including how this changes daily classroom activities.

In 1996, Myron Tuman argued that “digital literacy ‘is likely to entail a radical reworking of all the most basic terms and practices of our print-based society,’” and “[w]riting teachers integrating pedagogy and technology are pivotal agents in these changes” (as cited in Eldred & Toner, 2003, p, 34). The argument for a “radical reworking” of basic terms has been a constant, and the changes to writing and production of text have led to the two major professional organization for teachers of writing, the National Council for the Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Conference on College Composition and Communication, to released statements addressing the role that new technologies are playing on our understanding of writing and teaching. At the beginning of 2008, NCTE published their definition of 21st-Century literacies. This position statement not only acknowledged that the way we understand literacy is changing, but also that in order to be considered literate today, one must have an understanding of digital literacies. Because of this, “the curriculum of composition is widening to include not one but two literacies: a literacy of print and a literacy of the screen” (NCTE, 2008, para. 2). This expansion of our understanding of literacy calls for a reexamination of assessment methods to account for
the texts students are being asked to produced. At the basis of the “CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments” (2004) is a call to acknowledge that because “[i]ncreasingly, classes and programs in writing require that students compose digitally” we must understand how best to teach and assess the writing (CCCC, 2004, para. 1). Prior to the publication of these two documents, the CCCCs released their “Principles and Practices in Electronic Portfolio” (2007) statement which forwarded that “[c]omposition professionals in post-secondary institutions . . . share concern and responsibility for helping students learn to write at a college level, using the most effective communication technologies. Disciplinary practice and research suggests that portfolio assessment has become an important part of the learning-to-write process” (CCCC, 2007, para. 1) and because of that “electronic portfolios . . . have become a viable institutional tool to facilitate student learning and its assessment” (CCCC, 2007, para. 2). The necessity to reconsider assessment in relation to how we teach students continues to gain support from scholars, institutions, and professional organizations.

These changes are at the heart of this larger project. This project aims to explore how new definitions of text, literacy, and writing complicate assessment. Moran and Herrington (2003) raised the question, “‘What criteria should we use when evaluating academic hypertexts?’ and ‘Is it possible to evaluate hypertext and non-hypertext compositions using the same criteria?’” (pp. 247-8). Others have raised similar questions, including Huntley and Latchaw (1998) in “The Seven Cs of Interactive Design,” and Diane Penrod (2005) in Composition in Convergence: The Impact of New Media on Writing Assessment. One proposed solution to assessing new writing has been through the use of electronic portfolios.
Understanding the Role of Multimodality in the Writing Classroom

According to Gunther Kress (2003), literacy is changing. He points out that there has been a “move from the now centuries-long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image and, on the other hand, the move from the dominance of the medium of the book to the dominance of the medium of the screen” (Kress, 2003, p.1). Kress continues that these changes “from the traditional print-based media to the new information and communication technologies” (2003, p. 5) have informed the transition to multimodality. Kress and others “explore the understanding of alphabetic writing as one modality among many that individuals should be able to call on as rhetorical and creative resources when composing messages and making meaning” (Anderson et al., 2006, p 59). While the term may change, there does seem to be an agreement about the changing modes of writing.

Anderson et al. (2006) point out that “a number of educators have begun experimenting with multimodal compositions, compositions that take advantage of a range of rhetorical resources – words, still and moving images, sounds, music, animation – to create meaning” (p.59). In her case study of new media text designers, Cynthia Selfe (2004) uses similar terminology in defining new media texts as “texts created primarily in digital environments, composed in multiple media (e.g., film, video, audio, among others), and designed for presentation and exchange in digital venues” (p. 43). Selfe goes on to say that “[t]hese texts generally place a heavy emphasis on visual elements (both still and moving photography, images, graphics, drawings, renderings, animations) and sound, and they often involve some level of interactivity” (2004, p. 43). Regardless of the way the concept is defined, with changes to writing come changes to teaching and to ways we assess texts.
Electronic Portfolios

According to Linda Ash (2000), “[t]he need for persons with technology skills continues to be great. To meet this need, teachers who encourage students to use technology as a tool to process and demonstrate knowledge promote content learning and technological expertise” (p. 13). Ash and others agree that digital portfolios allow students to not only practice content skills but also to interact with technology and demonstrate their abilities to communicate in various formats. While paper-based portfolios have long been accepted by our field as a valid means of formative and summative assessment, the numbers of scholars suggesting the electronic versions of these assessment staples is growing.

Eportfolio scholarship has become increasingly popular in the last ten or so years, but much of the scholarship still relies on paper-based portfolios. However, some scholars that have been writing on eportfolios recently include Barbara Cambridge, Lorraine Stefani, Robin Mason, Chris Pegler, Helen Barrett, and Kathleen Blake Yancey. The scholarship surrounding the use of eportfolios comes from a variety of disciplines including scholars in rhetoric and writing, computers and writing, education, distance education and more.

Scholars such as Blair, Mason, Pegler, Weller, and Stefani have all written about the possibilities of electronic portfolios being used by instructors for tenure and promotion. Kristine Blair (2007) argues that although the writing field has begun to embrace electronic portfolios in the writing classroom, when it comes to tenure and promotion, paper-based documents and print-based publications are still valued over electronic ones (p. 59). Similarly, in the sixth chapter of the 2006 book The Educational Potential of E-Portfolios: Supporting Personal Development and Reflective Learning, Stefani, Mason and Pegler argue that electronic teaching portfolios can be an alternative to the paper-based teaching portfolio and use a proposed pilot study at the
University of New Zealand to support their claim (2006, pp. 95-96). Although still limited, more scholars continue to look at eportfolios as a means to help not only students but also instructors. As more is written about how electronic portfolios can help in professional development in the academy, it seems that the use of similar methods of collection will become more popular in the classroom.

In Kathleen Blake Yancey’s 1996 article that concludes a special issue of *Computers and Composition*, she proposes six assertions about how e-portfolios may “bring new resonance to Cindy Selfe’s (1989) expression ‘layered literacy’” (1996a., p. 259). Yancey argues that technology is changing the idea of literacy (1996a., p. 259), text (1996a., p. 260), assessment, identity, as well as how information is shared (1996a., p. 261), and discusses how technology is and will continue to be an intricate part of how our field moves forward and how computer-based portfolios may be one way to facilitate this shift. In the years since Yancey’s article, technology has continued to evolve and issues of access, knowledge, price, space, and more have lessened. Even so, eportfolios have still not seen widespread use. As mentioned before, much of the current scholarship surrounding eportfolios relies on the paper-based portfolio scholarship, which has been an intricate part of the rhetoric and writing field for many years.

It would be naïve to assume that there have no been problems with portfolios in the past, nor would it be accurate to propose that portfolios are the best means of assessment in all cases. Even though there are many issues that complicate the use of electronic portfolios, some of which will be explored in more detail in future chapters, because of the inherent reflective nature of portfolios, either paper-based or digital, reflection on success and progress using this assessment tool has continually taken place. While the reflection and research surrounding this
means of assessment continues to grow, less attention has been paid to the role that this means of assessment plays on the programmatic/departmental level.

The Project

As I began work towards my larger project I became aware of the plans at a neighboring institution to introduce electronic portfolios into their first-year writing program. Because I was a graduate of their English department, and because a course taught by the new Director of Writing had initially set me on the path of computers and writing, I contacted her to find out about the changes taking place.

Because of the timeliness and my research focus, I approached the Director of Writing, who had been an instructor of mine when I was an undergraduate and who had also received her degree from the same doctorate program that I was working in, about the possibility of studying her program. In doing so I found out that the institution was planning a pilot study and would welcome an outside researcher coming in to observe the changes. While the intertwined relationship that existed between the site of study, my Ph.D. program, and myself made me initially hesitant, the potential biases that arise from this have been closely considered and addressed throughout the research process and will be addressed in future chapters.

In the spring of 2009, Midwestern University, a small, private midwest liberal arts university, began to pilot electronic portfolios in their writing program. The pilot program, a three-step process, began as a way of working to incorporate multimodal assignments in the first-year writing program. This process began with phase I, where two instructors tested multimodal assignments in their writing classrooms, phase II, which had all Writing II courses incorporate a multimodal assignment into the classroom, and phase III, which is in progress at the moment, where Writing I and II are moving to incorporate elements of multimodality. While the
University’s own pilot program focuses on the inclusion of multimodal texts into the writing classroom, their assessment methods had to change as well.

Midwestern University has a tradition of portfolios. The writing program at Midwestern, which includes approximately 1,000 students each semester, has used paper-based portfolios for years. The program-wide process portfolios acts as a way to assure students are meeting programmatic standards in their various writing classes. While a further discussion of definitions of both paper-based and electronic portfolios will take place in Chapter 2, a process portfolio has been defined by Kathleen Blake Yancey, Sue Ellen Gold, and James E. Newkirk as a working portfolios or a portfolio that demonstrates process and the writer’s reflection on her/his process (Yancey, 1992). With the inclusion of multimodal projects into the classroom, however, standard assessment practices were challenged.

During the pilot program, various courses transitioned to using electronic portfolios. In the summer of 2008, an honors course of College Writing II was added to the schedule. This course was the first to pilot electronic portfolios. As part of earning honors credit, the students in this course were asked to use a content system within Blackboard to create an electronic portfolio. While “students were still evaluated using [the department’s] rubric, and portfolios were shared with” the director of writing, this “unexpected and interesting development” that occurred during phase II led to further exploration of electronic portfolios (Tulley, 2009) and is the basis for my research.

Ultimately, the University’s move toward electronic portfolios came after the new Director’s suggestions that the writing classes include a multimodal assignment. As a way to answer concerns about assessment, electronic portfolios began to be tested. Because the institution offered a web-based content system and because the instructors and University were
accustomed to a portfolio system, the 2008-2009 pilot study became a place where eportfolios were used to collect and distribute student texts in the designated classes. Going into the pilot study, the Director of Writing saw the pilot of just a handful of classes as a way to figure out how the content-system might work as an eportfolio for students and instructors, but also as a way to figure out how to make end-of-term portfolio review time efficient and anonymous.

The transition to including multimodal assignments and ultimately the inclusion of electronic portfolios at Midwestern came from a change in program administration. After attending The Ohio State University’s Digital Media and Composition, Dr. Teague set about working to include digital assignments in the established program. In a 2009 article, Teague said “I ideally envisioned a writing program where first-year composition courses could have the same standard writing requirements but instructor choice as to how to implement them. In theory, this meant that instructors could choose to incorporate multimodal assignments as long as the basic requirements were met” (Tulley, 2009). In an attempt to facilitate change without completely disrupting the program’s culture, Teague implemented the Multimodal Composition Initiative, which was a way to incorporate multimodality into one of the four assignments in the College Writing II course. The Initiative, which began in Spring 2008, was a means to address such calls to revise the program’s understanding of literacy preparation that groups such as NCTE called for. At the same time, however, the change remained localized to the institution. Future chapters will discuss the changes being made at Midwestern University, the choices the Director of Writing made, and the implications of such choices.

When I initially met with the Writing Program Administrator, we talked about her goals for the study, the work she had already done, and the possibility of having me research their transition. Based on timeliness, location, and the Director’s willingness to work with me, my
research was able to develop around a program that was considering transitioning to electronic portfolios. Through interviews with the Director of Writing, instructors, students, and portfolio evaluators, as well as textual analyses of assignment sheets, departmental documents, and student-produced texts, this project relied on multiple perspectives to understand the changes that one university made. In doing so, I worked to create a dynamic overview of how this program moved toward the use of electronic portfolios as a means of accommodating multimodal text.

Goals of Study

This research project stems from one large question, *Why eportfolios?* Ultimately, I see this project looking at eportfolios because I see them as a place where computers and writing, assessment, and teaching meet, but also because they act as a possible response to concerns and criticisms held in the field about multimodality in the writing classroom. My line of inquiry has been complicated though. Rather than just knowing “why,” through this project I hoped to better understand the how, where, who, when, and more of digital portfolios.

The research that comprises this dissertation looks at a specific institution as it prepares to make program-wide changes in their first-year writing program. The project is guided by ethnographic methods and includes interviews and textual analysis to create a rich picture of the process of transitioning to digital portfolios in a standardized writing program. The goal behind this research is to find larger implications about the use of electronic portfolios that may help as other classes or programs work to incorporate similar assessment methods.

Research Questions

This dissertation has been guided by the following questions:

- What are the potential benefits and challenges of eportfolios?
- What can an eportfolio do that a paper-based portfolio does not?
• How are institutions/programs incorporating eportfolios?
• How might a program incorporate eportfolios based on these findings?
• How would this change our understanding of assessment, instructor training, and student training?

I raise the first two questions as a means to justify eportfolios and the overall research. Addressing these questions seems important as I try to come to terms with how or whether eportfolios may be a positive transition for first-year writing programs to make in assessment. The final three questions will be a way to explore the practical application of digital portfolios in the specific first-year writing classrooms. These three questions guide my ethnographic study, and in addressing them I hope to create a thick description of how assessment changes happen. While Midwestern’s focus is on changing the type of writing and text assigned in first-year writing, I will focus on how understandings of assessment must change when students are asked to produce non-traditional texts.

I see the proposed research questions working together to begin to speak to the overall question, Why eportfolios? Furthermore, in exploring these questions, it seems important to study not only how a single program is changing their assessment, but also how other institutions might begin to incorporate eportfolios based on the findings from the site of study. Looking at how these changes may affect assessment practices, instructor training, and student preparation would be equally important questions to consider.

Methods and Methodologies of Study

According to Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul’s book, Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research, “[e]thnography is an approach to learning about the social and cultural life of communities, institutions, and other settings that . . . [i]s investigative. . .
uses the researcher as the primary tool of data collection. . . [and e]mphasizes and builds on the perspectives of the people in the research setting” (1999, p. 1). This methodology allows the researcher to account for many different factors in their research and to create a fuller picture of the situation being examined. Janice M. Lauer and J. William Asher situate ethnographic research as a way to conduct qualitative research that “examines an entire environments, looking at subjects in context” in order to help the researcher “understand human behavior which occurs in a natural setting” (1988, p. 39). Because making department-wide changes to assessment effects not only the instructors but also students, the way a department or program is organized and run, and potentially many other issues, this study will benefit from the complete picture ethnographic methods can supply.

In addition, this methodology will make it easier to understand the complexity of making such a change within a program. As a means to understand how an institution moves toward electronic portfolios, this research will explore the situation from many sides. A combination of observations, interviews, and textual analyses will be used to collect data, and I will consider how various stakeholders are effected by the transition to create a description of what others might keep in mind when making a similar transition. Triangulating the research and “returning to the data, and [producing] thick descriptions, detailed accounts of writing behavior in its rich context” (Lauer & Asher, 1988, p. 39) will validate the findings of this study. Furthermore, as LeCompte and Schensul (1999) point out, ethnographic research is “inductive, building local theories for testing and adapting them for use both locally and elsewhere” (p. 1). While the research conducted for this project will be specific to one program, the findings from this research will be used to formulate broader implications.
Though the methodology will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, it is important to note that this study is only guided by this methodology and I do not claim it is a thorough or complete ethnographic study. As a researcher I observed two separate class settings for a limited amount of time, and, because of time constraints of the research and the institution’s progress with eportfolio, this research cannot claim to fully “understand human behavior which occurs in natural settings” (Lauer & Asher, 1998, pp. 39). This research, has, however, included many elements of ethnographic designs and process to better understand the transition.

Dissertation Summary

This larger project is divided into five chapters. The first chapter has attempted to introduce and begin situating the larger project by including a brief literature review, an overview of the larger project, and a discussion of the research questions. Chapter Two, the literature review, builds on the first chapter as a way to situated the overall research. The second chapter provides a detailed literature review that situates how multimodality has led to changes in writing, teaching writing, and assessing writing. In addition, this chapter explores the first two proposed research questions as a means to further ground the rest of the document. This chapter discusses how eportfolios differ from their paper-based counterparts, and discuss the benefits of electronic portfolios over other assessment methods, including paper-based portfolios.

Chapter Three looks at methods and data collection. The chapter begins discussing the ethnographic research conducted at Midwestern and includes an overview of why the institution was selected, what the institution is doing and has done to transition to electronic portfolios, and how and what data was collected and interpreted.

The fourth chapter focuses on the observations, interviews, and analyses that took place at Midwestern. The focus of this chapter is creating the rich, deep understanding of how the
change took place and how it affected various stakeholders. Following this discussion, Chapter Five focuses on conclusions and implications of the previous four chapters. This chapter draws conclusions about the previously posed research questions and suggest possible future study.
CHAPTER TWO: A NEW WAVE OF ASSESSMENT: MOVING TOWARD EPORTFOLIOS

I wasn’t introduced to portfolios until late in my college career. As a student I used portfolios in creative writing courses and an advanced writing course, and as a teacher I used them sporadically throughout the first few years of teaching. When I entered my Ph.D. program, however, I came to a program with nearly twenty years of experience with portfolio assessment and began the journey to truly understanding portfolios on a larger, program-wide scale.

As a student I remember my frustration to understand the grading process of writing portfolios. I had spent many years, both in college and before, with a certain understanding of the grading process; I would write a paper, turn the paper in, get the grade back with instructor comments, and then move on to the next assignment. Spending the semester working on projects, collecting them in a folder, and presenting them at the end of the term for assessment challenged the standards to which I had become accustomed, and as a writer it challenged my understanding of the writing process. No longer was it sufficient for me to write the paper and be done with it. Instead, I now realized that I was expected to write, reflect, and revise my writing. I was supposed to consider how I could improve my writing, and the introduction of portfolios helped me better understand academic discourses, how writing is done differently depending on audience, and how “revision” is a complex re-seeing rather than merely editing. At the time this was a lot of change to accept, but being removed I am able to reflect on this experience and see how it has changed my writing, my appreciation of writing, and my approach to teaching writing.

By the time I started teaching I was able to begin to see how portfolios had benefited me as a student. I was able to look at a single artifact and see the changes to my writing over a period of time that traditional assessment hadn’t necessarily allowed for. Because I was collecting and
later reflecting on my writing throughout the semester, I was able to see the progress I made from one draft of a paper to the next, but I was also able to see the progress I made as a writer and thinker from the first to the last paper of a semester. When I entered graduate school I was also able to see the changes that had taken place from my first portfolio during my sophomore year of college and my final portfolio created as a capstone project for a literature course my senior year. The process of writing that teachers had been stressing to me since middle school – that of prewriting, writing, and rewriting – came together in the act of collecting my work in a portfolio. The collecting, selecting, and reflecting (Yancey, 1996b) that the portfolio process had asked me to do as a writer had made me aware of the role that reflection, re-seeing, and readdressing topics and issues played in my writing; the choices I made as a writer in each stage of writing effected the outcome, and at the same time I began to realize that the act of reflecting helped me make conscious choices not only in organizing the portfolio, but also in deciding what to work on later. When I faced planning a semester-long course in my own teaching, I used portfolios in hopes of helping my students see their growth as writers, just as portfolios had helped me.

My experience with portfolios is not necessarily unique. Portfolios have been a significant part of higher education, and they have been used in various disciplines for many years. The value of collecting artifacts in a common space can be traced back to the early Renaissance, and more recently collecting writing as an assessment method in the discipline extends back to the 80s. Since that time, countless students at colleges and universities across the country have been asked by their instructors, their programs, and sometimes even their institutions to utilize portfolio keeping. Just as I had instructors in college who valued portfolios and all that accompanies them – including process, selection, reflection, and revision – others
have had similar experiences. My experience was not initially unique; portfolio assessment challenged me as a student, as it often does to students who enter a class or program that uses portfolios. What makes my experience unique, however, is the fact that it led to the present research. I have been on both sides of the portfolio; I struggled to understand the value of portfolios as a student, and I have seen the challenges that portfolios pose to instructors and even to university programs, departments, and entire institutions.

Keeping in mind the importance of the student experience and the instructor experience, the goal of this chapter is to better understand why e-portfolios deserve the attention of scholars. While the previous chapter worked to set the ground for the larger discussion, this chapter will focus more on how electronic portfolios are being understood, discussed, and used. This chapter begins by providing a historical account of assessment focusing on how different methods were used and what they valued (Broad, 2003) and the relationship between the teaching of writing and the means of assessment. Following the historical overview of assessment in general, this chapter then focuses on portfolios in the writing classroom and address why portfolios were introduced, how they were used, and the discussions that have been raised, some of which still remain significant. This chapter concludes by looking at electronic portfolios and where portfolio scholarship is heading, why the focus is changing, and the role electronic portfolios may play in future assessment.

Assessment and the Process Movement

The assessment of writing has changed as much as writing instruction over time. Early writing instruction was based on availability. During the late middle ages, when materials were scarce, verse was favored “because they could be memorized more easily than works in prose” (Curry Woods, 2001, p. 124). Early American writing pedagogy proposed that students should...
demonstrate and maintain a basic understanding of mechanics, appropriate vocabulary, and an ability to analyze and imitate authors (Wright & Halloran, 2001, pp. 215-216). In addition, students of this time were expected to practice oratory. Wrights and Halloran (2001) point out that while formal English became the norm in American colleges during the eighteenth century, “[i]n the period immediately preceding the Revolution and extending into the early decades of the nineteenth century, writing instruction was governed by assumptions and methods drawn from the English derivation of classical rhetoric. Oratory of the deliberative, forensic, and ceremonial kinds was assumed to be the most important” (p. 218). In addition to the writing students did, much focus was on the orations performed in public. Students’ successes were often based on the performed orations, and the writing exercises were valued less.

At the turn of the twentieth century, however, composition was professionalized and the teaching of writing took on yet another approach (Hobbs & Berlin, 2001, p. 249). Between 1880-1910, Harvard implemented “a particular kind of writing; a wide array of course work; and an eminent, highly visible composition staff” (Brereton, 1995, p. 11). Prior to this, Harvard’s writing program, “like that at most colleges, required a mix of oral and written composition throughout all four years. . . with a single rhetoric course to provide a theoretical grounding in the principles of effective prose” (Brereton, 1995, p. 9). When Harvard moved to focus on a single year-long first-year writing course requirement so too did other colleges across the country (Brereton, 1995, p. 13).

The opening of public universities led to the general education movement often marked as the means for the expansion of first-year writing programs. Open enrollment led to inconsistencies in the levels of preparation for college-level writing, which directly impacted the composition boom. While during certain times in history the study of writing was valued less,
the twentieth century became a time in history where both writing and the teaching of writing took many different shapes. Yancey points to what she calls the “waves” of writing assessment over the past fifty or so years. She asserts that rather than clear breaks between assessments, each “wave” has fed into the next and that clean breaks don’t exist. Nevertheless, beginning in the 1950s, Yancey says that objective tests were favored, in the 70s and 80s holistic essays were favored, and from the mid 80s through much of the 90s portfolio assessment has been favored (Yancey, 1999, p 484).

During the first wave, Yancey (1999) points out that assessment was task-oriented. Writing assessment was a means to place students in appropriate writing classes, develop strategies about how and what to teach students in those classes, and guarantee that students had learned the material from their courses (pp. 485-486). During this time, writing program assessment focused on testing. A workshop during the 1954 Conference on College Composition and Communication “decided to talk about ‘standards for widely used English tests bearing on college guidance, admissions, and placement.’ It was felt that the CCCC could influence testing better by proposing standards for the construction, selection, and use of tests than by preparing, publishing, and promoting tests of its own” (National entrance, 1954, p. 123). Grading standards and programmatic standards were being discussed and presented at conferences during the mid-50s, which supported the use of testing (Tuttle, 1958; Eaker, 1954).

By the 1970s, the second wave of assessment, which relied on holistically scored essay tests, was emerging (Yancey, 1999, p. 486). During this time, student writing was examined; “during the second wave, we began employing a ‘direct’ measure – a sample of the behavior that we seek to examine, in this case a text that the student composes” (Yancey, 1999, p. 486). The logical transition to application took place during this period. Rather than asking students to
perform knowledge out of context, application and demonstration were valued more. Closely corresponding to the student-centered pedagogy that emerged around the same time (Murray, 2003), this assessment method grew in popularity because it asked student writers to show assessors what they were able to do.

Yancey (1999), Huot (2002), and others agree that these assessment methods, while useful in their own right, limited the potential of writing assessment. During this time, the field began to value process. At the same time, there was a movement to value the act of writing and consider many, varied writing samples written in different contexts, under different constraints, with different audiences, goals, and expectations in mind. Just as the way writing was taught changed, and just as the way writing had been assessed changed based on the values of writing instructors, there came a point where single writing samples or multiple-choice tests no longer met the assessment expectations of teachers. With the introduction of the process movement, assessment needs again changed and transitioned to Yancey’s (1999) third wave of assessment, and a transformative moment in writing assessment history, the portfolio movement.

Beginning in the seventies, teachers across the country began to question the value of earlier models of teaching writing. As writers and instructors of writing, scholars such as Murray, Berlin, Flower, and Faigley, realized that the method of teaching writing should correspond to the way writers write. If a professional journalist would not expect to write an article and have it published without re-reading, revising, and having others, including an editor, read the text first, why should we not teach our students to do the same? Expecting students to write and produce texts for grading did not give value to the prewriting, writing, and rewriting that all writers take part in as they compose. The process movement called attention to this and brought the discussion to the forefront of professional conversations. The significance of the
process movement is far-reaching and includes transforming practices both inside and outside the classroom.

At the base of the process movement was the belief that writing was not a linear action and because of that, the way writing was taught changed to model the actual process that writing takes: prewriting, writing, rewriting. Murray’s (2003) suggestion for teaching writing as a process rather than product became a catalyst for change in English departments and writing programs alike. Hailed as one of the most influential scholars in the early process movement, Murray argued that “[t]he writing process itself can be divided into three stages” including prewriting, writing, and rewriting (p. 4). Murray and other early process advocates all believed in the value of the process, but in practice the teaching of the writing process varied as vastly from classroom to classroom as one might expect. The value was a commonality, but the application differed, and by the mid 80s, much of the professional discussions surrounding process were highlighting and problematizing these differences.

Hairston (1986) calls attention to what she calls the field’s “maxim,” which supports focusing on process rather than product and argues that this new approach to the teaching of writing is “certainly for most of us a welcome change from an approach to teaching writing that depended primarily on analysis and imitation of the written product” (p. 442). She continues to call attention to an issue that Faigley (1986) rightfully points out. Faigley says “[t]he problem . . . is that conceptions of writing as a process vary from theorist to theorist,” which led to differences not only in how writing was taught but also how research was conducted (p. 527). During this time there were those who saw the process movement as significant because it allowed student writers to explore and discover meaning; “They would say that students do not really learn how to write; rather they come to an understanding of what it means to write by
actually engaging in the process” (Hairston, 1986, p. 442). Others relied on a classical approach to rhetoric and a scientific approach. “In their view, writing is an activity that can be analyzed and mapped. . . and teaching strategies can be devised” (Hairston, 1986, p. 443). Hairston does note the obvious complication that rarely does a teacher, scholar, student, or writer benefit only from one or the other two approaches, and the crossover only further supports the fact that the process movement helped scholars view writing in a similar way but did not standardize the teaching of writing.

Initially considered a paradigm shift, some have argued that the important transition from product to process did not in fact equate to a “paradigm shift” (Crowley, 1996, p. 65). Nevertheless, the movement significantly altered the field. The change from teaching writing as prescriptive and product driven to teaching it as a process accounts for these changes. Lynn Bloom (2003) reasons that one of the causes for the success of the process movement rests in its timeliness in relation to other changes in the larger English field, such as deconstruction and other abstract theories. The process movement displaced these jargon-filled discussions with “plain, understandable concepts and everyday language” and made the course more applicable and approachable (Bloom, 2003, p. 33). Gary Olson (1999) featured a list of ten points of emphasis that followed the process movement including the beliefs that writing is an activity, is recursive, is social, and is a way to learn. Additionally, Olson pointed to the beliefs that writers are often aware of who they are writing to, writers need time for inventing, writing, and revising, and more (p. 7). The key point to recognize, however, is that “the process orientation helped us to theorize writing in more productive ways than previously and to devise pedagogies that familiarize students with the kinds of activities that writers often engage in when they write” (Olson, 1999, p. 7).
The process movement led to changes in the teaching of writing and to changes in how writing was introduced to students and assessed. It valued not only process, but along with that came a call for planning, drafting, revising, rewriting, and editing. As a means to help student writers understand the necessity of the writing process, assessment practices changed. In the beginning of his book, Broad (2003) forwards the belief that even with the changes to assessment, there is no clear answer to the question of what we value in student writing (p. 4), but he also acknowledges that “value” is often signified by assessment. When an instructor grades a writing activity, students often perceive the writing activity as a valued assignment whereas ungraded assignments, or assignments that get merely a checkmark when they are done are often seen as less important. The pervading belief throughout the history of writing instruction has been that we grade what we value, and that we value what we grade.

The changes to how writing was being taught and valued inevitably led to changes in assessment. Turning back to the early nineteenth-century and before, assessment practices rested on the use of oral exams and recitation (Witte, Trachsel, and Walters, 1986; Huot & Williamson, 2009). As schools moved towards standardization, and as cost-to-time ratios became more important, however, written exams were introduced, only to lose favor to multiple-choice exams (Williams, 2009, p. 63). In search of more cost-effective, efficient, and valid forms of assessment, educators have favored different methods of assessment for years.

The principle that grades equal value may be a long standing one, but it complicated the process movement because grades often end students’ writing process because of the belief that the grade is final (Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2008; Huot, 2002). Because of the stalling power of grades in the writing classroom, traditional assessment methods challenged the process movement that was being used across the country. While teachers were telling their students that
they needed to prewrite, write, and rewrite, traditional assessment only took into consideration the final product. Again, like many times before, changes to how writing was taught led to changes in grading; the acceptance of process led to an inescapable change to assessment. The widespread incorporation of portfolios is one that corresponds with the process movement.

Portfolios

Scholarship addressing portfolio assessment in the writing classroom began to appear more regularly in professional journals and publications during the mid 1980s, but even earlier, Ford & Larkin’s 1978 *College English* article called for attention to be turned toward portfolios. The emergence of such discussions closely corresponded to the process movement taking place in writing classrooms across the country. The correlation between portfolio grading and the process movement is perhaps responsible for the widespread use of portfolios because they both value demonstrating process.

Olson (1999) forwards the belief that “the process orientation helped [the field] to theorize writing in more productive ways than previously and to devise pedagogies that familiarize students with the kinds of activities that writers often engage in when they write” (p. 7). In treating student writers as writers then, Huot (2002) and others acknowledged both the importance and difficulty of assessing writing. When instructors assign grades to student writing, the grade ends the writing process. In fact, the act of assigning a grade “freezes student work and teacher commentary,” which ultimately discourages students to revise (Huot, 2002, p. 73). Because students are accustomed to grades being the final say, the risk remains that the role of process in writing remains an enigma to students. If we assess what we value (Broad, 2003), then when we assign a grade, as Huot suggests, we are placing value on a text that students see.
Even when we ask for revision, the assigned grade threatens the writing process, and because of this, assessment again changed.

The commonly held understanding of a portfolio is that they are an assessment apparatus that stalls assessment. Portfolio assessment asks writers to collect their work throughout a set period of time as a way to demonstrate comprehension, growth, or competency. Grades are often held off until the end – either of the semester or at some point in the middle of the semester – with portfolio assessment, which theoretically allows for and encourages revision. Portfolios can be used as a showcase or as presentation, but all portfolios “share a similar goal: to show someone else what the portfolio keeper has learned, or to convince an audience of the portfolio keeper’s achievements, abilities, or talents” (Reynolds & Rice, 2006, p. 3). Similarly, while portfolios are used differently between classes, programs, and institutions, Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) suggest that “thoughtfully designed” portfolios, regardless of where they are being used, share nine characteristics. These include: collection (p. 32), range (p. 33), context richness (p. 33), delayed evaluation (p. 34), selection (p. 34), student-centered control (p. 35), reflection and self-assessment (p. 35), growth along specific parameters (p. 36), and development over time (p. 37).

The general goals of portfolios as forwarded by Reynolds and Rice, Hamp-Lyons and Condon, and others correspond to the axioms of the process movement. Olson (1999) summed up the process movement as a combination of ten features. These include the beliefs that writing is an activity, is recursive, is social, and is a way to learn. Additionally, writers needed a clear understanding of their audience and time for invention, writing, revising (Olson, 1999, p. 7). Portfolios provided the space to potentially demonstrate each of these principles. At their core, portfolios act as a space to show the process and recursive nature of writing. Additionally,
portfolios are social in nature – at least shared between writer and instructor, and sometimes additional readers – and the act of portfolio keeping asks students to collect, select, and reflect as a way to learn about process and writing. Portfolios often ask the keeper to share the progress they have made by showing earlier drafts, additional pieces that discuss revision plans or reflect on revisions conducted. One expected way of demonstrating this learning is through the inclusion of process work. At least in general, portfolios address the pillars of the process movement as set forth by Olson. Even so, portfolios are not straightforward. In fact, from their inception, portfolios have taken on many varied shapes.

According to Reynolds and Rice (2006), portfolios typically fall in to one of two categories. The first are portfolios for learners or process portfolios. These portfolios are for the benefit of the portfolio keeper rather than an outside force, for example a teacher. Portfolios for learners or process portfolio focus on process over product and are used to “collect or create artifacts. . . that best represent [the portfolio keeper’s] experience and engagement with the learning process in a particular subject area” (Reynolds & Rice, 2006, p. 2).

The second type of portfolio is a best-works portfolio, which is further broken down into two categories: evaluation portfolios and presentation portfolios. The best-works portfolio may begin as a learning portfolio, “but at a certain point, attention shifts from the learning process to the final product” (Reynolds & Rice, 2006, p. 2). Both evaluation portfolios and presentation portfolios focus on demonstrating final product and, in theory, the “best works” produced by the portfolio keeper.

While these or similar understandings of portfolios are often cited in discussions about portfolios, other definitions are less specific. For example, some argue “[p]ortfolios, in education and personal or professional development, are collections of documents and other
objects that can be shown as evidence to support claims a person makes about what they know, what they have achieved, and what they can do” (as cited in Stefanie, Mason, & Pegler, 2007, p. 9). Others use broader definitions and propose that portfolios are “[a] system which allows users to record any abilities, events or plans which are personally significant; which allows these records to be linked, augmented or evidenced by other data sources, and which promotes reflection on these entries” (as cited in Stefanie, Mason, & Pegler, 2007, p. 9). While often portfolios are referenced as a method of assessment, still others have forwarded the claim that portfolios are more than merely an assessment tool but instead are a pedagogical approach to teaching writing.

One of the challenges that arise when discussing portfolios is finding a common definition. What appears to remain constant is the belief that portfolios demonstrate learning. In doing so, the portfolio keeper must collect, select, and reflect on the inclusion of particular artifacts (Yancey, 1996b). As the field again faces changes to how we approach the teaching of writing, our assessment needs have changed as well, and while portfolios are still an important point of discussion, the conversations have turned more toward electronic portfolios. With this change in focus, however, the issue of definitions becomes even more difficult.

As alluded to previously, early scholarship supporting portfolios emerged in the late 70s. Ford and Larkin (1978) presented portfolios as a way to address what they saw as an increasing problem with decreased writing standards. This “leveling effect, whereby the teachers’ expectations were conditioned by the students’ low abilities to such an extent that teachers lost their power to judge with accuracy the quality of the many essays read each week,” which led to acceptance of a lower standard of writing (Ford & Larkin, 1978, p. 950). The authors agree that the portfolio system, used in all writing classes at Brigham Young University-Hawaii at the time,
had potential for larger campuses, and was “the best way [they knew] of to combat grade 
inflation and the decline in students’ English abilities” (Ford & Larkin, 1978, p. 951).

This early use of portfolios in the writing classroom entailed “the disinterested judging of 
each student’s work, collected, like the best representative work of an artist, into a ‘portfolio’ . . . 
which is read by at least one teacher besides the one from whom the student is taking the class. 
This second teacher has the power to decide whether or not the papers he reads meet the agreed-
upon standards and to pass or fail the portfolio accordingly” (Ford & Larkin, 1978, p. 951). This 
approach to portfolios acts as a way to distribute trust, creates a more authentic and broad 
audience, and becomes a “uniformly produced and judged sample of the students’ work during 
the semester” that “insures fairness and uniformity” in grading, but the flexibility of the portfolio 
rests in the fact that each institution can enforce standards chosen by their department (Ford & 
Larkin, 1978, p. 952). Scholarship that followed Ford and Larkin’s article relied on similar 
portfolio methods.

At SUNY Stony Brook in the 80s similar portfolios were introduced in their writing 
program. Elbow and Belanoff highlight the SUNY portfolio program, which, like Brigham 
Young University-Hawaii, allowed students “a chance to satisfy the University writing 
requirement on the basis of [their] best writing, writing [they]…had a chance to think about and 
revise” (1991, p. 6). What set the SUNY portfolios apart was the mid-semester evaluation. 
According to a handout that students received explaining the portfolios, “At mid-semester 
[students would] get a chance for a trial dry run on one paper” (Elbow & Belanoff, 1991, p. 6). 
If a paper passed at midterm, it would count during the final portfolio review; if a paper failed at 
midterm, on the other hand, it needed to be revised for resubmission in the end of term portfolio. 
At the end of the semester, all students submitted their portfolios, which were holistically read
and assessed (Elbow & Belanoff, 1991, p. 9). Similar to BYU-Hawaii, SUNY’s portfolio program “change[d] the rhetorical situation between teacher and class, greatly reducing the possibility of antagonism which sometimes develops between students and teachers” (Ford & Larkin, 1978, p. 952).

This method of portfolio became popular at this time for various reasons, including the belief that portfolios minimized “a teacher’s personal prejudices for or against a given student. The problem of the rogue teacher is also cured. Any teacher who is not teaching the required material at the standard determined by the department . . . will have real trouble at portfolio time” (Ford & Larkin, 1978, p. 954). Often used as a means of standardization, portfolios became an answer at universities across the country. Schools such as Kansas State University in 1988 saw portfolios as a way “to establish uniform grading standards among our 120 sections of Composition I and II” (Smit, Kolonosky, & Seltzer, 1991, p. 46). The use of portfolios for the creation of such standards continues in programs today where large numbers of sections, instructors, and/or high turn over rates create an increase potential for inconsistent instruction.

Standardization has been programmatic or institutionally mandated, but at times there have also been state interventions to assure students are receiving equal educations across the state. In the late 80s, professors at Christopher Newport College (now University) moved towards portfolios to meet the state of Virginia’s mandated assessment (Rosenberg, 1991). During the second half of the 1980s, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) proposed its “Recommendations for Measuring Student Achievements at Virginia’s Public Colleges and Universities” that “required its state supported schools to ‘submit annual reports of progress in developing their assessment programs and concrete, non-anecdotal, and quantifiable information on students achievements’” (as cited in Rosenberg, 1991, p. 70). Like
Virginia, students in Kentucky K-12 classrooms take part in a state-mandated portfolio program. According to a state-produced document, “[s]ince 1991-92, Kentucky students in assessment grade levels have been asked to complete writing portfolios as a part of the statewide accountability assessment” (Kentucky Department of Education, 2008, p. 3). Though an answer to a state mandate, other institutions also began to use portfolios to address increasing calls from programs, departments, colleges, and even states for evidence of learning.

Program-wide uses of portfolios was significant, but the use of portfolios in the classroom was perhaps even more widespread because

> [p]ortfolio assessment in the composition classroom offers not a methodology but a framework for response. Rather than provide definitive answer to questions about grading criteria and standards, the relationship between teacher and student, and increased paper loads, the portfolio approach presents an opportunity for instructors to bring their practice in responding to student writing in line with their theories of composing and pedagogy. (Sommers, 1991, p. 153)

While programmatic portfolio use creates some standards – i.e., the demonstration of certain genres of text or specific, preset skills – portfolios often look different. As Reynolds and Rice’s (2006) explanation of the types of portfolios demonstrates, portfolios are used to meet various learning outcomes and requirements. Some portfolios require all work completed for a class to be included and then the portfolio is read holistically so that one or two weaker pieces do not necessarily mean the portfolio fails, much like Elbow and Belanoff (1991) suggest. Other portfolio systems allow for writers to pick only their best works, which are revised as a way to demonstrate the learning that has taken place, what Reynolds and Rice call the best-works
portfolio (2006, pp. 2-3). The type of portfolio, however, does not change the inherent nature of portfolio evaluation; portfolios are an assessment method that is collected over a period of time and includes multiple examples, is context rich, and requires that the portfolio keeper be selective and reflective (Reynolds & Rice, 2006, p. 1).

The use of portfolios in the writing classroom allows for the complexities of process to be valued and to help students understand that writing is a means of learning (Sommers, 1991; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). From instructors who hated grading (McClelland, 1991) to those who found the canonical-reading-out-of-context approach to grading as flawed (Forbes, 1994), portfolios became a way to remediate authority, create context, and solicit writerly reflection. When students became responsible for the collection, selection, and reflection of their portfolios, authority was shared. No longer was the teacher taking control of a text when she/he graded it. Instead, students were making the choices about what should and shouldn’t be included. Unlike previous methods of assessment, portfolios became a way to evaluate learning over an extended period of time and, again, to shift the assessment power paradigm. In past assessment movements, there was an unspoken belief that teachers held all the knowledge and assessment was something done to students’ work. Whether the teacher held the answer key to the test or passage to be memorized, the student could only demonstrate her/his learning to the best of her/his ability. The introduction of portfolios asked that students take an active part in compiling and reflecting on their work – from verbalizing their process to explaining their selection choices, portfolios became a way for students to become active in the assessment process.

Throughout the 90s, portfolios continued to be a prominent method of assessment. By this time portfolios were being used at all educational levels (Elbow & Belanoff, 1997, p. 21) as
a response to the testing and other previous assessment methods. Portfolios continued to take
precedent over exit exams and other theories of assessment at institutions around the country, but
at the same time, questions of validity and reliability began to arise.

Issues of agreement among portfolio scores led to questions of reliability and validity
(Elbow & Belanoff, 1997, p. 25). In 1993, Hamp-Lyons and Condon studied the assumptions
behind portfolio assessment at their own institution only to find that portfolios did not
necessarily lead to higher levels of accuracy (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2009, pp. 327-328). In
their study of portfolio assumptions, the data revealed that there were a handful of assumptions
about portfolios that included the belief that portfolios would lead to more accurate assessment
(Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2009, p. 327). While traditional methods of scoring essays were not
reliable or consistent (Huot & Williamson, 2009, p. 331), what Hamp-Lyons and Condon’s
investigation revealed was that “accuracy is not an inherent virtue of portfolio assessment” (p.
327). White (2007) furthers Hamp-Lyons and Condon’s discussion of portfolio reliability and
validity by pointing out that not only are portfolios potentially unreliable, but portfolios add a
level of assessment that we may not initially expect. He says:

several validity problems are inevitable: a weak student with no outside
responsibilities will be able to produce a more substantial portfolio than a better
writer who happens to be a single parent supporting a family (a timed test evens
out the measurement conditions); and students are likely to get help of various
sorts (from consultations in the writing center to purchased papers from
unscrupulous commercial firms), so it may be hard to know just what we are
assessing. (White, 2007, p. 164)

Though examples such as those White mentions may create unreliable portfolios, the reliability
and validity of scoring portfolios has equally been questioned. Some (White, 2007; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2009; Cherry & Meyer, 2009) argue that the assessment or scoring of portfolios is one of the largest flaws, and the more attention portfolios received the more attention these issues of equality and reliability received. White forwards a common sentiment that “the weakest aspect of traditional portfolios assessment” is the criteria for reliable scoring (2007, p. 176). The way readers score portfolios may change from person to person, and to combat that scholars began advocating scoring criteria or the use of rubrics or guides for assessment (White, 2007; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2009). These early discussions of reliability and validity, while not completely resolved, begged for additional research into the possibilities of portfolios, and reliability and validity continue to be important issues in current discussions.

Though their validity has been questioned, portfolios are seen to be an answer to the desire to create valid, replicable assessment of the writing process. “[W]hen we collect one sample of writing performed under one set of conditions, we can measure a given writer’s ability to produce that kind of writing under that set of conditions” (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000, p. 7). However, when we collect multiple drafts from multiple works, we challenge this singular look at assessment and consider multiple factors. The role that context, development and growth play in portfolio assessment makes them an answer to the need for valid and reliable assessment. Portfolios were said to give a “more trustworthy picture...of ability (making us realize how little we could trust those old conventional single-sample pictures), but in the same stroke they undermine[d] any trust we might want to put in the scoring” of single-texts or exams (Elbow & Belanoff, 1997, p. 26). In the late 90s it was believed that “portfolios [were] simply the best system we currently have to assess writing while still trying not to disrupt or undermine the teaching and learning process” (Elbow & Belanoff, 1997, p. 32). While that may no longer be
the case, portfolios still are a valuable assessment method that continues to prosper in writing programs.

To return briefly to the early discussion of “waves” of assessment, Yancey (1999) concludes her discussion of assessment’s history by looking forward. She says that energies are currently accumulating as though to gather a fourth wave. Perhaps this next wave will focus on program assessment as epistemological and ideological work; perhaps it will focus more on individual assessment as interpretive act; perhaps it will take on the challenges posed by non-canonical texts (email, hypertext, multiple-generic writing); perhaps it will address the kinds of expertise and ways that they can construct and be represented in writing assessment; perhaps it will include topics that are only now forming. (Yancey, 1999, pp. 500-501)

Historically, assessment practices have changed to address how and what we are teaching. As Yancey (1999) points out, however, the future of assessment is still unknown. Her nod towards “non-canonical texts” is an important one to consider. Since the mid-90s scholars had been questioning how to address changing modes of writing in the classroom and more importantly to the discussion at hand, how to assess such changing modes of writing. As this change begins to happen, readjusting our view of portfolios and the spaces we create portfolios has lead to a recent renewed discussion of their importance for writing classrooms.

Looking Forward: Acknowledging Changes to the Teaching of Writing

The success and widespread use of portfolios and many assessment methods can directly be linked by changes to the values systems of writing instruction. In recent years,
understandings of text have evolved to include a wide variety of products. In writing classes, student writers are producing conventional texts but also videos, podcasts, websites, and more. They are blogging, interacting, reinterpreting, and mashing up their compositions to produce and interject themselves into an increasingly digital and multimodal world. Discussions about how text is changing have been ongoing (Baron, 1999; C. Moran, 2002; C. Selfe, 2003; Selfe, 2007; Sidler, Morris, & Smith, 2008), but more recently these changes have made us stop and ask “What new understandings of terms such as text and composing will students bring with them to the college classroom. . . especially those students habituated to reading and composing the kinds of new-media texts that have come to characterize contemporary computer-based environments” (Devoss, Johansen, Selfe, & Williams, 2003, p. 157).

Because the places students are writing outside of the university are changing, so too are the ways they are writing inside the university and once they leave. But this is not just a writing problem. In fact, “[t]eachers in every discipline, but especially teachers of writing, must eventually grapple with” issues of technology, literacy, and culture “if we are to uphold our historical roles as teachers who prepare students for civic as well as academic discourse” (Sidler, Morris, & Smith, 2008, p. 2). Furthermore, “[i]f we are to move from teaching the dominance of print literacy to teaching the use of multiliteracies and the creation of multimodal texts for different purposes, we need to connect our theory and our practice in productive ways” (Williams 2007, p. xii).

Changes to writing have led to a need to redefine the idea of literacy. A literate individual must “possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. . . . from reading online newspapers to participating in virtual classrooms” (NCTE-WPA, 2008). No longer is reading and writing sufficient, but computer skills and the ability to interact in virtual
spaces are considered not only important but necessary for people. This makes multimodality a worthwhile and necessary discussion in the writing classroom. This necessity makes sense since the field of writing studies has long embraced technology.

Plato feared that writing would be the end to thought, but this clearly wasn’t the case. Dennis Baron (1999) points out that “the computer is simply the latest step in a long line of writing technologies” (p. 17). Before computers there were pens and pencils, and Baron reminds us that writing itself is a significant technology which some, including Plato, feared. Just as the invention of writing changed the way knowledge was stored and shared, modern technologies too are changing the way we create, store, and share information (Ong, 2005, p. 24). Whether we say that we are in the late age of print (Bolter, 2001), practicing a secondary literacy (Ong, 2005), or members of the cyborg era (Inman, 2004), the changes to writing and communication have and will continue to happen, but these changes are not new.

Many have accepted and in fact embraced changes to our understanding of literacy. Students in writing classrooms across the country are being asked to produce texts in the broadest definition possible. While certainly more instructors still expect traditional texts, it is more common to hear of non-traditional and multimodal texts being assigned. Across the country, teachers and entire programs are beginning to integrate these new approaches to writing. From the inclusion of blogs to the creation of videos, when students are asked to create multimodal texts they are also being asked to use and demonstrate their ability to write. Some of the most widely published scholars in the field of rhetoric and writing support the use of multimodality in the classroom, but at the same time scholars understand the hesitation to support such a move wholeheartedly. While acceptance has and continues to be slow, another
important problem rests in logistics – more specifically, how we can evaluate the new texts that we’re asking students to create.

In supporting the inclusion of multimodality, several inevitable discussions arise. There are questions of student, instructor, and institution preparation; there are questions of whether we are actually teaching writing anymore; and there are questions of how to assess what our students are producing; “Today’s writing assessment systems evaluate print-based writing, not the multimodal compositions students already produce in their classrooms and in their lives” (Whithaus, 2005, p. xvii). Because assessment is already often an anxiety-inducing, highly charged, and emotional act, the concern – and sometimes fear – of assessing multimodal assignments is an important point to be addressed.

Borton and Huot (2007) suggest that assignments, instruction, and assessment “should be tailored to teaching students how to use rhetorical principles appropriately and effectively” (p. 99). As a discipline, this is at the core of our jobs, and when we ask students to compose in new spaces – including digital and non-digital – it is important to remember this. Borton and Huot suggest that teachers who assign and assess multimodal texts benefit from a method they coin “instructive evaluation” or “instructive assessment” (2007, p. 100). “Both terms denote techniques that help students learn to assess texts rhetorically – their own texts and the texts of others, as they compose and after they do so” (Borton & Huot, 2007, p. 100). These methods involve students and help them set goals to address their purpose (Borton & Huot, 2007, p. 100). Moran and Herrington (2003) address a similar issue in their earlier chapter where they ask, “‘What criteria should we use when evaluating academic hypertexts?’ and ‘Is it possible to evaluate hypertext and non-hypertext compositions using the same criteria?’” (pp. 247-8). Like Borton and Huot (2007), Moran and Herrington provide one solution by listing potential criteria.
Still others have forwarded additional possibilities including Huntley and Latchaw’s (1998) “Seven Cs of Interactive Design,” which provides additional suggestions for evaluating new media texts.

Discussions surrounding assessing multimodal texts are broad, but a reoccurring suggested method continues to be the use of electronic portfolios. Perhaps because of their history in the writing classroom and the possibilities that portfolios provide, discussions supporting eportfolios have continued to grow since the mid-90s.

Eportfolios as Assessment Solution

Like traditional paper-based portfolios, the scholarship supporting the use of electronic portfolios (eportfolios) is extensive. In recent years, three comprehensive studies of eportfolios have been published (Cambridge, Cambridge, & Yancey 2009; Jafari, & Kaufman, 2006; Cambridge, Kahn, Tompkins, & Yancey, 2001). Some of the earliest publications on eportfolios occurred in the mid-90s, including a special issue of *Computers and Composition* dedicated to electronic portfolios (volume 12, issue 2). Over the years, as the technologies have advanced, so too have the discussions.

In 1996, Yancey called portfolios “a metatext with seven defining features” including being collective, selective, and reflective as well as presuming development, diversity, communication, and evaluation (Yancey, 1996b). That year, Yancey edited a special issue of *Computers and Composition* where she, along with ten other scholars, explored their uses and understandings of electronic portfolios. These early conversations focused on publicizing who was using eportfolios (Yancey, 1996a), how eportfolios were being used (Howard, 1996; and Fisher, 1996), and what eportfolios could do for instructors, students, and the field (Watkins, 1996; Huot, 1996; Wall & Peltier, 1996). While this and other articles to follow helped to
develop a wider discussion of eportfolios, many of these issues are still being addressed, often in a further attempt to solidify and publicize the role of digital portfolios.

Scholars have continued to publish reflective and exploratory pieces on the use of portfolio, both paper-based and electronic, across the field. Beginning with Elbow and Belanoff (1991) and continuing through to the edited collection by Cambridge, Cambridge, and Yancey (2009), it is clear that instructors have wanted to share both successes and failures when it comes to portfolios. Of course, this is true too of much of the scholarly work that instructors of writing do. Though Elbow and Belanoff’s (1991) landmark essay focused on paper-based portfolios at SUNY, research today focuses on eportfolios and reflection (Yancey, 2009), eportfolios and lifelong learning (Stefani, Mason, & Pegler, 2007; Chen, 2009), and, like Elbow and Belanoff, on departmental and programmatic uses (Jafari, & Kaufman, 2006). The technologies and expectations of digital or web-based portfolios continue to change, but thematically discussions continue to have similar focuses with some of the earliest publications.

Like paper portfolios, eportfolios stress the importance of both process and presentation. While a paper portfolio is often a static document, in theory, eportfolios can continue to evolve and change over time and, as some have suggested, emphasize life-long learning. More significant, perhaps, is the fact that electronic portfolios “resolve many problems inherent in paper portfolios, such as accessibility, scalability, and flexibility” (Reynolds & Rice, 2006, p. 4). Eportfolios create a space appropriate for multimodal texts. Traci Gardner suggested that eportfolios provide a way to assess documents which resist assessment in the current grading system. It is difficult to know how to grade email, fragments of real-time discussion, and other online writing. It’s the problem of grading
things which don’t fit into the traditional way of grading. What portfolio
assessment can do is to allow writers to highlight the document which they
have produced among all the documents they have composed. (as cited in
Yancey, 1996b, pp. 132-133)

Electronic portfolios offer advantages that other means of assessment do not. Because of their
electronic nature, they become a natural space to account for demonstrating and assessing
students’ abilities to compose in electronic environment, one of the outcomes listed in the WPA
Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition. (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2000).

According to Lorenzo and Ittelson, an eportfolio “is a digitized collection of artifacts,
including demonstrations, resources, and accomplishments that represent an individual, group,
community, organization, or institution. This collection can be comprised of text-based, graphic,
or multimedia elements archived on a Web site or on other electronic media such as a CD-ROM
or DVD” (2005, p. 3). As already alluded to, digital portfolios are similar to paper-based
portfolios because they “are governed by purpose and audience.... allow students. . . to showcase
their best work. . . allow students to document learning. . . [and] are created through the same
basic processes. . . collection, selection, and reflection” (Yancey, 2001, p. 20). Like the paper-
based portfolio, eportfolios can take many forms. As Lorenzo and Ittelson (2005) suggest,
eportfolios may exist as website built by students using web-authoring software, they may be
documents saved on a CD, DVD, or flashdrive, or they may be stored on eportfolio host sites that
a university either subscribes to or students subscribe to. The element of interactivity and design
differ from institution to institution, and perhaps from class to class. As the 2003 Eportfolio
White Paper, published by the ePortfolio Consortium, suggests, “[o]n any given campus or
institution, one might find a single ePortfolio system in a department, an ePortfolio system integrated with a campus Course Management System, or an ePortfolio system fully integrated into the entire institutional infrastructure” (p. 25).

There are several options for how an electronic portfolio can be set up. One of the easier methods includes saving or burning documents to a CD. Putting textual documents, presentations, and video clips to a portable device such as a flashdrive or CD allows students to create a portfolio that includes traditional and non-traditional texts. So while a paper-based portfolio can hold printed slides, or written scripts for videos, they cannot accommodate these texts in their intended environment. Saving documents this new way generates an electronic portfolio, though the texts are generally read in the same way that we might expect a paper-based portfolio to be read. Methods such as these work well for single-classroom implementation or use when an institution does not support or cannot support larger portfolio programs.

A more popular and common alternative to this is the use of proprietary programs such as Blackboard Content System by Blackboard, Epsilen Portfolios by CyberLab, and other programs that institutions must purchase a license for. These systems do the behind the scenes work to create the portfolio shells that students and instructors in turn “fill in.” Institutionally, these systems are often proposed and suggested for use across programs and institutions, and in some cases the school’s learning objectives or outcomes are built in to their portfolio system so students can load and share content that demonstrates the objectives. What remains the same with these proprietary portfolios

is the ability to assess students and programs in a variety of ways . . . .

ePortfolio solutions, like ePortaro and the Blackboard Content System, provide a flexible framework for students to submit drafts and final
versions of assignments, either through digital files or online forms.

Through the use of a Master Academic Planner (MAP), the Epsilen software provides a multi-dimensional matrix that is dynamically and automatically configured to support individual student needs for learning, advisement and assessment. (ePortfolio Consortium, 2003, p. 43)

Of course, while these systems provide ease of use and reduce the need for extensive training, there are limitations on generic programs created for wide use.3

The third possibility for eportfolios comes in the form of open-source portfolios, such as Sakai, or self-designed portfolios. Using web space provided by institutions, free web space, or programs online that allow for free hosting – such as blogs, wikis, etc – documents can be loaded, designed, and shared. Sites such as Blogger, Wordpress, or PBWiki allow students to create accounts and design an interactive portfolio space that can be shared with instructors, peers, and friends. This method of portfolio building gives writers the freedom to design their portfolio space without institutional or programmatic restrictions. At the same time, of course, these spaces can be used on a larger level by putting into place portfolio requirements (i.e., each portfolio must have “x” number of pages, or videos should be uploaded using “y” program). The most obvious problem to such a portfolio system is support. While blogs, wikis, and free webhosting websites may market themselves as user friendly, the fact that they are “free” often means that they don’t come with technical support.

While all possibilities for portfolios have benefits and flaws, and though there may be alternative options, these are perhaps the three most common types. Just as paper-based portfolios may ask students to use binders, programmatic-produced folders, or binder clips,

3 Potential limitations of eportfolios will be addressed in more details in future chapters.
eportfolios differ from institution to institution and class to class. At the same time, in understanding eportfolios, it is important to understand how they are used in the classroom. In some cases, eportfolios may be used as part of an assignment or a final project, while in other cases they may be an expectation kept up throughout the entire semester. Though the term “electronic portfolio” is used to define a certain type of assessment tool, the truth of the matter is that “electronic portfolio” is a complex term with a long history in scholarly publications and with many implicit and explicit beliefs that accompany it.

The fact remains that when programs move to incorporate multimodal assignments they are faced with many issues and questions that must be addressed. Eportfolios continue to be an answer. Assessment scholarship has had to address the changes in the classroom, and again it is changing to address the changes to not only how we teach, but also what we teach. The significance of this move towards multimodality is one that can no longer be denied, and as scholars have been suggesting, eportfolios are an important way to assess the changes. To understand how portfolios can best do this though, it is important to understand the voices that have been a part of the discussion to this point and that continue to influence and inform our understanding of electronic portfolios.

Just as the process movement ushered in portfolio assessment, the emerging shift in writing again is changing the assessment needs of the field. Paper-based portfolios became a way for teachers to assess the process of writing including prewriting, writing, and rewriting as well as self-reflection. What these paper-based portfolios cannot do, however, is assess the new modes of writing we are asking students to produce. Whipple (2009) suggests that as a field we must realize that no longer are students just prewriting, writing, and rewriting; the new process movement is “preproduction,” “production,” and “postproduction,” and current assessment
methods do not take this into account. This new process approach associated with multimodal writing is becoming ever more significant in writing programs across the country, and though “the majority of multimodal composition [is] occurring at the individual level and not necessarily in program-wide efforts” (Anderson et. al, 2006, p. 69), programs are looking for answers to multimodal assessment problems.

Eportfolios are being forwarded as a response to the new, digital process movement. Institutions across the country are moving towards this assessment method for individual classrooms, programs, and even institutionally. Even so, these moves cannot be taken lightly, just as the decision to include multimodality in the classroom must be thoughtfully implemented. While the scholarship advocating portfolios and eportfolios is broad, there are clear deficiencies in the level of detail that scholarship is addressing. The act of beginning an eportfolio initiative is a difficult one, and the need for careful consideration for all involved in an eportfolio initiative informs this study. Implementing electronic portfolio affects not only classroom practice, but also student, instructor, and institutional preparation. Additionally, such a change can have a wide-reaching affect across a university, specifically when an entire program moves to utilize this new assessment model.

In the chapter that follows, I begin to explore the affects of an eportfolio initiative and discuss my ethnographic research conducted in the spring of 2009 at Midwestern University. This chapter introduces the institution, the first-year writing programs history, and the events that led to the decision to pilot electronic portfolios. In addition, the chapter gives a larger look at not only what the institution has done, but why the institution was selected, how data was collected, and also how the program may stand as an example for other institutions looking towards similar assessment transitions.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS, METHODOLOGIES, AND DATA COLLECTION

In the previous chapter I situated the discussion of portfolios, both paper-based and electronic, as a means to better understand the significance of this research. Chapter two focuses on how portfolio scholarship has evolved to accommodate changing values in assessment and the teaching of writing. It continues by considering how and why eportfolios have been one response by the field to the need for methods of assessing multimodality in the writing classroom. In this chapter then, I will move on to discuss the specific site of study for my research of one institution’s transition to electronic portfolios. This discussion of the institution adds to the deep description of the research and also situates Midwestern University as an example for other administrators and teachers of writing to better understand what an eportfolio initiative may look like.

While my past experiences had largely informed my interest in electronic portfolios and assessing multimodal texts, when it came to deciding on an approach I was less sure. The idea of collecting data seemed cold and impersonal. As a scholar and teacher, I embraced my roles because of the personal connection with the areas of study and my students. I valued the feminist approach to classroom activities where students’ voices were heard and valued, where knowledge making was shared, and where I worked collaboratively with students. Even in developing my familiarity with the research being conducted in the field I found myself drawn to articles where participants felt “real” rather than articles with cold, static results-based studies. Because of this, ethnographic research and case studies both appealed to me.

I saw ethnographically informed research as a way to better understand the multiple perspectives in my research. Because a portfolio initiative effects multiple stakeholders, including students, instructors, and administrators, I knew that it would be important to gain a
comprehensive understanding of the writing program community. This understanding drew me to case studies and ethnography because both methodologies rely on culturally grounded narratives where the research “author-izes” the data (Newkirk, 1992, p. 135). Ethnographically inspired research became a way to study, explore, and describe the culture of the entire group. The use of observations and interviews support this methodological choice because both data collection methods, in conjunction with textual analysis, come together to present a deep description of how such a transition affects multiple stakeholders and creates a rich picture of what a change to electronic portfolios may mean.

At the heart of my approach to this research is my belief in the value of equality and fair representation. Feminist theories of research guide my approach to the interview process, observations, and other means of data collection as well as my representation of my study. As a researcher it has been and continues to be my goal to construct the picture of the findings from the ethnographically informed research with input and feedback from various participants. Rather than merely representing the study, showing the depths and complicated relationships between participant, institution, the university, and scholarship on the teaching of writing and eportfolios allows for the description that follows.

Considering this, the chapter that follows aims to elaborate on my method and data collection as well as the site of study. This chapter begins by discussing again the research questions that guided this study and then creates a rich picture of the larger university, the writing program, and the particular classes that participated in my study. Afterword, I discuss the methodological approach as well as particular methods of data collection, including interview, observation, and textual analysis. The chapter concludes by focusing on the variables and limitations of this study.
Research Questions

As mentioned in chapter one, the research for this project is guided by several questions including:

• What are the benefits and challenges of eportfolios?

• What can eportfolios do that paper-based portfolios do not?

These questions look at the benefits and challenges of electronic portfolios and how eportfolios are similar or different from the traditional, paper-based portfolio. Largely addressed in chapter two, questions one and two act as a way to situate the use of and importance of eportfolios. Because of the changes to writing, the types of texts that students are producing, and the spaces we communicate, it is important that classroom practices take these into account. Eportfolios, as forwarded in chapter 2, are one way that scholars have suggested instructors of writing assess multimodal assignments.

Paper-based portfolios answered questions of how to show the value of the writing process. Because portfolios demonstrate various aspects of the writing process – often times including revision and reflection – they have long been used as a means to assess the writing process and demonstrate the value of process. In fact, portfolios became an accepted and widely used method of assessment because they demonstrate “what the portfolio keeper has learned . . . [and] convince an audience of the portfolio keeper’s achievements, abilities, or talents” (Reynolds & Rice, 2006, p. 3). As the field began to focus on preparing students not just with the skills “to produce traditional texts using computer technology, but also to produce documents appropriate to the global and dispersed reach of the web” (WIDE Research Center Collective, 2005) we also looked for new ways to assess these texts. Electronic portfolios became the space where multimodal texts and traditional texts could be equally represented and assessed.
Furthermore, in eportfolios writers could still demonstrate the traditional writing process, the portfolio-keeping process (Yancey, 2001, p. 20), and the new proposed process – including preproduction, production, and post production of non-traditional texts (Whipple, 2009). Eportfolios accommodate multimodality in ways that traditional assessment methods can’t. Students can load documents as well as videos, presentations, podcasts, and more, and both product and process can be fairly represented and assessed.

While these benefits were clear and began to address the initial research questions, three questions remain. These include:

- How are institutions/programs incorporating eportfolios?
- How might a program incorporate eportfolios based on these findings?
- How would this change our understanding of assessment, instructor training, and student training?

These questions guide the remainder of my study. To answer these questions I have formed a thick description of Midwestern University based on my observation, interviews, and textual analysis. In focusing on a single program’s transition to electronic portfolios, I consider multiple perspectives in such a change and aim to better understand how these changes influence understandings of portfolio assessment, training, and preparation.

These research questions and the discussions in this larger project come together as a way to better understand how eportfolios are changing assessment and how these changes must be addressed. Modifying programmatic assessment requires support and backing from various levels including administrative, faculty, and student. In order to understand how to make such a move, this study shows the choices that one institution made and attends to the challenges and successes the program, instructors, and students faced.
The goal of this project is to develop a deeper understanding of how eportfolios work on a programmatic level. Because eportfolios are a place where computers and writing, assessment, and teaching meet, this project brings together these elements to better understand the changes the field faces, while also exploring one answer to the changes. Examining multiple perspectives becomes a way to respond to concerns and criticisms about the use of multimodality in the writing classroom and also address and acknowledge challenges and successes in preparation, training, instruction, and assessment. In answering the previously noted research questions, the answers come together to better understand why eportfolios, and this discussion demonstrates how a specific program is incorporating eportfolios and how other institutions might follow based on the findings.

This study examines a small writing program at a private university, but in order to truly understand, it is important to develop a clearer picture of the various elements. This includes the institution itself, the first-year writing program, and the people involved in the initiative including administrators, instructors, portfolio evaluators, and students. In what follows, I discuss each of these participants and the roles they play in the larger study.

Site of Study

When a small writing program at a private, midwestern liberal arts university decided to pilot multimodal assignments in their first-semester course, changes to assessment needed equal piloting. According to the University’s website, the enrollment during the 2008-2009 school year was 4,400 with more than 3,100 undergraduate students and more than 1,300 graduate students (Office of Public Information, 2009). Midwestern University boasts a 17:1 student-to-faculty ratio and 90% of the students receive some level of financial aid. Students can major in one of more than 60 majors, and there are also eight masters programs and two doctoral
programs (Office of Public Information, 2009). While the institution itself does not necessarily translate to the majority of institutions across the country, its size and student population makes it representative of many smaller, midwestern institutions. Furthermore, first-year students at the Midwestern University are required to take a first-year writing sequence similar to students at other institutions across the nation.

All undergraduate students at The Midwestern University (referred to as Midwestern from this point forward) must meet a two-semester writing course requirement. Ten full-time faculty members and approximately five adjuncts teach these writing courses. Because these courses are graduation requirements, at any one time, nearly 1,000 students are enrolled in a writing course (Tulley, 2009). All students complete a first-year composition requirement typically during their first year on campus and at least one second-level writing course, often during their second year. Students can place into College Writing I or College Writing II when entering the university, but all students must pass College Writing II (ENGL 106) and a 200-level writing course in order to graduate. While some majors require specific second-level writing courses, students do have options including writing and literature, technical communication, electronic literature and writing, or electronic rhetoric and writing. These courses create a common experience for students across the University, much like at other institutions, and become a place for students to explore and expand their writing skills. Because nearly all of Midwestern’s students are required to take ENGL 106, this study focuses on this course, and ENGL 107 as explained later. The following section explains the University’s first-year writing program, the goals of ENGL 106 and 107, and further explains the participants in this study.
Midwestern’s mission “is to equip our students for meaningful lives and productive careers” (Midwestern University’s undergraduate handbook, 2007, p. 7). The University prides itself on being “vitaliy concerned with the growth, development, and success of each student, and highly responsive to emerging opportunities for innovation in [their] educational programs, the learning environment [they] create, and the organizational process of [their] institution” (Midwestern University’s undergraduate handbook, 2007, p. 7). This mission and the goals of the institution cross over into the writing program as well. Again, all students at Midwestern must take and pass ENGL 106 College Writing II – Academic Writing and Research. According to the English Department’s website, 106 is a course that “introduces students to writing processes and prose conventions common to many academic disciplines. . . provides opportunities for students to participate in one or more of the ongoing conversations in particular communities of writers. . . . emphasizes analytic and persuasive writing based on critical reading of nonfiction prose” (“ENGL 106,” 2007). Students who pass ENGL 106 are expected to have met the following learning outcomes:

1. The ability to use flexible composing processes that are well-suited to the types of writing produced by professionals in the academic community
2. The ability to revise your own writing in response to the feedback provided by readers
3. An understanding of how the rhetorical relationships among writer, audience, and message should influence your writing
4. The ability to use writing to sharpen your analytic and critical-thinking skills
5. The ability to summarize, paraphrase, and quote sources effectively
6. The ability to draw on readings and your own experiences in order to verify, critique, and extend the perspectives offered by other writers
7. The ability to construct reasonable and persuasive defenses of your positions when they are critiqued by advocates of other positions

8. The ability to construct a well-organized essay that contributes to an on-going discussion about a particular issue by clearly stating your position on the subject and then supporting and developing that position with reasonable arguments and examples, consideration of other points of view, and effective use of sources

9. The ability to analyze the writing conventions of particular discourse communities and to produce texts that conform to those conventions, including the conventions of fair usage of sources and formal documentation detailed in either the MLA or APA publication guides

10. The ability to edit your own writing to conform to the spelling, usage, punctuation, and style conventions of standard American English (ENGL 106, 2007).

Like many schools across the country, Midwestern’s writing program asks students to research and take part in various writing situations as a means to prepare them for future careers and future writing in the academy. While Midwestern’s population is considerably smaller than many schools, the focus of the writing program is justifiably similar to not only other institutions of both larger and smaller size but also corresponds closely to the requirements set out in the *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition* (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2000). According to this statement, at the end of first-year writing, students should have an understanding of purpose, process, knowledge of conventions, composing in electronic environments, and critical thinking, reading, and writing (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2000). Midwestern’s learning outcomes largely correspond to these outcomes as demonstrated in the chart below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WPA Outcome</th>
<th>Midwestern University’s Learning Outcome (by number)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>3, 7, 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>1, 2, 8,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of Conventions</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composing in Electronic Environments</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing</td>
<td>4, 5, 6,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 How ENGL 106 (2007) learning outcomes correspond to WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (2000).

While clearly some of the learning outcomes for ENGL 106 can fall under multiple headings (as evidence by learning outcome number 8), each ENGL 106 learning outcome corresponds to at least one suggested category set forward by the Council of Writing Program Administrators. While Midwestern’s writing program may be much smaller than other programs, and while their organization may be different, the objectives of this program correspond with national standards. Because of this, Midwestern’s writing program becomes a good space for the following research, even if the size, assessment method, technology, and support may not be as representative of other institutions.

In assessing student learning, Midwestern’s ENGL 106 course uses a plus/minus grading scale with “the additions of an ‘NC,’ and ‘P’ grades. ‘NC’ stands for no credit and doesn’t affect the GPA. ‘P’ stands for passing and is only given to qualifying non-native speakers” (“ENGL 106,” 2007). The “NC,” or no credit, grade is “earned by students who attend class regularly and complete all assignments but whose writing skills have not yet met the minimum level of writing competency required to pass ENGL 106” (“ENGL 106,” 2007). If students receive an “NC” they must retake the course. Those students may sign up to take the course again or may sign up for ENGL 107, College Writing II Tutorial – Academic Writing and Research.
ENG 107 is “[a]n alternative version of ENGL 106. This course is designed to provide students with intensive instruction in order to satisfy the requirements for ENGL 106. Only students who earn an – NC in ENGL 106 or 107 the last time they took the course qualify for ENGL 107” (“Spring 2010 English courses,” 2009). The learning outcomes for ENGL 107 correspond with those of ENGL 106, but unlike retaking ENGL 106, students who sign up for ENGL 107 are allowed to write new papers and revise a paper from their previous, non-passing portfolio. This means that students are allowed to build off of the work they did previously. Typically only one section of ENGL 107 is offered per semester, so some students who receive a grade of “NC” do retake ENGL 106.

Midwestern has used portfolio assessment in their College Writing II courses for years. Their portfolios fall into the best-works category of portfolios (Reynolds & Rice, 2006, pp. 2-3) where students are expected to select, collect, and reflect on writing throughout the semester. Student portfolios include all of the papers written throughout the semester. Along with revised and polished copies of each essay, students must also include rough drafts (with instructor feedback), copies of sources, and a final revision of the unit 2 paper, a standard assignment in all ENGL 106 course where students “offer [their] own position concerning an issue important to our society and/or a particular discipline and then support that position with good reasons backed with examples, quotations and paraphrases from sources, and other evidence” (The College of Liberal Arts, 2007). The portfolio process provides a means of collaborative assessment of the work done in first-year writing courses. The department uses a standard rubric during portfolio evaluations “containing four loose categories of ‘Thesis and Development,’ ‘Organization,’ ‘Documentation,’ and ‘Mechanics’ to assess several papers as a body of work” (Tulley, 2009).
As a means to reduce the number of clearly passing portfolios, Midwestern introduced an exemption rule where students whose major paper in their portfolio received an 85% or higher and who met all other course requirements (including attendance, completing all assignments, prewriting, drafting, revising, peer review, and whose portfolio demonstrates exit level criteria) would not have to go through the full portfolio review process (The College of Liberal Arts, 2007). Students whose major paper grade average fell between 85% or 73% were still required to submit their portfolios during the final week of classes for a committee portfolio read, and students whose major paper grades fell below 73% or who did not complete the class or meet other requirements were required to reenroll in the ENGL 106 (The College of Liberal Arts, 2007). Requiring students to submit portfolios in this category asks the students to revisit their work and demonstrate a true understanding not only of writing conventions at an exit level (Hamp-Lyons and Condon, 2000, p. 15; Reynolds & Rice, 2006, pp. 2-3; White, 1994, p. 28) but also to bring practice in line with theory – particularly the recursive nature of writing (Sommers, 1991). This process allows instructors to inform their students whether they have met the requirements for portfolios and whether they are eligible to submit a portfolio. Additionally, this process reduces the number of clearly passing portfolios and the portfolios that clearly do not meet the programmatic standards.

Students whose major paper average falls between the 73% to 84% range must submit their portfolios to their instructors, and during final exams, instructors redistribute their students’ portfolios for the committee portfolio reading process. Anywhere from one to three additional ENGL 106 instructors then read each submitted portfolio using the departmental portfolio evaluation rubric. Fellow faculty members make a holistic judgment whether the portfolio does or does not demonstrate the learning objectives of the program. If the first reader feels that the
portfolio does not meet the passing level, a second and/or third reader will read the portfolio the following day until a consensus is reached. Even after a decision is made, instructors reserve the right to appeal readers’ decisions, though according to the director of writing, that happens rarely.

In addition to implementing the “85% rule” to their portfolio system, Midwestern’s writing program has experienced additional changes. The department appointed Dr. Catherine Teague as the new Director of Writing recently, and among other changes, Dr. Teague implemented the Multimodal Composition Initiative, where instructors have the option to incorporate a multimodal assignment as one of the three major assignments for College Writing II. Teague saw this as a way to introduce multimodality into the classroom without disrupting “the primary currency in other courses” at the University – the traditional academic paper (Tulley, 2009).

Beginning in Spring 2008, the Writing Program began piloting multimodal assignments in the ENGL 106 courses. The longstanding requirement of ENGL 106 was for students to write and revise four essays. The aforementioned change, however, gave instructors a choice for essay four; instructors could assign essay four as a traditional essay or as a multimodal assignment. Those who took advantage of the multimodal option had students create websites, argumentative video essays, and public service announcements. This proposed change was not required of all courses, and instructors ultimately had the choice to assign the traditional paper or multimodal assignment. While there likely was some exploration, instructors who chose to have their students create non-traditional assignments were doing so out of their own interest.

As briefly alluded before, Midwestern’s Multimodal Composition Initiative was a three-step process that was the program’s own pilot study. This process began with a small selection
of classes testing multimodal assignments in their writing classrooms. This included two classes, one ENGL 106 and one advanced English course, replacing a traditional assignment with a digital option (Tulley, 2009). Students in the ENGL 106 course created a standard, academic essay where they took a position on an assigned topic. For the final project in the class, however, students took their arguments and created websites using Microsoft FrontPage. In justifying the assignment, Teague argued “[b]ecause initial research was already complete. . . [the website assignment] allowed students to focus on learning web page design, find pictures and sounds, and develop a web text that ‘remixed’ the print assignment in a variety of ways” (Tulley, 2009). The second phase of the initiative was a more widespread use of multimodal assignments in the classroom, and was the phase of the larger process where the data collection for this dissertation took place. Midwestern’s third phase in this transition will be to standardize the evaluation of multimodal elements in ENGL 104 (College Writing I) and ENGL 106 and 107 (Tulley, 2009).

This third phase is an important one to the larger discussion at hand. As the program moves to include alternative modes of writing, the standardized evaluation that Midwestern is accustomed to must change. Before the introduction of electronic portfolios, it was assumed that students would “put their non-print work on CD[s] and insert the CD in a final paper-based portfolio to turn in,” and then the non-traditional text would be “read” by the evaluator on her/his computer (Tulley, 2009). The idea of electronic portfolios, however, was always a move that was part of the discussion. In fact, in introducing the phases, Teague suggested that “[l]ater phases will likely explore the possibility of using electronic portfolios through the Content System available through Blackboard classroom management software already available” (Tulley, 2009).
While instructors were able to easily assess non-text products in the classroom, during the portfolio review it was more difficult to do so. The departmental rubric used during the portfolio process does not currently evaluate qualities of “Delivery,” “Design,” or “Audience,” all of which are important in assessing multimodal, and even traditional, texts (Tulley, 2009). This speaks to the larger concern with assessing non-traditional texts. Borton and Huot (2007) stress that, much like traditional texts, assessment should be rhetorically based in understandings of composition (p. 99). While Midwestern’s rubric did not consider delivery, design, or audience before the multimodal component, these elements have been valued in assessment for first-year writing programs across the country. The WPA outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (2000) says that students should be able to:

- Respond to the needs of different audiences.
- Learn common formats for different kinds of texts.
- Develop knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics.

In other words, the necessity of assessing design, delivery, and audience, as well as other elements, are not unique to multimodal texts, nor are they necessarily new concerns. They are, however, of increased importance for the writing program at Midwestern. As the ways writing is being taught changes, the assessment method must evolve as well, but changes to wide-scale, standardized assessment are difficult. Because assessment is often habit-forming, asking a department to consider new components in portfolio evaluation or to use a new rubric will likely be met with some hesitation. Further concerns rest in how to physically or virtually share the portfolios.
Burning projects to CDs was one option to accommodate the portfolio process, but there were still potential bumps along the way that had to be considered. Because Midwestern employs adjunct faculty who share an office, not all instructors are guaranteed computers during the process. Also, because instructors are not required to teach multimodal assignments, some may feel uncomfortable evaluating such products during finals week. Because of lack of training, interest, comfort or any number of other reasons, many instructors choose, for now, to teach a traditional paper for the fourth assignment in ENGL 106. While these instructors do have the choice to abstain from making such a move in their classroom, at portfolio time this becomes more difficult because it is possible that an instructor will receive a CD or multimodal portfolio. While the program works to consider how to address these problems, they continue to move forward, and beginning in the spring of 2009 several courses piloted electronic portfolios created using the Content Management system available on Blackboard.

Content Management System

Four fulltime faculty members piloted digital portfolios during the spring semester. In an attempt to understand how eportfolio are being used in the classroom, and to gain a better understanding of the transition from multiple perspectives, I worked closely with two of the four instructors who took part in this pilot program, Janet Longman and Catherine Teague, to better understand what it means to transition to electronic portfolios. My research included interviewing both instructors, observing classroom activities and discussions, interviewing students, and collecting and analyzing the digital artifacts created during the class.

All instructors who piloted the portfolio system used the Content Management System on Blackboard. Each student at the Midwestern University has access to Blackboard. Within that system, all students have access to a file-storage area called the Content System. According to a
student resource for this system, “[t]he Blackboard Content System offers [students] an integrated system for storing, sharing and publishing [their] content” (Academic Technology Services, 2009). Students in the courses that piloted the digital portfolios were asked to keep their files on the Content System. All files were stored under a “My Content” option within the larger system. The Content System then became a place for students to not only create portfolios but also to back up files in case of a hard drive crash or a lost flash drive. Also, while students in ENGL 106 and 107 stored their English papers here, they could also store other papers because the Content System allowed students to store, manage, and share documents and files from any course.

Within the Content System students also have an option to create a portfolio through a “My Portfolio” button; “The portfolio tool allows students to collect and organize their documents on the Content System into a custom web page” (Academic Technology Services, 2009). In doing so, students must add the documents and files they wish to share to their “My Content” section. The “My Portfolio” option includes a “Portfolio Wizard” which prompts students through several steps to create their portfolio. There is also a manual option to create a portfolio. Both options create a standard portfolio that mimics in design a standard Blackboard course shell. Like a course shell, students can customize the titles of the buttons, include links or images, change colors and fonts, and create new pages. The layout of the digital portfolio also mirrors a course shell; digital portfolios have links on the left side of the page (either as buttons or text links), and page content appears in the center frame. Once portfolios are created students can share their portfolios with their instructor, portfolio evaluators, or friends and family.

Because of this common portfolio option, students in classes where they created digital portfolios used a standard platform. The use of commercial or proprietary portfolio systems is
often considered a wise move. These prefabricated systems reduce costs for universities because technical support is outside the institution (Stefanie, Mason, & Pegler, 2007, pp. 118-119), and these software options allow for institutions, teachers, and students to link between goals, outcomes, and artifacts while considering various goals, audiences, and access (Barrett, 2000).

Another commonality between the students who created electronic portfolios was that they were all enrolled in College Writing II courses. In the two classes I observed, students were required to create an electronic portfolio, but the other requirements differed. The courses were both taught by full-time faculty members. While neither class met exclusively in computer labs throughout the semester, both classes were able to meet in a reserved computer lab during the final weeks of the semester when students were asked to work on their multimodal projects and composing and compiling their portfolios. Furthermore, because each course met the College Writing II requirement, all students were expected to produce the same level of writing in order to be submitted to the portfolio review process or to be exempted from the process. Even though the student populations were different, the types of assignments required were different, and the instructors were different, the courses shared many similarities that make them comparable courses.

ENGL 106

Dr. Longman, an Associate Professor of English, taught the section of ENGL 106 that I observed. With a background in literature, she teaches upper-level English courses in technical writing, Shakespeare, the English Language, as well as ENGL 106. As one of the first to pilot electronic portfolios, Dr. Longman taught an honors section of College Writing II in the Fall of 2008 where students met the basic course requirements and created a digital portfolio to fulfill
the honors requirement. In the Spring of 2009, Dr. Longman had experience teaching digital portfolios and with the Blackboard Content System used to host the portfolios.

According to the Spring 2009, ENGL 106 syllabus supplied by Dr. Longman, the course was broken down into three units including one on debates on public issues, one on an independent research topic, and the multimedia portfolio. In addition to attendance/participation (50 points), the assignments for the course included a paper for unit one (100 points), an annotated bibliography (50 points), a research proposal (50 points), a unit two paper (200 points), and a digital portfolio (100 points). While most of the requirements for this course were standard across the program, the digital portfolio replaced the traditional fourth assignment.

The digital portfolio requirements for this course included the following:

- A title page with basic information including the student’s name, instructor’s name, class, section, and semester.
- A portfolio introduction page with an introduction geared toward the portfolio evaluator. Students were told that “This text SHOULD NOT appear as a written paper. Do something else fun and be creative. Maybe make a powerpoint, connect us to your webpage, do a movie, etc. It should be multimedia, not the standard academic text” (Longman, Portfolio Introduction, 2009).
- A link to the course syllabus.
- Separate pages for students’ argument paper, proposal and annotated bibliography, and final paper. These three separate pages, or buttons, needed to include:
  - An introduction where students explained the assignment and their approach to the assignment.
  - A link to the assignment sheet.
• A link to the final paper.
• A link to sample process work.
• A reflection of the student’s essay explaining her/his reaction to the initial paper, the strengths and weaknesses of the essay, her/his revision plan, and response and reaction to the revision the student completed.
• And a final reflection that, like the portfolio introduction, was to be a multimedia document that covered what the student learned from the class, what the student planned to work on in their future writing course, what her/his next writing course would be, and how she/he would apply what she/he learned to future writing.

Each of these elements made up not only the portfolio but also the final assignment, since students were required to compose a substantial amount of additional text (including introduction, final reflection, and individual introductions and reflection for each assignment).

ENGL 107

In the Spring semester in 2009, Dr. Teague taught an ENGL 107 course with 21 registered students. Dr. Teague, an associate professor of English, was also the Director of the Writing Program. In addition to teaching various sections of College Writing I and II, Dr. Teague has taught courses on processes and the teaching of writing, electronic rhetoric and writing, electronic literature and writing, and digital writing. As a digital rhetoric scholar and the Director of the Writing Program at Midwestern, Teague’s experiences and interest in the role of technology in the writing classroom made it a good fit for her students to create multimodal assignments and use the digital portfolios.

Grading for this ENGL 107 class was based on participation (15%), a reflective portfolio introduction (5%), a revised argument (20%), a revised analysis (15%), a new argument (30%),
and a multimodal argument (15%). The revised argument and revised analysis assignments asked students to either build off of essays written in past ENGL 106 classes or to start new essays from scratch. The third essay, the new argument, was an assignment that asked students to compose a new argument based on a provided set of readings. The fourth project of the semester was the multimodal argument, where students were expected to “take the subject of Paper 3 and make [their] argument[s] in a different way through a multimedia tool such as PowerPoint or MovieMaker” (English 107.01 College Writing II Tutorial, 2009).

Unlike the ENGL 106 course, Teague’s student portfolios were not the multimodal focus and instead students worked to compose video arguments using Movie Maker. The portfolios students created in ENGL 107 included a brief introduction that welcomed the portfolio evaluator to the portfolio. Each portfolio then included four pages or buttons that were links to the writer’s reflective introduction, revised argument, revised analysis, and final argument. When evaluators clicked on these links or buttons they were prompted to open writer’s essays that were attached as Word documents. Teague’s students were expected to name their final argument essay “Final Argument” so that the portfolio reader would begin with that essay, but otherwise students largely had control over the design elements of their portfolios.

Portfolio Evaluators

As previously mentioned, portfolios that are not exempt but are considered passing, are evaluated by at least one additional instructor. During this study, digital portfolios were assessed by the four instructors who piloted the eportfolios. In addition to Drs. Longman and Teague, Professor Theresa Roberts, an assistant professor at Midwestern for twenty-five years, and Professor Darren Evans, an assistant professor of English, were the digital portfolio readers. During their reading process, Roberts and Evans both allowed me to sit in their offices and listen
to their responses to the digital portfolio evaluation process and ask questions about their reactions to the difference in reading traditional paper-based portfolios and the electronic portfolios.

Students

The students who took part in this study were a diverse group and included first-year college students, returning college students, and upper-level students who had not yet completed the ENGL 106 writing requirement. While further discussions of some of the students appears in the following chapter, it is important to note that each student had access to a computer, Internet access, and access to instructional support through their teacher and the Student Technology Center, a student-run office on campus that offers workshops on various computer topics as well as individual student support and tutoring.

Ethnographic Research

This qualitative, descriptive research modeled on ethnographic work in anthropology and sociology, aims to create a rich picture of an entire environment by observing participants in context (Lauer & Asher, 1988, p.39). Ethnographic research “is an approach to learning about the social and cultural life of communities, institutions, and other settings that . . . [i]s investigative. . . [u]ses the researcher as the primary tool of data collection. . . [and e]mphasizes and builds on the perspectives of the people in the research setting” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 1). This method, used by rhetoric and writing scholars such as Beverly Moss (2002, 1992), Wendy Bishop (1999), Lester Faigley (1985), Roxanne Mountford (1986), and Shirley Brice Heath (Heath, Street, & Mills 2008), allows researchers to account for various factors in their data collection in order to create a fuller picture of the situation being explained.
Scholars have supported the use of ethnographic research because “[t]his methodology not only allows for but emphasizes the context that contribute to acts of writing and written products. That is, ethnographers who study writing, literacy, and so on, study writing as it occurs in its specific cultural setting. A study that ignores the social context of language use is not an ethnography” (Moss, 1992, p. 156). Lauer and Asher (1988) situate ethnographic research as a way to conduct qualitative research that “examines an entire environments, looking at subjects in context” in order to help the researcher “understand human behavior which occurs in a natural setting” (p. 39). Because of the importance of context, ethnographically based research in writing classrooms allows for a better understanding of circumstances and situations that influence interactions. In order to understand the complexities of a department-wide change to assessment, full or partial ethnographic research is useful because of the complete picture it encourages.

Because this study aims to understand a wide-scale change to assessment, and because of my feminist approach to research, a quasi-ethnographic method was the most appropriate. While this study was not a true ethnography because of time constraints, my goal as a researcher was to produce a rich picture from the collected data and, through the use of “extensive observations, [to] generate hypotheses, validate them by returning to the data, and produce thick descriptions [and] detailed accounts” of behaviors in a specific context (Lauer & Asher, 1988, p. 39). So while not a full ethnography, my intentions and approach to data collection are informed by ethnography. I observed two separate class settings for a limited amount of time, but because of time constraints of the research and the institution’s progress with eportfolio, this research cannot claim to fully understand all of the behaviors of participants. This research, has, however, included many elements of ethnographic designs and process to better understand the transition.
As a researcher, I was observing, interviewing, and collecting data as an outsider from another program. While I sat in class and observed classroom discussions and interactions, my role as a researcher was clear from the beginning. Because my data collection did not begin until after the second-half of the semester (when students were introduced to their multimodal assignments and the digital portfolios), students were aware of my physical presence in addition to my explanation of my intentions. Although I was clearly an outside observer, my role was largely passive in the class. I sat amongst students during my visits and took notes.

In introducing participants, including instructor, students, and portfolio evaluators, to my project, I explained that because I would be representing them in my research I would value their feedback on how they were portrayed in the project. As a feminist scholar and researcher I believe it is important, as Blakeslee, Cole, and Conefrey suggest, to “view . . . [participants] as contributing constituencies who engage actively in our studies and in our textualizations of our finding” (1996, p. 151). Because of power differentials and power struggles, feminist ethnographers “are conscious of constructing, not merely representing” the ethnographic narratives (Chiseri-Strater, 1999, p. 127). In an attempt to ensure that all participants are comfortable with my representations of our conversations, their works, and my perceived observations, sections of this larger project have been offered and shared with those involved.

This sharing was my way to ensure that my approach considers the social construction at the center of inquiry, where the distribution of power and privilege are central to understanding a given context (Lather, 1991, p. 71). Power and privilege play an important role in understanding context because of the various groups involved, as well as my own situation in relation to the institution, participants, and study. It was my goal never to make participants feel like “subjects” being “watched” and “studied.” Working with instructors, sitting amongst students, making my
intentions clear from the beginning, and remaining open to questions, communication, and input from various participants all helped create a more equal stance. Just as the writing program administrator must answer to university administrators as well as instructors, faculty, students, and scholarly conversations in rhetoric and composition, as a researcher I must also ensure that my understandings of these various communities do not interfere with the data. Because my connection to this institution and because these people are very real, my approach to this study allowed me to consider these relationships while presenting my data.

As a means to understand how an institution moves toward electronic portfolios, this research explores the situation from many sides. A combination of observations, interviews, and textual analysis have been used to collect data, consider various stakeholders effected by the transition, and create a description of what others might keep in mind when transitioning to eportfolios. Triangulating the research and “returning to the data, and [producing] thick descriptions” (Lauer & Asher, 1988, p. 39) validate the findings of this study. While the research conducted for this project is specific to one program, the findings from this research have been used to formulate broader implications beyond this single institution.

I observed a total of fourteen classes (nine ENGL 106 courses and five ENGL 107 classes). These observations took place almost exclusively in a computer lab and included classroom discussions, instructional classes, and student work time. This provided a context for the instructions students received in creating their digital portfolios and also student’s understandings and working with the digital portfolio system.

To extend the picture that this research provides, I also met individually with both instructors and a total of five student participants. Interviews with instructors provided a deeper understanding of their pedagogical and practical beliefs about multimodal assignments, digital
portfolios, and the teaching of writing. Interviews with students allowed them to share their expectations, experiences, and responses to the various types of writing, including multimodal, and writing assessment. At the end of the semester during portfolio evaluation I also interviewed two additional portfolio reviewers who assessed and taught eportfolios. Because, aside from minimum content, the digital portfolios were not standardized across the department, the responses and reflections of the portfolio evaluators provided an interesting look at how eportfolios are viewed by “outsiders.”

Finally, a number of students shared their digital portfolios. This sharing process provided a rich resource for how eportfolios differ and also what eportfolios do that perhaps paper-based portfolios do not. Aside from common reasons given by administrators, including easy storage and retrieval and development of technology skills (Springfield, 2001, p. 71), electronic portfolios become a space to collect and reflect on non-traditional texts. Through textual analysis and visual analysis, these portfolios create a contrast to the paper portfolios and demonstrate the individuality, or lack there of, associated with digital portfolios.

Data Analysis

Feminist ethics of reciprocity, honesty, accountability, responsibility, and equality each guided the analysis process. From garnering input from participants, I remained upfront with my portrayal of them, my experience observing them, and their shared experiences.

Specifically, I worked with each participant and shared my analysis of our interviews, my reporting on observations, and my analysis of relevant textual materials. Participants were asked to provide feedback on the representation I provided and the findings I presented. At the same time, I included my own experience in the data analysis process when relevant because of my relationship with the institution, the Writing Program Administrator, and the instructors. Using
multiple approaches and working with participants allowed me to acknowledge and accommodate my own biases as much as possible. Because I went into the analysis process without a clear hypothesis, I allowed the data collected through observation, interviews, and textual analysis to naturally result in the findings discussed in the final chapter.

This feminist approach allowed for a self-reflexive approach to the larger questions. I remained conscious of my biases and worked to address these. This reflexive approach to research allowed me to consider the complex social nature of such research. Through the various methods of data collection, my intention was to “reconstruct . . . [the] characteristics of the . . . group under study” (LeCompte and Schensul 130). Even in attempting to recreate the complexities of this specific time period, however, there were uncontrolled variable.

Variables and Limitations

There are several key variables that need to be acknowledged before moving forward with the discussion of this research. As already touched on, both instructors whose classes I observed were experienced teachers and had previously taught multimodal assignments and assigned digital portfolios. It is understandable that instructors “feel confident about teaching students how to compose alphabetic texts primarily because we are so familiar with those forms” (Selfe, 2004, p. 71), but because the instructors to pilot electronic portfolios had previous experience with multimodal assignments, their learning curve was less significant than it could have been. Furthermore, these two instructors chose to take part in this pilot of electronic portfolios, and this may impact classroom successes and struggles. Instructor level of comfort and interest in such a transition are important, and this research cannot as deeply address this concern because of the previous experience. However, through interviewing portfolio evaluators and sitting in on department meetings, alternative perspectives and hesitations are acknowledged
and build depth to the discussion at hand. Furthermore, because of the limited use of digital portfolios in the institution, this limitation is one that, as a researcher, I could not control.

Another uncontrollable variable was the number and students who agreed to participate versus the number that followed through. While nearly every student from the two classes agreed to participate on some level of my study (either though allowing me to observe and record my observations, taking part in an interview, or allowing me copies of their portfolios), only five students participated in interviews and only twelve shared their portfolios. This sample is small but also representative of the student populations of larger institutions. Like many larger institutions, a larger portion of students at Midwestern receive financial aid, approximately half of the students live on campus, and the majority of students are in-state residents. In the most recent entering class, average ACT test scores were 23.6, SAT scores were just under 1600, and average GPA was 3.41. The student population numerically is clearly smaller than many institutions, but the students are consistent with larger institutions.

The only courses that piloted electronic portfolios were College Writing II, though one was an ENGL 106 class and the other an ENGL 107 course. While students in ENGL 106 may have taken the class before, all students in ENGL 107 had taken and not passed 106 at least once. This means that the students in this class all had created a paper-based portfolio in their previous course, whereas ENGL 106 students may or may not have been familiar with portfolios before creating their digital portfolios. This difference in experience between students creates some differences in reactions and responses to eportfolios, but also creates an interesting point of discussion for others hoping to learn from Midwestern’s transition.

Midwestern’s size is another important variable that must be considered. The university is a relatively small with just over 4,000 students total and about 1,000 students a year in the
writing program. While their size is clearly an advantage to making larger-scale change, the writing program is also at an advantage because of the technology available in each classroom and to students and instructors. Midwestern’s campus is wireless, all classrooms have at least instructor computers and LCD projectors, if not also technologies such as Smart Boards. The campus also has a laptop loan program in addition to numerous computer labs (both open and reserved for classrooms). Furthermore, Midwestern offers a traditional Instructional Technology staff as well as a Teaching, Learning, and Technology Center and the Student Technology Center to offer assistance to instructors and students in creating and integrating technology in the classroom. As Richard Selfe points out (2003), “Technology-rich environments give educators and other stakeholders unusual opportunities to shape teaching and learning systems” (p. 54). Technology-rich environments such as that at Midwestern allow for great opportunities to incorporate technology in the writing classroom. These variables may be advantages for Midwestern and the writing program’s pilot of electronic portfolios, but these benefits have been considered in discussing the findings and implications.

Finally, I must acknowledge again my positionality as a researcher and graduate of Midwestern’s program. As attended to in Chapter 1, I had worked closely with the Director of Writing during my undergraduate years, and both she and I studied in the same Ph.D. programs. In fact, of the four instructors interviewed (two of which took part in the observation process as well), I took classes from three of the four. My relationship with the program and instructors may create biases on my part as a researcher, but as these arise I have worked hard to acknowledge them. In order to understand the complexities of my situation, it is important to realize that

When ethnographers study a community as outsiders, they must spend a
significant amount of time gaining access to the community and learning the rules of the community well enough to gather and eventually analyze the data. In contrast, ethnographers who study their own community may already have access to almost all facets of that community’s life, most likely have roles in the community that existed before the study, and consciously or subconsciously know the rules of behavior within the community. (Moss, 1992, 161)

My relationship with the Writing Program Director, the other instructors, and the larger university gave me both an insiders position and outsider position. To faculty I had established a rapport as an undergraduate in their classes or department whereas to the students I was an outsider who had a history with their instructors and school, but had no real connection (at least initially) to them. Though I have not been part of the institution for over six years, my relationships with these instructors helped me gain access to this community, and my familiarity with the institution has also proved to be an advantage. At the same time, this relationship has deepened my dedication to fairly represent the findings from this study.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter has been to explain both the site of study and the significance and reasons for my approach to this research. My connection to Midwestern and the instructors who agreed to take part in this study make it impossible to remove the personal from my research. Because of the multiple perspectives that are important to understanding how the transition to digital portfolios influences the various communities at Midwestern, a study based loosely in ethnography is an effective approach.

In this study it is important to understand the Director of Writing, the instructors of writing, the portfolio evaluators, and the students to provide a rich picture of the context.
Additionally, knowing the types of texts that are produced, how assessment methods must change, and how students are introduced to the process round out the data collection. Interviews, observations, and textual analysis were each important parts of the collection process.

In the chapter that follows, I explore the results of the data collection. Chapter four begins with a discussion of observations from Dr. Teague’s class and Dr. Longman’s class as a means to better understand how portfolios were introduced to students. Following those discussions, the chapter looks at several sample portfolios and the evaluation process to better understand how participants see technology changing assessment processes.
CHAPTER FOUR: MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY’S PILOT

When I began my data collection at Midwestern University I was excited to be back at the familiar campus. The tree-lined sidewalks I had grown accustomed to as an undergrad, the old, white home with a narrow staircase and porch swing where the English Department was, and the other buildings that had been so important to my early education all felt comfortable. But at the same time, I was nervous. Everyone I had gone to school with was gone, and I felt like an outsider reminiscing about a time past. As I climbed to the third floor of the main campus building where Dr. Longman’s class was going to meet I felt pulled by two very different emotions: excitement and fear.

On the first day of my observations I sat on a bench at the end of one hall at 8:30 am, listening to people down the hall talk about grading, or classes, or something that I couldn’t concentrate on. I pulled out my notebook and started to write.

*It’s weird being on Midwestern’s campus. . . . I was worried about being late but that wasn’t a problem. . . . When I first sat down the hallway was silent except for a few conversations inside the offices in the hallway. At about quarter-til though students started appearing. Some of them are talking about their papers that are due today. There is a fear or apprehension in their speech.*

*I’m getting looks that I’m clearly an outsider to these students. They’re looking at me sitting on this wooden bench at the top of the stairs just watching the small group of students that are beginning to gather down the wide hallway. It feels like even the faculty are looking at me. Since it’s late March someone new in the environment stands out I suppose. I look older than most of the students on campus, perhaps I feel older than them too. I wonder if my own insecurity and confused level of comfort make me stand*
out. The fact that I’m looking around so much and writing in my notebook probably doesn’t help either.

While my relationship with the institution was complicated, this relationship is important to understanding the discussions at hand. My relationship with faculty members and the institution allowed for a level of comfort, though to the students I still appeared as an outsider. This personal connection to the institution and instructors, however, informed my approach to data collection.

In this chapter I will present my findings from my observations, interviews, and textual analysis. This chapter moves chronologically through my time observing Midwestern and focuses first on a departmental level introduction to digital portfolios, then on a classroom level introduction before moving to specific students’ experiences with digital portfolios. The chapter concludes by looking at the evaluation process from the evaluators’ perspectives. The goal of this chapter is to understand, from various perspectives, the transition to digital portfolios at Midwestern and how certain events and occurrences can help others make similar changes to assessment.

Introducing Digital Portfolios

The multimodal composition initiative at Midwestern, introduced in Chapter Three, was designed as a means for instructors to incorporate a multimodal assignment in their College Writing II courses while still giving primary emphasis to the traditional academic paper which remains highly valued throughout the institution. This initiative was designed as a way to gradually transition to a program-wide change in the types of texts that students were creating. While “the majority of multimodal composition [is] occurring at the individual level and not
necessarily in program-wide efforts” (Anderson et. al, 2006, p. 69), Midwestern’s initiative became one means to spread the individual level changes to a larger audience.

Multimodal assignments in the writing classroom are becoming ever more important. Beginning in the mid-90s, scholars were arguing that there was an “increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioral, and so on. . . . [N]ew communications media are reshaping the way we use language” (New London Group, 1996, p. 64). Since that time, students have gone “from downloading images into their essays to creating webpages to accompany assignments to creating short films for those websites, often without being asked to do so in the assignment” (Williams, 2007, pp. x-xi). Communication is changing, and because of that writing must change too. In fact, “[t]he multiple purposes and audiences for which we write demand multiple approaches or communicating our message” (Williams, 2007, p. xi). Because of this, as teachers of writing we must realize that students need to be experienced and skilled not only in reading (consuming) texts employing multimodalities, but also in composing in multiple modalities, if they hope to communicate successfully within the digital communication networks that characterize workplaces, schools, civic life, and span traditional cultural, national, and geopolitical borders (Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007, p. 3).

In forwarding the multimodal composition initiative then, Midwestern’s writing program began to explore ways of asking students to use all (more) available means to persuade, inform, communicate, distribute, and create knowledge.

As might be expected, change to a writing program can be tumultuous, and with this understanding, Teague introduced the multimodal initiative slowly. At a faculty meeting at the
start of the Spring semester in 2009, Teague set aside one full meeting to talk about the
program’s own eportfolio pilot program as a way to get feedback from full-time and adjunct
faculty members and to allow instructors to share their experiences and interest in eportfolios and
multimodal assignments in the writing classrooms. This approach to change is one of Ward’s
(2008) recommendations for successful WPAs. Ward says that “[b]eing an effective
administrator means being able to draw on staff, committees, and teachers to get the work done
effectively” (Ward, 2008, p. 59). Teague’s “keep people first” (Taylor, 2008, p. 231) approach is
one that I will return to in the following chapter, but this approach avoids the classic mistake
where technology, rather than students, instructors, and learning, becomes the focus (Taylor,
2008, p. 234). Because of this open discussion model, instructors at Midwestern were active in
the pilot from the start.

The first day of the spring semester always seems to be a cruel joke; on this particular
day the snow was piled high and the winds were blowing, but eleven instructors of writing
gathered in Midwestern’s library conference room to learn more about the changes taking places
in classrooms across campus. As I settled at a seat in the middle of the large, round table,
different instructors walked over to me to say hello or introduce themselves. Some faculty
members asked about how I had been since they’d last seen me, some five years before when I
graduated. Some who I’d not met seemed to look right past me and greeted their colleagues that
they hadn’t seen since the end of the previous semester. As people walked in and settled down,
however, a long-time adjunct faculty member raised the first question before the meeting even
had a chance to begin. Knowing that the meeting’s agenda was to introduce and persuade
instructors to consider multimodality and digital portfolios, she asked how much training she and
her fellow teachers could expect to receive. This question got quickly to one of the most important points in making a change to any program.

The concern of training and preparation is an important one that often comes up (Tobin, 1987; Hermann, 1989; Taylor, 1998; Kimme Hea, 2002; Atkins, 2005; etc.). The fact remains that in order for any technology initiative to be successful there must be adequate training. Taylor (2008) stresses that people are more important than the technology and that twenty-percent of all technology funds should be allocated to training (p. 237). The concern for training is understandable, and while training was not officially discussed during the meeting, the idea of instructor preparation remained at the heart of much of the conversations that day. Because the inclusion of multimodal texts or the digital portfolio was optional, the need for official training was less relevant. Even so, Midwestern’s Student Technology Center (STC), Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE), and the expertise of faculty in the writing program were all mentioned as resources for training, support, and help. The STC was introduced as a space where students and instructors could receive one-on-one assistants with technology questions ranging from how to use campus email to how to create websites. The CTE focuses on technology and pedagogical best practices and is a service provided specifically for instructors. Even without departmentally sanctioned training, instructors who chose to take part in the pilot, and in turn their students, had support options. Even so, the concern raised by the adjunct was only addressed in a superficial manner by pointing her to places on campus to get help. While institutional support is obviously an important step for instructors and students, this question raises concerns about specific training. Is it enough to ask instructors to go to a help center such as the Center for Teaching Excellence? Is it enough to share what has worked for other instructors? Training is an issue that deserves clear and direct attention in a situation like this,
though this will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter.

As the meeting progressed, both Dr. Teague and Dr. Longman spoke about their past experiences with eportfolios. Dr. Teague had used eportfolios in some of her advanced writing courses, and, Dr. Longman had used the eportfolios as the honors component of her College Writing II course previously. Both instructors stressed that eportfolios were more “fun.” This perceived level of fun was both on an instructional level and a student level. In fact, when Longman shared her students’ honors writing portfolios she said it was clear to her that all students, even the weaker students, enjoyed the process more than the traditional paper portfolio. The use of anecdotal evidence here becomes not only a persuasive measure but also an argument based on educational lore (North, 1987). Longman observed as her honors writing course took part in the portfolio creation process and compared those observations to those of previous courses she had taught where students created paper-based portfolios. The difference in engagement, excitement, and the actual product supported her belief that digital portfolios were inherently more “fun.” This line of argument is based in the belief that “Practioners understand how writing is done, learned, and taught” and is “concerned with what has worked, is working, and might work in teaching, doing, or learning” (North, 1987, pp. 22-23). So while only based on her own experience, this level of “fun” became a selling point of digital portfolios to the faculty and later students. The fact that two, full-time faculty members, including the director of first-year writing, enthusiastically supported the move to digital portfolios created additional credibility and support for the transition.

While these two instructors were the first to have experiences with digital portfolios, at the same meeting, other instructors talked about their experiences with multimodal assignments. One instructor spoke about how her students had created public service announcements in her
class rather than a traditional fourth paper. In her presentation she shared some of the work her students had created and talked about the similarities to a traditional assignment. Again, Longman also shared some of the portfolios that students created in her honors class, and in doing so she focused on the amount of text that students created to justify the digital portfolio as a final paper. Even with this discussion taking place, however, Teague continued to stress that instructors had the right to choose what their students would do and if they wished to participate. The fourth essay could continue to be a traditional essay or a multimodal essay, and the use of eportfolios was optional and not required or forced.

In showing what other instructors had chosen to do in their own classes, for example assigning a PSA project, Teague demonstrated what she had said in several of our meetings: she didn’t want this change to be seen as something being forced on instructors or done to the writing program. The stress of a more organic change remained important to this initial faculty meeting, and while not truly bottom-up, the change was also not directly top-down either because the change was not being enacted by University administrators. This choice-driven approach challenges traditional hierarchies of the academy. Popham, Neal, Schendel, and Huot (2002) propose that reflection is one way to implement a more egalitarian approach to administration, and that the use of reflection “helps eliminate many old structures of hierarchy and power. . . . [E]ncouraging reflection from/to administrator to/from teachers and to/from first-year students, . . . shows that all . . . are in constant states of learning, critically engaging with [the] world and the structures around us” (p. 20). This thoughtful move suggests a challenge to traditional power hierarchies, even if the change was something that eventually instructors would have to embrace. The fact that throughout this meeting teachers wondered how this would affect not only them as professionals but also their classroom environments,
students, and learning showed an awareness for stakeholders, which “might well be broadened to include all those who have a strong interest in a course or program and who might influence its future” (Gleason, 2000, pp. 575). The inclusion of instructor testimonials as well as student works brought together two of the common stakeholders in the writing program and served to foster a stakeholder-centered design. Since “Writing assessment should articulate and communicate clearly its values and expectations to all stakeholders, especially students,” it remained important to be conscious of the changes and needs of various stakeholders from the inception to the implementation stages.

While some instructors demonstrated the multimodal projects their previous classes had composed, the level of techno-proficiency varied from class to class and from example to example. In demonstrating the digital portfolios, Longman showed several portfolios created by students with differing levels of technology experience. The first portfolio was basic and included only the minimum requirements. With a multimodal introduction and conclusion and links to the various essay, the student’s portfolio met the requirements. However, the second portfolio shared demonstrated more comfort with the technology. Through the use of various web images of Gustav Klimt paintings, the second sample portfolio created a thematic tie between the various pages. Using Klimt’s color schemes and the inclusion of images, the second portfolio showed an overall level of unity that demonstrated a higher-level of comfort with aesthetics, design, and technoliteracy. The differences Longman highlighted in the two samples helped support the fact students came to the experience with very different abilities, much like their instructors comfort level. Like the examples shown during the meeting, the goal of the meeting appeared to be that instructors would leave with a sense of options. That instructors could modify their fourth writing assignment to be multimodal (be it a website, a PSA, a podcast,
or even the portfolio itself) was a point returned to again and again. Even so, instructors were also reassured that they did not have to change the design of their course and could keep the traditional written-essay assignment for the final paper in their classes as well.

While digital portfolios create an avenue to share non-traditional texts, they also can store and disseminate traditional texts. One option for instructors who wanted to experiment with eportfolios was for them to use the digital space much like a paper-based portfolio. Because the Content Management System allowed students and instructors to attach and link to Word, PDF, and other standard document formats, instructors had the option of letting their students submit a digital portfolio without any additional multimodal component. Rather than creating the additional pages of texts that Longman’s students did – including the introductions and reflections – instructors could ask their students to prepare print portfolios in electronic form. While this was an option, Reynolds & Rice (2006) point out that this is not the choice most instructors choose because “e-Portfolio keepers have a different relationship with their reader than do paper-based portfolio keepers and they must consider how to guide their readers’ navigation” (p. 5). Even when the products remain traditional, alphabetic texts, the digital environment still demands the portfolio keeper consider her/his reader in a different way. These demands may include considering how the reader will actually read the text on a screen, making sure the documents are saved in a compatible format, or even ensuring that files are saved with the correct name. Because of this, most instructors choose paper portfolios when they will work because of the comfort and familiarity. This storehouse approach to the digital portfolio, suggested by attaching traditional texts in a digital environment, was one way to integrate and experiment with the technology though, and ultimately was a choice that few made.
Many issues were raised during this meeting, but some of the most prominent included questions or concerns about:

- How this change would affect the student-tutor relationship,
- How multimodal assignments, including digital portfolios, would be a part of classes when there was not enough lab space on campus,
- What would keep students who repeat ENGL 106 or 107 from reusing the same content,
- How this would change the way that students were taught about and understand plagiarism,
- And whether the content created in the digital portfolio would be private.

These and other questions raise important points to be considered. While many of these issues will be further addressed in the final chapter, these questions and concerns, as well as others raised in scholarship and discussions with fellow teachers were important throughout my observations, interview, and ultimately my analysis.

Dr. Teague’s Introduction to Digital Portfolios

I had the chance to observe Dr. Teague’s ENGL 107 course as they wrapped up their semester and created their digital portfolios. As one of the faculty members piloting the digital portfolios and as the Writing Program Administrator, Teague’s class became an interesting space for my observations because of the dual role she played in this process. All students in her class had taken and not passed ENGL 106 at least once in the past, and all students were expected to create a multimodal argumentative paper to include in their portfolios. As an instructor it was Teague’s goal to have students re-present an argument as a video essay.

According to the syllabus distributed to students at the start of the semester, all members of the class would be creating a multimodal argument for project number 4. The syllabus read:
Project 4 Multimodal Argument: For this project, you will take the subject of Paper 3 and make your argument in a different way through a multimedia tool such as Power Point or MovieMaker. More requirements will be provided for this project mid-way through the semester. No technology experience is needed to complete this, as you will learn how to complete this project during class time.

This statement in her syllabus does several things, but perhaps most importantly informs students from the beginning what will be expected of them. Based on the argument they make for their third essay, students knew they would repurpose their argument in some way. Also important to note here is that Teague makes it clear that students will receive further information about the expectations of the assignment and that they need not worry about ability in going in to the project.

When I began observing her 107 course in April, Teague had already introduced students to the multimodal project. Through an email correspondence, however, Teague explained that she didn’t foresee this being a problem for me as a researcher since she would need to reintroduce the assignment because a handful of students had missed the previous class and would need the introduction. Because of this, from nearly the beginning of the discussion of the digital project and the eportfolio discussion that followed, I was able to observe classroom interactions and observations.

On April 2, Teague reintroduced students to their final project. By this time in the semester students were expected to have submitted their three written essays, though as class started that morning Teague reminded some of the students they still had to turn in their third essays. As the class settled into some sense of classroom normalcy, where several students were chatting quietly to one another, a handful were checking email, Facebook, sports scores, or some
combination of websites, Teague reminded students that they were to use Microsoft’s Movie Maker to take their written essay and make it into a movie. Using the classroom LCD projected, Teague walked students through the basic steps to create a video that included adding slides, much like in Power Point, saving and importing images, and adding text boxes. This demonstration-based lesson models the task that students are expected to do and, at least in theory, articulates the specific requirements of such a project. Zoellner (1969) argues for the use of modeling in the writing classroom because students often ask what the teacher expects of the written product, and by using samples the criteria becomes more clear. If “we offer the student readings by publishing writers, a time-honored technique of great usefulness . . . and that the unique rhetorical solutions evolved by the model writer are circumscribed efficacy in helping the puzzled student to cope with his [or her] own compositional problems” (Zoellner, 1969, p. 284). Along the same line, in a recent study, “[t]echnology skills instruction conducted by. . .instructors appeared to have a positive impact on the computer self-efficacy of students” (Koh & Frick, 2009, p. 217). This mimetic approach to teaching writers has evolved over the year, and this approach has “help[ed] to prevent basic misconceptions of the forms and styles of writing [certain] assignments require” (Gottschalk & Hjortshoj, 2004, p. 83). In addition to this demonstration method, the in-class work time on this day, as well as April 7th and 9th, allowed students to practice a literacy skill that was new to them in a safe space where there was assistance. Because these class meetings were largely workdays, Teague was able to answer questions individually and walk around the classroom.

During this introduction period, students were reminded that throughout the semester they were all responsible for writing a total of three papers that included two revisions of papers from their previous ENGL 106 courses, and one new argument that they had produced during the
current semester. She reminded students that because their third argument paper (the new argument created in 107) had been or was being turned into a video essay, paper-based portfolios, like those they had created in their previous writing courses, would no longer accommodate the texts the student writers were producing. However, not until April 14th did students get an introduction to the eportfolios.

Just short of two weeks after they had been introduced to their video essay assignment, after the Easter holiday, and on a Tuesday morning when the class was scheduled to meet in an open computer lab, Dr. Teague wrote on the board:

*The plan for today in 107*

1. Complete cross-class peer review
2. At 11:30 I will teach you how to make your portfolio
3. You can use left over time to do Essay 3 edits from drafts I hand back or finish your movie

*Your Final “Final Copy” of Essay 3 is due Thursday. In class. Hand in Final Copy only.*

*Movie is due in my dropbox on Thursday also.*

While it is likely students had heard about the portfolios prior to this discussion, if at no other time than in their ENGL 106 courses in previous semesters and as they read through the syllabus at the start of the current semester, this introduction shows the digital portfolios as something that takes place at a certain time in the semester. Aligning with Reynolds and Rice’s (2006) best works portfolios, students were introduced to a portfolio process where they would be expected to showcase a final product that would show their instructor and the portfolio evaluators at the end of the semester what the writer had learned and to persuade them that the portfolio
demonstrated a certain level of competency. Rather than focusing on the collection of documents over a period of time, and reflection throughout the collection process, the process was condensed into approximately 30-45 minutes of a 75-minute course. Through compiling the portfolio in such a short time, the acts of selection, collection, and reflection, which are expected to take place over a period of time (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000), become simply a task that must be completed. The element of time in the portfolio process is an important one, and in fact development over time is one of nine characteristics of portfolios. In addition to development over time, including collection, the other characteristics of portfolios includes range, context richness, delayed evaluation, selection, student-centered control, reflection and self-assessment, and growth (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000, p. 32). These nine characteristics are combined in different ways, but development over time demonstrates measurable points in growth that are “useful to the learner, who sees visible evidence of progress, and to the teacher, who can demonstrate the effects his or her course is having on the students” (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000, p. 37). This demonstration carries over to portfolio evaluators too who can see a measure of the learner’s development. When the portfolio is represented as an apparatus created in a single class period, even though only the demonstration, the loss of development over time makes the portfolio less effective.

Portfolio scholars have discussed and disputed the value of portfolios that are held off until the end of the semester. While portfolios allow for process, growth, and more accurate evaluations of writing, the pitfalls of such an approach are also inescapable. From students discomfort with not receiving grades in a “traditional” sense (McClelland, 1991; Callahan, 1995), to the perception that communal review is busy work or questions the instructor’s authority (Coulter, 2000), to the added work portfolio evaluation can create for instructors when
multiple drafts are not only suggested but required (Sommers, 1991), portfolios have not been embraced without some discontent. Even so, White argues that while portfolios have obvious advantages over previously supported methods of assessing students’ writing, that does not mean it is the only way or always the best way (2007, p. 119). Furthermore, the element of a portfolio being developed over time does not necessarily mean over the full semester, especially when it might be argued that portfolios at Midwestern were created over the 16-week semester since they were writing and revising throughout the entire class. Though perhaps holding off the portfolio creation until the end of the term may be a different approach to the portfolio, it does not negate the value of the portfolio. Even though the introduction to this process was shortened at Midwestern, students did have about two weeks to work on compiling and reflecting on their portfolios, works, and growth as writers in Teague’s class.

Students were told they would have a total of four more classes (the current class and the following three meetings) to work on their portfolios, video-essays, and revisions. Teague explained to students that they would be creating very basic digital portfolios, but as a means to introduce these new portfolios and to show the versatility of the digital portfolio, she pulled up several samples digital portfolios created by honors students in an ENGL 206 course. These portfolios included images, navigation buttons, bright colors, extensive reflection activities, and traditional essays, but as she showed these documents to students, Teague stressed that the 107 students wouldn’t have to include the extra design elements. Instead, students were told they would have buttons on the left side of their screen that would pull up their Word documents, and their digital portfolios would include a brief reflection or introduction.

During this initial discussion and introduction of portfolios, Teague walked students through the process of creating a portfolio. In her introduction, Teague broke the portfolio
creation process into two parts. The first step used the Content System within Blackboard, which she compared to the digital drop box that students had been using all semester. In fact, because students had been storing their papers in the digital drop box throughout the term, she told them “you’ll like [the Content System],” implying that this storage similarity would be familiar and that familiarity was something the students would like. One way to introduce students to new technologies is to compare them to familiar technologies. The importance of comfort cannot be overlooked. Whithaus, Harrison, and Midyette (2008) found that students believed their performance was directly related to their comfort with the tools they were using. In fact, they suggest that “a greater fluency and comfort with the materials of composing appears to impact students’ performances on high-stakes essay exams” (Whithaus, Harrison, & Midyette, 2008, p. 16), and it is reasonable to assume that such comfort crosses over into portfolios - especially when they act as high stakes writing assessment tools.

Again relying on the instructional PC and LCD projector, and asking students to follow along on their lab computers, Teague showed students how to load their papers in the Content System. The Content System is comparable to a virtual hard drive where students and faculty can upload, manage, and share content (The Blackboard Content System, 2004). At Midwestern, this meant that students could store Word documents, presentations, spreadsheets, images, videos, and more. To this point in the semester, students had not been asked to use the Content System, and because they would have to add all four of their essays, Teague walked them through the process four different times. During the process she showed how students would upload their essays including argument 1, argument 2, new argument, and video essay. The use of repetition and demonstration worked as a means to solidify the process, and for those students following along, it gave them time to complete – or nearly complete – this process.
While some students did follow along, other students continued to work on other projects, and some only watched. Teague stressed that students would want to wait to load their essays to the content system until the essays were the absolute “final, final” – the most polished, revised, strongest essays the students could write. This may mean then that students wouldn’t be able to create their portfolios until later in the semester. The portfolios created in the 107 course included only final, clean drafts that would be read by one or more outside reviewer at the end of the term. While students had received peer feedback and instructor feedback, and drafted throughout the semester, they were responsible for continuing to revise their essays until the texts were the strongest possible examples of the student’s writing. If students loaded essays too soon, it would be possible the wrong version would be read by a portfolio evaluator and the portfolio might not demonstrate course competency.

The second part of the process, once the content was loaded, was the actual portfolio creation. Again, within Blackboard, students had access to a portfolio tool that would “enable students . . . to assemble, present, and share information online for documenting academic growth, career evaluation, and course preparation” (The Blackboard Content System, 2004). This program has two options including the Portfolio Creation Wizard or a customized portfolio option that used an established template. Teague explained briefly that she would provide students with a handout the following class explaining how to name their portfolio, and referred to the handout several times throughout the rest of her explanation, but quickly showed students how to create a portfolio using the customized portfolio option. This included walking them through the steps to create the shell to house the portfolio, which asked the portfolio creator to add a description. Teague suggested the description be “This is my portfolio.” She showed students how to add content and walked them through the steps from naming the content to
uploading a document from their Content System files. Following that, Teague showed students where to click to change the background, the style of the buttons, and other minor aesthetics.

After walking students through the entire process, Teague created a second portfolio and demonstrated how the Portfolio Creation Wizard worked. The wizard was a set of steps that manually walked the portfolio creator through the process and included boxes for the portfolio description, spaces for the content to be loaded, and ways to change some of the aesthetic options. Both the Creation Wizard and the customized portfolio option created identical portfolios, but the wizard was more directive and akin to a fill-in-the-blank, while the customized option was more user-directed.

During this process, however, Teague stressed that while she didn’t care what colors students chose for their portfolios, students needed to think about their portfolio evaluator. As a means to stress the importance of the document being readable, Teague said that hot pink text on a red background might be difficult to read, and that students should be aware of the choices they are making. As with any traditional text, one of the most important points to consider in designing, writing, and presenting texts – whether multimodal or not – are the consequences of the choices the writer makes (Huntley & Latchaw, 1998, p. 106-107). It is important to remember that “[c]onventional rhetorical principles such as audience awareness, exigence, organization, correctness, arrangement, and rhetorical appeals are necessary considerations for authors of successful [texts]. . . . These rhetorical principles of communication. . . also apply. . . to multimodal compositions” (Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007, p. 5). While the mode of presentation has changed, the learning outcomes of multimodal texts are not necessarily changing. Midwestern’s learning outcomes state that in ENGL 106/107 students will develop “an understanding of how the rhetorical relationships among writer, audience, and message should
influence your writing” (ENGL 106, 2007). In suggesting forethought of their reader’s needs, the portfolio creation process becomes a rhetorical act in not only reflection but also creation. Using this assessment method extends the multimodal emphasis. Rather than only having students use their video arguments as a rhetorical act, the digital portfolio became a space where students were expected to make conscious decisions.

Even though students had freedom in designing their portfolios, and students were told to consider their readers’ needs, Teague reminded students that their goal was not to make the most beautiful presentation necessarily, but rather to see the portfolio on a practical level. The digital creation was what portfolio evaluators would use to read the students’ essays, and Teague explained that “other than the mode of delivery, there isn’t anything different” about the digital portfolio process from their previous experience with paper-based portfolios. However, this raises questions of what a portfolio “looks” like. Just like a paper-based container that may have tab dividers between units or assignments, a digital portfolio may have buttons or links to distinguish between them. Just as a paper-based portfolio may include sample or prewriting such as a sketched web or tree diagram, an electronic portfolio can include digital representations of these invention activities or scanned copies of the tactile versions. However, eportfolios can include documents with hyperlinks directly to sources or additional documents within the portfolio. Electronic portfolios can also represent multimodality in a way paper-based portfolios cannot; videos, for example, cannot fit nicely into a paper portfolio, and even if they are burned to a CD and inserted into the portfolio, the video is not presented in its natural environment. While Teague didn’t want the aesthetic elements of the digital portfolio to intimidate or discourage her students, even the basic digital portfolio was not just like the paper portfolios created in other classes, and this was largely overlooked. The way this classroom component
was presented differed between instructors and is discussed in more detail in the final chapter, but Dr. Longman’s presentation to students showed that there were more differences between digital and paper-based portfolios.

**Dr. Longman’s Introduction to Digital Portfolios**

Like Teague, Longman’s students were introduced to portfolios through a demonstration with an instructor computer and LCD projector as well, but students in her class were still meeting in their traditional classroom during the introduction process. While the last few weeks of class were held almost exclusively in a computer lab, Longman’s class, like Teague’s, had met through the first three months in a traditional classroom. To begin her introduction, Longman hoped to show students examples of portfolios that she had created and also that her past students (in ENGL 206) had created. Because Longman had been the first to actually use this system in her honors college writing course, she entered this project with a database of past student portfolios to share, which likely boosted her confidence in formally piloting digital portfolios. In a study of self-efficacy and technology for pre-service teachers, Koh and Frick found that when the teacher feels confident in their ability to use a computer, they are more confident in their ability to integrate technology into the classroom (2009). Confidence in ability, or self-efficacy, is built on four standards that include: observing a successful performance, success in performance, verbal persuasion of student’s success, and reduced stress and tension during performance (Koh & Frick, 2009, p. 212). Having taught the digital portfolios before (i.e., observing a successful performance), having this database of successful portfolios (i.e., success in past performance and a visual of student success), all likely led to the final reduction of stress and tension during the implementation of digital portfolios the second time around. The confidence in teaching any unit a second time contributes to greater success, but because
Longman was using the same system and introducing the same project she began this process with an advantage.

Because Midwestern is a small campus, and because most, if not all, students in her 106 course were new to the university and writing program, Longman’s introduction of the portfolio was slightly different than Teague’s. Longman’s students had written three traditional academic papers including a synthesis essay, a research proposal and annotated bibliography, and a persuasive research essay. For their final project (the equivalent of their fourth essay), Longman’s students were told they were going to do something “more fun, more creative, and something that [would let] the portfolio reader know more about the writer.” In presenting the prospect of a digital portfolio to students, Longman explained that while everyone has to complete a portfolio for 106, her class was one of the few selected classes to do something different, and that like the paper-based portfolio the digital portfolio would still show process and product, but that the digital portfolio allowed for “a little bit of fun” at the end of the semester.

While Longman made it clear that the portfolio evaluators would still be looking at the academic essays and ensuring that student writing was meeting basic criteria for passing 106, she also stressed that the portfolio evaluator would get to know the writers better through the introductions and reflections that would be required in the digital portfolio.

Using the sample portfolio she created and portfolios from previous students, Longman showed the class what the digital portfolios might look like. During this process, however, she stressed that students should not feel intimidated by the samples and instead should focus on what they will be asked to create. Like the 107 class, Longman’s emphasis was not on how good the design elements were, but instead on the reflection element. Because her students were not
completing a traditional fourth essay, the portfolio was their final project. In creating their portfolio, students were expected to create additional text. In fact, Longman said that with the new text created, from introductions to reflections, ended up being the equivalent of approximately twelve-pages.

Longman’s student portfolios were slightly different from Teague’s. Longman’s students were to create seven buttons (which in turn created pages) using the portfolio wizard. These included a title page, introduction page, a syllabus page, a synthesis page, a proposal and annotated bibliography page, a research essay page, and a final reflection page. The title page was supposed to be more detailed. Longman said each of these pages should include information such as the student’s name, the instructor’s name, the course and section, and the year. The syllabus page could just be the course syllabus attached as a document, but the synthesis, proposal and annotated bibliography, and research essay pages were all to include an introduction to the page, the final essay, sample process work, the assignment sheet, and a reflection. The introduction and reflection on each page were newly created texts specifically for the portfolio. These texts might include an explanation of why the student picked a certain topic for her/his project, what she/he learned from the project, or how the project demonstrated growth.

The specific pages dedicated to introduction and reflection, on the other hand, were supposed to be more about the student as a whole instead of a particular project. Longman said that neither of these could be traditional written papers, but instead students might use Power Point, create a movie, include music, or do something else that would provide a “holistic view of yourself” for the portfolio evaluator to get a better idea of who was behind the portfolio. Similar to “the decisions students make about how and what to revise, the reflective statements shifts to
students some of the responsibility and authority for their work” specifically in this environment where readers perceptions of the writer can be supplemented (Weiser, 1997, p. 297). The introduction was to be reflective and explain why the student made the choices she/he did, highlight the writer’s strengths, and give some sense of who was behind the papers. The final reflection was to be created in a similar manner and not rely on traditional text but use another tool such as Power Point. This reflection was to be guided and would ask students to look back at their class, consider the second-level writing requirement they would take, talk about the future writing they would do at Midwestern and in their careers. Since “[p]ortfolios are holistic and integrative in nature, allowing their owners to build relationships between learning and construct schema of themselves as learners, not just accumulate knowledge” (Paulson & Paulson, 1997, p. 284), the multimodal reflection allowed for a new level of reflection that asked not only for the traditional text but also the digital literacy elements that they had engaged with.

After explaining the pieces of the portfolio that students would be expected to create, Longman turned her focus and discussion to the aesthetics of sample portfolio. The first portfolio she pulled up she called a “basic” portfolio with very basic colors. The portfolio, she explained, was a passing portfolio because of the texts produced throughout the semester and because of the progress the student had made in her/his portfolio creation. Longman explained that each student in the class likely had different levels of comfort with technology, and none of them were expected to be experts. She suggested students work with the Student Technology Center (STC) if they had questions, and also alluded to future classes where students would be able to work and ask questions in a lab.

This simple portfolio allowed Longman to remind students that the most important part of the portfolio was the content and reflection, not the student’s ability to design a web portfolio.
Following that, however, other portfolios were brought up which included more advanced design elements. This included the sample portfolio that used artwork by Gustav Klimt to create a color scheme, another that included a video, and several with pictures and bright colors that made the portfolio feel like some of the writer’s personality was coming through. The portfolios shared demonstrate a range of skill levels and helped students get an idea of what they would be asked to create.

After the initial introduction, students were given work days in the computer lab in both of the classes. As students worked, Longman started class by demonstrating various steps to the process. Like Teague, Longman walked students through the process to create pages. Instead of focusing on showing students how to do the entire project at once, however, Longman had students work on smaller parts together. For example, seven classes (almost two weeks) into the project, Longman had students come together at the start of class and work with changing background colors. She projected the color code website, http://html-color-codes.info and asked all students to go to the page and pick a color they liked. As students followed along, their instructor walked them through the process of changing background colors using the HTML toggle option within the portfolio program. As students tested this out, Longman brought up the issue of color choice that Teague had discussed with her class. Longman said that darker colors may be easier on the eyes of the portfolio evaluators, but that students needed to make sure that they could read the text and that the links were still visible when the background color changed. Using the example of dark blue, Longman showed students that black text on a dark blue background was difficult to see, and that when links within the page were clicked and went from the link color to the active link color or visited link color, sometimes they blended in with the background. The importance of thinking of readers was stressed in both classes, and as
mentioned in the previous section, remains important not only in the traditional sense of audience but also in highlighting how the creation of a portfolio is a rhetorical act.

In reflecting on her introduction, Longman spent much of the time “selling” the idea of eportfolios to her students. By telling them from the start that their class was doing something special and “fun” that other classes weren’t doing, Longman was able to persuade students to be interested.

A Discussion of Portfolios

As touched on earlier in this chapter, both Teague and Longman utilized sample digital portfolios as a learning tool. Both instructors created or used their own samples in addition to previous student portfolios. These samples, even if unintentionally, became templates for students to follow in their creation. By showing students final products as samples, the instructor set the standards for creation.

Comparatively, the samples provided by both instructors differ significantly. As shown in image 4.1, the sample portfolio used to demonstrate the requirements to ENGL 107 students was quite plain. To the left there are buttons that have been minimally edited, the header has been customized to welcome the reader to the “student’s” portfolio, and the introduction text below the heading (which corresponds to the “Reflective Introduction” button on the left hand side of the page) demonstrates the writer’s reflection on the portfolio as a whole. Each assigned argument for ENGL 107 then has a button on the left side. These included the two revisions (an

---

4 Even though this sample portfolio says it was created for ENGL 106, this is the sample portfolio created by Dr. Teague to introduce her ENGL 107 students to the portfolio process.
5 In the case of all images of portfolios in this chapter, identifying information has been removed. For example, in Image 4.1, the header reads “Welcome to [Student’s Name]’s ENGL 106 Portfolio.” Also, at the bottom of the welcome text there is a line that reads “For more information about this Portfolio, contact [student’s email].” I have cut any identifying information for the sake of anonymity.
argument revision and an analysis revision) as well as the new argumentative essay written in 107 and the video essay that expands the argumentative essay.

Image 4. 1 ENGL 107 Sample Portfolio

Image 4.2 demonstrates how this sample portfolio works. When a portfolio evaluator clicks on one of the buttons they are prompted to open or save a document. Below is what a reader or student would see when they clicked on the “Revised Argument” button (button 2 from Image 4.1). All of the other buttons would bring up a similar prompt to download or save the document, though the “Reflective Introduction” button would take the reader back to the main screen seen in image 4.1.
As a functioning portfolio, this document does a few things. It demonstrates to students how a digital portfolio should look, it demonstrates the level and depth of design that is acceptable, and it sets a standard for the amount and type of reflection that should take place in the portfolio. This sets standards whether intentionally or not for students to meet. While clearly 107 students could have gone above and beyond this, the expectations projected in the sample were met and rarely exceeded.

Alternatively, in Longman’s class, the sample was quite elaborate. While both instructors stressed that their students need not worry about their experience with technology, and that the writing was ultimately the basis of assessment, the portfolios shown in the ENGL 106 course was significantly more complex. As shown in Image 4.3, this sample portfolio takes advantage of many more technology skills and options. The yellow background of the center frame where the text is and the inclusion of an image are in stark contrast to the white background and black text of Image 4.1. While the buttons look comparable between the two images, another major difference is clear when one of those buttons is selected.
Image 4.3 Sample ENGL 106 Portfolio

Below is what the portfolio reader would see if they selected the “proposal/ann. bib” button (button number five in Image 4.3). Image 4.4 shows how students in Longman’s class were shown to create their pages. Rather than linking the document to the button (as demonstrated in Image 4.2), Longman had her students create pages that corresponded to each button.
Each essay written had an assigned page, and students were expected to write an introduction “which indicates what the assignment was about, how [the writer] approached it, etc.” Then, as attached documents, students were to included the assignment sheet, their final, revised paper, sample process work, and a reflection about each individual paper or project. When the portfolio reader clicks on “PROPOSALS AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY.DOC” on a page of the portfolio, she/he is prompted with the same download window where the reader can select to open the document or save the document (seen in Image 5).
4.5), similar to the portfolios created in the 107 course. However, the 106 sample shows more of the process, more reflection, and the product.

The difference in design of the two samples provided do demonstrate instructor differences, but it is important to highlight that in the case of the ENGL 107 portfolios, Teague’s students were creating a video argument for their multimodal component of the course, the component that replaced their final essay. In the ENGL 106 course, however, Longman had her students using the digital portfolio not only as their final portfolio but also as their multimodal project. Again, she figured that in having students create introductions and reflections for each assignment, as well as an general introduction and reflection for the portfolio, students were generating up to twelve-pages of new text. The dual purpose of the digital portfolio then explain some of the difference between the two samples.

The portfolios produced by students in the two classes differed greatly, and as might be expected, the portfolios produced and shared closely mirrored the samples created. Below are two samples of portfolios created by students in ENGL 107. Image 4.6 is Arthur’s portfolio. Arthur was a junior at Midwestern and had taken ENGL 104, 106 twice, and was in 107 for his third time (second time with Dr. Teague). Arthur struggled with his writing, but by the time I met him he had quite a bit of experience with portfolios. At the same time, he remained upbeat and his intense interest and pride in his portfolio was very evident to me. His excitement to share his progress and
product with me as an outside researcher was evident from my first observation. Arthur pulled me aside to look at what he was working on, he used his time in class to improve his projects and portfolio, and his openness about his struggles with writing set him apart from other students.

As is evident in the screenshot of his portfolio in Image 4.6, his portfolio followed the sampled portfolio closely. The white background with colored buttons is nearly identical to the sample seen in Image 4.1. Even the level of reflection is approximately the same – just a few sentences about his growth and development as a writer and pointing to the strengths in the portfolio. Image 4.7 shows Liddy’s portfolio created in ENGL 107.

Like Arthur’s portfolio, Liddy’s portfolio is basic, though rather than buttons, Liddy used links. While the reflection between the sample portfolio, Arthur’s portfolio, and Liddy’s portfolio different in content, the amount of space devoted to the reflection is similar. Had the sample included more elaborate or detailed reflection, it is likely that the amount of space devoted to reflection would have been similar in the student created portfolios.
In the 106 course, however, the student portfolios were more elaborate. Like the sample portfolio seen in Image 4.3, the 106 student portfolios were more colorful, included images, and demonstrated process. While Mike’s portfolio (Image 4.8) did not include any images on his main page, the portfolio reader sees that Mike followed the sample and included a splash page with his name, his instructor’s name, the course and section, and the year.

As Image 4.9 and 4.10 show, once the reader selects a button on the left she/he is taken to alternative pages. Image 4.9 takes the reader to Mike’s Power Point Introduction. This introduction is attached, much like the 107 student’s essays, but the link still exists in it’s own page. Image 4.10 shows Mike’s “Argument Paper” page. Unlike in the 107 portfolios, when a reader clicks on the Mike’s “Argument Paper” (button four from the top in Image 4.8) the reader is taken to a page that includes text that introduces the reader to the project, provides a link to the assignment sheet, provides sample process work, the revised essay itself, and a reflection on the project.
Mike’s portfolio was not the exception in ENGL 106. Anne’s portfolio (Image 4.11) shows how some students used images. Like the sample, Anne used a visual on her “Title Page” and kept up the use of landscape images throughout her portfolio on the other pages where she included pictures of a lake, a forest, and a winding road. Other students included images of themselves, their friends, and their family. Many portfolios included senior pictures on the “Title Page” or splash page, which literally allowed the portfolio reader to see who the writer was. For the sake of anonymity, however, these portfolios have been excluded from this discussion.
What is evident from the sample portfolios provided in the two classes and from the student produced portfolios is that students mirror the samples they are provided. When instructors demonstrate projects, students see that as guidelines to follow. If, for example, portfolio introductions and reflection take place on the same page and are only four sentences and about four lines of text (as shown in Image 4.1), then it is likely that students will produce the same amount of content (as evidenced in Images 4.6 and 4.7 where both students had three to four lines of text and approximately the same number of sentences). Likewise, if students are shown portfolios that include images on the splash page as in the case of Image 4.3, it is likely this will be replicate, as Anne did in Image 4.11. Of course, there are exceptions, since Mike’s portfolio (images 4.8-4.10) did not include images, even though his “Argument Paper” portfolio page (Image 4.10) shows that he followed the content, reflection, and development models provided by his instructor.

Additionally, these samples show that the portfolios are being used quite differently in classrooms, even in a communally assessed writing program. While one instructor used the
portfolio only as a storage unit for essays, as evidenced in the ENGL 107 portfolios, the other used the portfolios as a writing space. The 107 portfolios served the purpose of not only storing documents, including the video essays students created which couldn’t be fairly represented in a paper-based portfolio, but these portfolios also became tools for assessment. In ENGL 106, however, the portfolios went beyond this. While they were also tools for end-of-term assessment and also stored the documents and reflection expected in a portfolio, the 106 portfolios suggested a deeper learning with a nod toward lifelong learning (Hartnell-Young, 2006). The multi-leveled reflection that took place on the individual assignments and the portfolio as a whole suggest deeper engagement.

The focus on digital portfolios as a space for lifelong learning is growing because of the belief that such learners “are said to be reflective and self-directed, active investigators and problem solvers, and effective communicators, among other things” (Hartnell-Young, 2006, p. 126). By using the design, collection, selection, and reflection as an assignment, it’s arguable that the students in the 106 course went beyond the basic presentation portfolio and this space became a self-directed, active space for students to solve problems and communicate. While students largely did follow the lead of the sample portfolio provided to them, their exploration of design and presentation became a way for them to take ownership of their work while also considering problems they faced as writers and on a design level. Furthermore, 106 student portfolios suggest higher levels of visible reflection through the use of a reflective introduction, a reflection for each assignment, and a final course reflection that concluded the portfolios. While reflection can take place outside of the portfolio space, which suggests the 107 students may have spent equal or even more time reflecting on their struggles, growth, development, and future as writers, the fact that this is not visible to a portfolio reader makes it difficult to address.
In both cases, however, students who created eportfolios were more likely to take part in three of the four aspects of lifelong learning as forwarded by Hartnell-Young (2006). Hartnell-Young looks at digital portfolios as a space where several types of 21st-century learning are more likely to take place. These include: learning through engagement with technology, learning as representation of identity, and learning by developing critical multiliteracies. Eportfolios challenge the passive relationship that learners often have with technology (Hartnell-Young, 2006, pp. 127-128). Through making conscious decisions in design elements from the background color, to the images included, to the style of buttons used on the portfolio, students engaged with the technology and asserted their power. While Hartnell-Young focuses on “choice” in relation to representation of identity (pp. 128-129), it’s clear that on a deeper level, the eportfolios piloted at Midwestern gave students agency over the representation of their self. For example, some students chose to include scanned versions of their senior pictures, pictures of them with their friends, or pictures of them with their family. In fact, of the collected portfolios, all ENGL 106 students included at least one picture of themselves in their reflective Power Point introduction, and some included pictures within the portfolio shell as well. This representation of self and control over the identity portrayed to portfolio viewers and readers allowed for a means of representation that is not often seen in paper-based portfolios.

The third type of learning suggested by Hartnell-Young to foster life-long learning is the development of critical multiliteracies. “‘Multiliteracies’ is a term that acknowledges cultural and linguistic diversity and the communication opportunities of new media” (Hartnell-Young, 2006, p. 130). In all classes where digital portfolios were piloted students were able to explore this mode of learning. In 107, students took traditional essays and created video essays using Microsoft MovieMake, a program that many admitted they hadn’t used before. Creating an
argument that incorporated sound, images, and text gave students a new means of persuasion. 106 students, on the other hand, used a more common technology, Power Point, but in a way that perhaps they hadn’t before. Because their reflective introductions and final reflections were created with Power Point, they composed texts that could have been done in a traditional manner, but presented them in short snippets. This meant they had to think about how to be as specific as possible while still being succinct, and because so many of the students included images they had to work with many of the same questions that the 107 students did in creating video essays. Both classes also practiced another literacy in creating their actual portfolios. Though most, if not all, the students had spent at least one complete semester using Blackboard as students, very few if any would had experience on the design end. Because they had control over content, design, and even levels of sharing, students who piloted the eportfolios practiced a new literacy, one that may transfer over to other web-based presentations from blogs to personal websites. Were it not for the digital portfolios, students wouldn’t have this experience. The pilot allowed students to grow as literate citizens in print and digital environments as suggested by NCTE’s 21st-Century Definition of Literacy discussed previously.

Portfolio Review Process

The portfolio review process at Midwestern is a communal process where instructors collect their students’ portfolios and have at least one additional instructor read and review the portfolios. Throughout the semester students receive grades on their essays from their instructors. At the end of the semester, all students compile a portfolio that includes clean, revised essays, sample process work, and sources (when appropriate). Prior to Spring 2009, all students created paper-based portfolios using folders with two pockets. While several classes
piloted electronic portfolios during the Spring 2009 semester, all other sections continued to use paper-based portfolios.

Students whose final paper grade average fell between the 73%-85% range were expected to submit their portfolios to their instructors (electronically or physically, depending on the course the students were enrolled). After this collection took place, instructors took all of the portfolios to the English office and deposited them on a table in a common space. Prior to the digital portfolio pilot, instructors would then select a stack of portfolios from another class, read through the portfolios, and, using a department-wide rubric, would make a judgment on whether the student’s portfolio demonstrated the necessary skills to pass the class. If the first portfolio evaluator disagreed that the portfolio showed passing writing, on the following day a second and sometimes third reader would read through the portfolio in order to come to a consensus.

With the introduction of electronic portfolios, however, this became more difficult. Because four instructors piloted digital portfolios, those four instructors were responsible for reading the collected artifacts. In each classroom then, students who created digital portfolios had to “share” their portfolios with the writing program administrator and the three other instructors who were teaching digital portfolios. Once the portfolios were shared with her, Teague created a chart to show who would be the first reader, second reader, and possible third reader. Because students shared the portfolios with all instructors, the review process, were a portfolio to need a second or third reader, would be easy enough since it had been organized so each student had a list of three readers. While a third reader was rarely needed in even the paper-based portfolio system, there were just enough instructors piloting digital portfolios to set this up.

On the first day of finals, all English faculty gathered in the English department for a pep talk as the daylong portfolio review took place. Teague handed out directions titled “Finals week
reminders – 106” (2009) and read through key points as she reminded everyone of the standards and goals of the portfolio process. After a quick review, the paper reviewers collected a stack of around thirty folders and return to their offices where they were expected to read through the portfolios.

As paper portfolio reviewers, they started with the final essays students wrote (typically the final, researched argument). Working backwards, portfolio readers were expected to use the grade sheet and mark “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory” in each of the four categories including thesis and development, style, documentation, and mechanics. During this process, if a portfolio receives four “satisfactory” marks, the portfolio passes and would not be read by an additional reader. If, however, the portfolio reader checked “unsatisfactory” in even one category, the portfolio receives an unsatisfactory rating and the portfolio would be read by another instructor on the following day. According to the “Directions for grading full portfolios” (2009), “No portfolio will fail based on only one reading. Two ‘unsatisfactory’ grades are required to fail a portfolio.” If the second reader agrees that the portfolio has at least one unsatisfactory component (of the four mentioned on the grade sheet), the portfolio fails. If, however, the second reader on day two believes that the portfolio demonstrates the programmatic standards, a third reader is assigned and the third reader makes the final call, and the majority evaluation passes. Even so, if the portfolio is deemed unsatisfactory, instructors still have the final say. The “Directions for grading full portfolios” (2009) sheet says instructors can go against the portfolio evaluation if they feel the student deserved a passing grade because the ultimate grade is the instructor’s decision since the instructor knows the student best. At the same time, the directions remind instructors that “it takes three instructors to fail [a] portfolio…. This usually suggests there is a problem, but again, sometimes there are unusual circumstances” where a
portfolio does not adequately represent a student’s writing ability. Because of this, the instructor has the ultimate say.

This process, again, was one that had been used in some manner for some time in the writing program. Exit portfolios and communal assessment are widely used. In fact, “communal writing assessment is an increasingly common part of the job for instructors and administrators of composition at the university level” (Broad, 1997, p. 134). This method of assessment is defined by Broad as “two or more judges working to reach a joint decision on the basis of a writing performance” (1997, p. 134). The portfolio review process at Midwestern then is two fold. It both acts as an “exit assessment for multisection courses, which may determine or affect students’ final grades” and it also acts as a “proficiency barrier” from allowing students to complete their 200-level writing requirement (White, 2007, p. 94). The use of such method of assessment corresponds with current scholarship on teaching writing and assessing writing, but Midwestern realized that communal review of portfolios was difficult when the portfolios were digital.

The four instructors to pilot digital portfolios were also the four digital portfolio readers. In submitting the digital portfolios, students shared their portfolios with all four instructors taking part in the pilot. The reading process for these four instructors was the same – they were to read starting with the final essay and use the paper-based grading rubric to make their evaluation. Unlike the paper-based portfolios, however, the portfolio readers were told that digital portfolios may not have sources and that “[a]ll instructors should have sources either on hand or be able to confirm them – call [the instructor] if you need to check something in MLA. Because this is the first time with multiple e-portfolios, try to give the students the benefit of the doubt” (“ENGL 106/107 electronic portfolio readers,” 2009).
As Yancey (1999) points out, there was an initial assumption that portfolios would be read in a single way, but “several recorded communal ‘readings’ have suggested at least two quite different portfolio reading processes – one, a linear process; and a second, ‘hypertextual’” (pp. 493-494). In what follows then, I pull from my observations to share the reading processes I observed in sitting with the four digital portfolio reviewers and share some of the obstacles and situations they faced. The reading process for the digital portfolios was split evenly between three of the four instructors: Dr. Longman, Professor Evans, and Professor Roberts each read seventeen portfolios while Dr. Teague read only six because of the additional running around and support she had to provide all instructors as the Writing Program Administrator. Each instructor taking part in the digital portfolio review had her/his own computer in her/his office, and each instructor allowed me to observe her/him for a while as she/he reviewed portfolios.

I began my morning sitting with Dr. Longman who, after checking emails, making copies, and preparing for a literature exam she had later in the day, began to read the portfolios. She sat quietly at her computer, pulled up the first student’s portfolio, read through the essays, and marked the grade sheet. After reading the first portfolio, she was prompted to log in to Blackboard again, though this was the only time this happened to my knowledge. As she continued to look through portfolios she commented on the differences between the portfolios. She said “Wow! That’s a lot of buttons” as she pulled up on student portfolio with about fifteen buttons going down the left side of the page. While these buttons each had a function for the portfolio keeper, the portfolio reader came to the experience with different expectations of how the buttons should function, as demonstrated in the discussion of the sample portfolios and student portfolios.
At another point in her reading process, Longman said one of the most frustrating parts of the reading process was finding the final essay. Because each instructor had their student call the final paper something different, evaluators weren’t always clear which essays to start with. In the paper-based portfolio, the top essay in the left pocket was the essay readers started with. In the electronic portfolio some students called their last essay their “Final Essay” while others named it “Essay 3,” “New Argument,” “Best Paper” or something else completely. Like Longman, Evans struggled with some of the portfolios he read when the buttons were named differently. He called Teague to ask about one of her student’s portfolios to find out whether he should read the “Revised Essay” or “Final Essay” first. In a communal review process, it is important for there to be a sense of order. If all instructors are expected to read essays in reverse chronological order, and all students are expected to produce their essays in that way, when common language and organization standards aren’t used in digital spaces this becomes difficult. Even in talking to Teague later in the day she noted that none of the instructors thought to tell students to name their final essay “Final Essay.” The difference in naming slowed the reading process and caused some minor confusion during the evaluation process; however, this was only a slight problem and will be addressed in the following chapter.

After leaving Longman’s office I made my way down to Evans’s office where he had been checking email, making phone calls, and reading a few portfolios. As I walked in, Teague came in to check on Evans as well and asked how he was doing. He said that the digital reading environment made it easier to pull up sources and to find information in sources or the body of the text. Both agreed that the search function in Word was a nice feature to be able to use, and as Evans settled back in to read he said that he felt like digital portfolios made it easier to catch plagiarists. In addition to having eportfolios in Blackboard, Midwestern also used “Safe Assign,”
a plagiarism detection software embedded in Blackboard. This program was brought up only one other time early in the semester as Teague was introducing me to the Blackboard components, though it is clear that Blackboard had many functions for both instructors and students. Instructors agreed this method of assessment was making it easier to catch academic dishonesty, even though there was another system in place across the university.

When Evans pulled up one of Longman’s student’s portfolios he seemed surprised and said “Oh, she had them do introductory Power Points.” After skimming through the student’s introduction he closed the document and said “Well then….Oh boy, Ok.” He seemed surprised and said “Wow! My student’s portfolios aren’t that together. She [Longman] had them put pictures on there – makes you see who you’re failing.” Again, in introducing her students to the portfolio project Longman said that the reflective introduction was a way to help the portfolio reader get a better sense of who the writer was, and as Evans’ comments point out, that personal element did just this; the picture and Power Point made him, as a reader, see the writer a real student with a face, friends, family, interests, and a plan for future writing. Of course, there was another portfolios he read that had an introduction explaining how the writer had grown over the semester and improved her grammar and sentence structure, but the introduction was riddled with fragments. The reflective introduction, just like a reflective memo or letter, can work for or against the student, and still functions as a sample of the writer’s ability to articulate her/his thoughts and develop her/his ideas even when presented in a different environment or using different tools.

On the second day of portfolio review I sat with Professor Roberts. As she read over a few digital portfolios and spoke with me, she said that one things that surprised her was the use of pictures. The previous day Evans had called Roberts to ask a question about one of her student’s
portfolios. When Roberts came in to Evans’s office she saw she had her student’s portfolio pulled up and the portfolio included a picture of the writer with her horse. Evans asked which essay to read as the final essay, and Roberts said the one on horse slaughter, but at the same time she said she didn’t know how her student had learned to put a picture on her portfolio. In reflecting the following day she was still impressed with her student’s portfolio and perceived initiative to go above and beyond the expectations set out by her instruction.

All of the digital evaluators agreed that the process had been easier than they had expected. Teague said that even though she would change some things, again for example the common language for the final essay, the process went quite smoothly. One student didn’t share his portfolio correctly so his read was delayed, but overall all portfolios worked. Evans mentioned around lunchtime that his Internet connect was slowing down, but again that resolved itself. The pilot itself went off without any major glitches, though there was one student in Longman’s class who had problems being granted access in the portfolio program itself and because of the troubled ended up creating a paper-based portfolio. The review process was slowed a bit as reader tried to figure out which essay to read first, but my observations showed a relatively successful pilot.

Conclusion

Through my observations, interviews, and textual analysis, the research questions that informed the larger study can better be understood and answered. Beginning with the question “What can an e-portfolio do that a paper-based portfolio does not,” this pilot demonstrates that the types of texts created in the two classes make it clear that digital portfolios accommodate multimodality in a way that paper portfolios cannot. Dr. Teague’s class used their portfolios to store their traditional essays and also their video arguments. Rather than needing to include their
videos on a flash drive or CD, the digital portfolio allowed for the multimodal texts to be presented in a functional environment. Longman’s students were able to extend their reflection to include traditional text while learning to negotiate new spaces, including Power Point and online spaces, as well as the use of images. These opportunities are difficult to replicate in a traditional portfolio. A Power Point may by printed and included in a paper portfolio, but the use of animation, timing, possible narrations, and other components are lost when these texts are presented in secondary environments – or when they are no presented on the screen.

The rich picture created in this chapter is an attempt to illustrate how a specific institution moved to incorporate electronic portfolios. From the various perspectives – the WPA, instructors, students, and portfolio evaluators – this chapter takes a specific institution’s move as a guide for future discussions about making changes to assessment in programs. Midwestern’s goal of voluntary piloting works as a starting point for future discussions that other institutions and programs may take away from this. The focus on voluntary change allows for a bottom-up and less disruptive change that is both responsible and reflective. The importance of considering multiple stakeholders is another point for other instructors, administrators, and programs to consider in moving towards assessment changes.

Through the discussion of the portfolio review process at Midwestern, the possible challenges to current understandings of assessment become apparent. From logistical issues, organization issues, to support issues, transitioning to digital portfolios, especially in a communally assessed program, demands a new approach to not only assessment but also the training and preparation of those involved in the program. For example, ensuring that all instructors have access to computers to read portfolios at the end of the term is as important as ensuring that classes have access to computer labs during the semester to create the portfolios.
The goal of this chapter has been to create a rich picture of the transition at Midwestern. During the semester I observed, interviewed, and collected artifacts from as many stakeholders as possible. From sitting in on faculty meetings to sitting in on classes and the final portfolio review, I have come to better understand how such a transition may take place and what may be learned from such a move. In the chapter that follows, I will pull together these observations to better understand what can be learned from Midwestern’s pilot program. The final chapter of this dissertation is broken down into implications for the larger field and for individual classrooms, and pulls from examples from this and previous chapters. Midwestern’s process proves an interesting starting point to discuss how others can make similar moves.
CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS, FINDINGS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This project stems from my interest in how technology is changing the way writing is done, is taught, and is assessed. These changes are evident in not only the places texts are produced and consumed, but also in scholarly conversations (NCTE, 2008; CCCC, 2005; CCCC, 2007; NCTE-WPA, 2008). While paper-based portfolios continue to be a good option for assessment, the effectiveness of paper-based portfolios must be re-evaluated to respond to the call for programmatic approaches that prepare students to be literate citizens (NCTE, 2008). Traditional portfolios cannot adequately represent video-based arguments and other multimodal texts that many writing teachers are assigning their classrooms. Digital portfolios, on the other hand, can accommodate these artifacts while still representing the traditional alphabetic texts, process, growth, development, and self-reflection traditionally valued by print-based portfolio systems. Because of this, many individual classes, programs, and institutions are moving toward electronic portfolios for assessment purposes. This dissertation addressed this transitional space to better understand a handful of research questions, all of which fall under the overarching question: Why eportfolios?

In order to answer this larger question, this dissertation addressed a series of questions in an effort to better understand how electronic portfolios were being used at a specific institution and what others might learn from that institution’s experiences. Using an ethnographically informed approach, as well as interviews, observations, and textual analysis, I worked to create a rich picture of how one program successfully piloted digital portfolios in a communally assessed, standardized writing program.

To this point, it has been my intention to understand not only how a specific writing program transitioned to digital portfolios, but also how digital portfolios accommodate new
media texts, the challenges and benefits of these emerging assessment tools, and the ways that these portfolios are being used. This study has highlighted assessment and writing studies scholarship and presented Midwestern University’s pilot program in order to further current conversations surrounding multimodal portfolios. This dissertation extends these conversations by exploring the transition and implementation process from multiple points of view. This approach creates a rich picture of what such a change may look like and shows different ways digital portfolios can be conceived.

As teachers of writing begin to rethink the nature of texts in the writing classroom, we are faced with the challenge of how to assess those texts. When we ask students to create texts in digital spaces, we must also revise the traditional ways we approach the evaluation process. Electronic portfolios have been one proposed answer to these changes because of their flexibility. The strengths of digital portfolios are numerous, including many strengths shared by their print-based counterparts. These strengths include the ability of to demonstrate process and product, encourage reflection and selection, and being a space for collection. However, digital portfolios also offer many possibilities that simply are not possible with print-based portfolios. For example, a web portfolio can accommodate multimodal texts and traditional texts. While traditional, print-based documents can be included as file attachments, read on the screen, or printed, an electronic portfolio can also become a space to share videos, link to blogs, or stream audio reflective introductions. For example, as one instructor mentioned during the introduction process discussed in the previous chapter, eportfolios allowed for students to include their video PSAs in their portfolios just as easily as their written scripts or an audience analysis. The types of texts that can be included in a paper portfolio are limited by the presentation mode. In a digital portfolio, however, projects using any number of tools can be demonstrated. As this
study has shown, the portfolios of students in Dr. Teague’s class included traditional Microsoft Word documents as well as video files; similarly, the students in Dr. Longman’s class included Power Point projects in addition to Microsoft Word documents in their eportfolios. While these results are in themselves compelling for teachers of writing and their students, equally as compelling are the possibilities not directly explored by the classes observed in this study. Students could have, for example, also linked to their Facebook pages, embedded YouTube videos, or uploaded music to their eportfolio. Because of the inherently intertextual nature of such spaces, digital portfolios better reflect the state of writing in the 21st-Century. Online portfolios are more relevant to students’ lives and connect the writing students are doing in the classroom to the rest of their lives.

Like paper portfolios, however, digital portfolios are not a perfect assessment tool. Questions of reliability, validity, and accuracy have been raised in response to the paper portfolio boom in the 90s (Elbow & Belanoff, 1997; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 1993; Huot & White, 2009). The same issues that face paper portfolios also face the electronic versions. In addition, there are technological issues that must be taken into account when considering the value of digital portfolios. For example, at Midwestern, the pilot was successful; but in classes where digital portfolios were piloted, all students were able to work on their portfolios in classroom labs during their assigned meetings. Though none of the classes were consistently in labs, being able to work and ask questions in class is an important element to consider in judging the level of success of this pilot.

Additionally, the four instructors to take part in this pilot each had access to technology in their offices, which meant they could read the portfolios during the evaluation process in the comfort of their offices. Lack of access may have made this process and the ultimate success of
the trial very different. Even so, reliability, validity, accuracy, and access are all points that
deserve further investigation. It is important to realize that none of these potential problems or
drawbacks kept paper portfolios from becoming a widely used, successful assessment method.
Similarly, these points should be used for future discussions of digital portfolios rather than as
stalling points in moving toward web-based portfolios. It is vital remember that “[w]hen we
collect one sample of writing performed under one set of conditions, we can measure a given
writer’s ability to produce that kind of writing under that set of conditions” (Hamp-Lyons &
Condon, 2000, p. 7). When we allow a writer the chance to compose and reflect on multiple
drafts or multiple works composed in multiple media, we give the writer the chance to succeed,
to grow, and to demonstrate multiple literacies and competencies. Digital portfolios allow for
this kind of demonstration and reflection.

With these strengths and potential limitations of eportfolios in mind, the goal of this final
chapter is to synthesize the implications and findings from the previous chapters in an effort to
succinctly and directly answer the research questions posed at the start of this project. I will
begin by summarizing the findings drawn from my observations, interviews, and analyses and
what these findings might suggest for our understanding of assessing 21st-Century texts. Then, I
will suggest several specific implications this study might have for the larger field of
composition studies and individual classroom application. Finally, the chapter will conclude
with suggestions for future research.

Coming To an Understanding of Eportfolios

In chapter two, I focused on how writing and the teaching of writing is changing, how the
spaces we are asking students to compose is changing, and in turn how our assessment is
changing to accommodate this evolving scene of literacy. Drawing from scholarship on the
benefits of print-based assessment methods, as well as the necessity of multimodal literacy, I argue that eportfolios may provide an important means for assessing student work in an increasingly multimodal classroom environment. In developing this discussion about portfolios, I answer one of my early research questions – specifically what can eportfolios do that paper-based portfolios do not?

The answer to that question, as this study has shown, lies in a fundamental understanding of the connection between representation and medium. While paper portfolios allow for writing instructors, programs, and students to demonstrate process, development, revision, and reflection, because students are working in new mediums it is important to consider how to best represent these. If students create a website, part of the rhetorical act of creation includes careful consideration about content, layout, formatting, and linking. When students are asked to create these types of documents that are interactive and dynamic, our assessment tools should consider the spatial and textual needs of these texts. Printing a website is easy enough, and the content itself can be replicated when printed, but when we print such a document, the product becomes static and loses its meaning and context.

By contrast, digital portfolios become a space where many different modes of text can exist harmoniously. From the traditional research essay which can be opened as an attached document (as seen in the discussion of Teague’s students’ portfolios), to the annotated bibliography that can be pasted into a blank page, these traditional texts can be read, understood, and assessed in digital spaces. At the same time, new media texts can also be included. Videos, still images, audio files, and media files that are just emerging or have yet to exist can be shared in a digital portfolio. The juxtaposition of traditional and multimodal texts, along with collection, reflection, and selection capabilities offered by eportfolio tools, make digital
portfolios a wise choice in assessing. Even so, electronic portfolios are not always the best choice, for reasons that will be discussed in the following section.

Based on the experiences at Midwestern University, piloting and transition to digital portfolios means that there must be moderate to significant changes in our approaches to assessment. While Teague told her students that “other than the mode of delivery, there [wasn’t] anything different” with the digital portfolios, the end result showed that this was not the case. For example, during the portfolio review process, Professor Roberts was surprised one of her students learned how to incorporate an image into her portfolio, and Professor Evans said that the portfolios created by Longman’s students really gave the reader a sense of who the students were. As he put it, the portfolios gave a face to the writer that a traditional paper portfolio didn’t. To assume that the only difference between an electronic and paper portfolio is the means of presentation is to ignore the relationship between text and reader, the medium the texts are encountered in, the types of texts that are considered appropriate, and the way these texts influence the reading experience (Muter & Maurutto, 1991; Dillon, 1992; Sutherland-Smith, 2002; Dyson, 2004; Ni, Branch, Chen, & Clinton, 2009).

For students, the act of creating a digital portfolio is quite different than creating a paper-based portfolio. At Midwestern, students made paper portfolios by using a paper folder with pockets on both sides. Students physically stored their papers in the pockets in reverse chronological order, were expected to have final, clean drafts on top of essay packets, and were instructed to give the portfolios to their instructor on the last day of class. This process meant that students had only to ensure that their essays were in the right order, all drafting and necessary documents were included, and the portfolio was complete. In the digital portfolios, students had to upload their final documents in some cases, and in other cases they had to upload
additional materials, such as draft work, invention materials, and sources. This meant that students were compiling their own work in a similar way to print-based portfolios, though the process was very different.

Students are often trained to organize their print-based portfolios by specific criteria, such as chronological order—a process many students find easy enough to follow. If nothing else, it’s clear which are drafts based on who has left the feedback and the type of feedback. However, when these documents are all in a digital folder it is a little more difficult. The act of carefully labeling drafts in either medium is important, but just as the actual collecting of materials for the portfolio is very different, the process of distinguishing between drafts and revisions in electronic environments loses the tactile sensibility. Because of this, there is the possibility of misnaming files or uploading the wrong files in the digital environment, a process that is more transparent in paper-based portfolios. Additionally, the format of how texts are presented and how texts are read differentiate the two types of portfolios. Traditional portfolios allow students to staple together documents, use paperclips to bind papers from a single unit, and group essays using portfolio folder pockets. Digital portfolios assign either buttons to each essay or pages to the work for an entire unit. Aside from the potential problem of labeling, the digital format seems to ensure that the reader’s experience is clearer. While students can put paper portfolios in the wrong order, which may cause problems, digital portfolios that are well labeled allow the portfolio reader to know which essay to begin with, at least in theory.

Of course, during Midwestern’s pilot, this was not the case. In such a program, where both instructors and students have freedom to call their assignments any number of things, readers sometimes were confused about which essay to read first. The study illustrated how, with eportfolios, if a portfolio has a “Final Revised Essay” button and a “Final Paper” button in
one portfolio, it may lead to confusion on the part of the portfolio evaluator. Midwestern ran into this problem with individual students naming their final, revised argument essay according to their own sensibilities as opposed to a pilot-wide standard, but because of open lines of communications between those taking part in the pilot, this problem was easily resolved.

What cannot be denied, however, is that digital portfolios are not just electronic versions of the paper-based portfolios, even when students are not expected to modify design elements and create flashy, multimedia reflection documents. Even if the digital portfolio is used for nothing other than uploading traditional essays, the collection and selection process still changes with an electronic portfolio system, as does the interaction between reader and the text. Each of these factors should play an important role in redefining our understanding of portfolios in the field of composition studies. To assume that paper and digital portfolios can be read and assessed in the same way is to ignore the full potential of the assessment tool, as well as the dynamic relationships between writer/portfolio keeper, text, and reader/portfolio evaluator. Teachers and administrators must therefore approach eportfolios with these complex relationships in mind.

Moving Forward With Eportfolios

While this project focused on Midwestern’s writing program, their design and implementation is clearly not the only way to incorporate digital portfolios. Institutions such as Clemson University (2010) require all undergraduates to demonstrate evidence of academic mastery in their electronic portfolios throughout their careers as students. Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis’ (2010) digital portfolio is an institutionally supported portfolio for institutional evaluation, reflection, and planning. Spelman College (2010) uses digital portfolios in their first-year writing and experience programs, while other schools such as Penn
State (2010) and the University of Minnesota (2010) offer digital spaces for professional portfolios for students, faculty, and alumni.

As this small sampling shows, eportfolios are being used in campuses across the nation, for multiple reasons. In fact, it is perhaps impossible to know all of the ways that eportfolios are being utilized, particularly since individual classroom implementation is difficult to track. What remains clear is that Midwestern’s use of digital portfolios during their pilot is just one of many possibilities for implementing the use of digital portfolios in a writing program. However, the pilot program at Midwestern also illustrates that digital portfolios can be a dynamic space for student writers to store, share, and showcase their writing throughout the semester. As might be expected, students reflected in addition to the collection process, and the portfolios also functioned as important artifacts for classroom and programmatic assessment.

The observation of two different courses at Midwestern also demonstrated that portfolios can be used differently within the same program. While Dr. Teague’s students used their portfolios to store and present their documents, for example, Dr. Longman’s students used the act of portfolio creation as a composing assignment. This difference in approach suggests that these digital writing and assessment spaces can be altered to meet different pedagogical, instructional, and assessment needs.

Through observation, interview, and analysis, this project has shown that the use of digital portfolios is one that should be taken slowly. Midwestern’s transition to electronic portfolios was a carefully planned, voluntary pilot program that took small groups of volunteers for testing the program. By having only volunteers take part, the Writing Program Administrator didn’t have to worry about faculty resistance. Instructors who volunteered to be part of the pilot did so out of interest, and this meant that elements such as fear and anger toward programmatic changes were
less prominent. Additionally, because the pilot only affected about four classes, the impact was easier to isolate and assess.

Other programs may implement a similar approach to digital portfolios. The use of program-wide, voluntary piloting allows for those most interested in the system to be part of the trials, errors, and revisions in the portfolio system. Leaving the actual piloting largely up to individual instructors within the program allows for multiple interpretations of the tool. For example, Longman had her students focus more on text creation in the portfolio itself than other instructors, but Teague had her students practice arguing a position in a video essay. These differences between individual classrooms became a space to allow for growth of a program’s expectations of the tool and student performance.

Because changing assessment practices are difficult, the benefits of voluntary piloting include practice and flexibility without needing to address opposition. While early discussions of the pilot program included some concerns about training, in the voluntary nature of the program at Midwestern meant that instructors who felt unprepared, uncomfortable, and uninspired by the prospects of the pilot did not have to play an active role in the process. However, even if faculty were not directly involved with the pilot itself, they were still included in discussions of the pilot’s progress, so that even those who consciously chose not to take part in the study knew what was happening and could ask questions. Institutions considering a pilot program for eportfolios should consider Midwestern’s approach, since voluntary participants who are interested and engaged in discussions about changes, even with understandable hesitation, make for an easier transition and assessment of the project. Even so, administrators must remember that making changes to programmatic assessment, even in the case of a small pilot, can be taxing on time and resources.
For example, in chapter four I discussed the portfolio review process wherein Teague had to make a chart of all students in the pilot classes. After creating this list, she had to assign portfolio readers, second readers, and third readers. Out of the four instructors piloting digital portfolios, it was possible that all involved faculty members would read the same portfolio (the three readers and the student’s own instructor). Because of the program’s system of reviewing portfolios, where no portfolio would fail based only on one reading, it was important for Teague to figure out how to distribute portfolios. With paper portfolios, it was easier for instructors to select a stack of portfolios and read them, and Teague wasn’t as heavily involved with the distribution process. However, by piloting eportfolios, Teague and the participating instructors were able to highlight the distribution issue; in short, they were able to see how the digital system worked and plan how to accommodate more digital portfolios in future semesters while ensuring that students had a fair read.

Implications for the Field

From these discussions, it is important that as a discipline, composition studies continue to stress the importance of mindful and considerate changes to assessment. In the case of Midwestern, the change was at least partially successful because it started small, was reflective, and was voluntary. Department-wide changes to assessment can be disruptive, so starting with a small selection of courses and using volunteers in the pilot effort reduces the potential for program-wide disruption. Additionally, because Teague allowed for open discussion in faculty meetings, she was able to address concerns about digital portfolios throughout the transitional process, from initial conception to the final stages of classroom implementation. The approach taken at Midwestern appeared more democratic than other approaches to changing assessment standards, particularly since Teague remained open to suggestions and considerations that arose
along the way. This approach valued the feelings and authority of instructors, the culture of portfolios in the program, and the possibilities for experimentation without forcing anyone to make a change (Gleason, 2000; Popham, Neal, Schendel, Huot, 2002). Ultimately, the model presented by Midwestern is one that deserves consideration and possible replication because, for the most part, this trial was positive and successful.

Even though Midwestern’s program may serve as a model for other programs looking to transition to eportfolios, it is also important to acknowledge several caveats. According to the CCC Committee on Assessment’s best-practices position statement (2009), assessment should be local. In other words, there is not a single assessment practice that will work for everyone. Eportfolios, for example, may or may not be the best choice for an institution, program, or class. Because of this, assessment needs must become part of departmental conversations. Figuring out what a program wants writers to learn and demonstrate is important, but equally important is deciding how best to assess these goals. This mindfulness corresponds to another of the CCC Assessment Committee’s best practices for assessment (CCC Committee on Assessment, 2009). The statement says that assessment should be selected based on learning objectives, learning outcomes, and program goals; assessment should be guided by and informed by curricular goals. Depending on the goals of a class or program, assessment may need to change. Just as writing assignments change between classes, the means of assessing those assignments may change to suit individual classroom outcomes and standards.

Communal portfolio assessment works for many schools, especially those who want to ensure that students in a wide range of courses are meeting common learning outcomes. Even so, communal portfolios are not the only option. Selective portfolio assessment is another option wherein a committee reads a random sample of student portfolios to ensure certain standards are
being met. Other options include giving instructors full autonomy in the assessment process, using rubrics or common grading standards and apparatuses, delivering final exams, soliciting student self-assessment, and so on. Regardless of current assessment methods, programs can learn from the transition process at Midwestern, even if they are not interested in transitioning to digital portfolios. With its open discussions and voluntary piloting, Midwestern’s democratic approach to implementing eportfolios is one other programs might consider in their tactics for making change.

This mindful approach to assessment should consider not only assessment best practices but also the importance of considering multiple stakeholders in current assessment practices. Changes in the way programs assess student writing influences not only the Writing Program Administrator and instructors/portfolio reader’s experiences but also the students in the program. Consider, for example, Arthur’s experience discussed in the previous chapter. Arthur had taken and failed to pass ENGL 106 and 107, which meant that in entering the digital pilot he had experiences with and expectations for paper-based portfolios. In fact, he entered the class with one very large paper portfolio that he brought to class and shared with me. Were he not in a class where he was expected to make an electronic portfolio, Arthur could have reused this folder and the files within it to show the true growth over his several attempts to meet the Composition II requirement. While Arthur was enthusiastic about being part of the pilot, this could have just as easily not been the case. It is important to consider how these changes affect students. Students who have experience with portfolios or previous assessment standards are perhaps a unique group, but even those who have no experience with previous institutional assessment practices may have very different expectations of what assessment “should” look like or do. The experiences of all of these groups, and those unintentionally overlooked, deserve attention.
In such a pilot, students are not the only ones who have changing expectations; the Writing Program Administrator has new expectations, as well. For example, Teague had to assign readers for the review process – something she had not had to do for the print-based portfolio system. Further, instructors have new expectations in that they must spend time teaching their students how to upload documents and to create the digital portfolio. While there is instructional time associated with paper portfolios, after teaching with paper portfolios for some time, this becomes second nature. When the portfolio system changes, however, instructors must learn the new system and teach it. Additionally, the reading process changes when eportfolios are used because of the changes to the ways texts are presented, the types of texts presented, and the ways that texts are consumed in electronic environments.

Considering all of these stakeholders is important in creating a sense of “buy in.” While this phrase may have a business-model connotation to it, there is an important element to the connotation. Getting stakeholders to understand the importance of new means of assessment and the value of digital portfolios is an important step in determining the success of any change. In the case of Midwestern, the University had a previous belief that digital portfolios were important, which is clear because the institution had the Content Management System in place before the pilot began. Additionally, the administration of the writing program saw the value in teaching multimodal composition and at the same time knew that traditional assessment wasn’t equipped to evaluate new texts. This level of support, added to instructional support, is important in determining success. Difficulties of application are challenging enough, but having a lack of institutional or programmatic support makes failure much more likely. Because of this, “buy in” allows for the process of change to stand a chance.
Of course, while the field should consider the stakeholders that are affected by such a change to assessment (Broad, 1997, 2003; Barlow, Liparulo, & Reynolds, 2007) and should work to create a culture of support that values such a change, it is also important to consider instructor training (Eldred & Toner, 2003; CCCC, 2004; Polly, Mims, Shepherd, & Inan, 2010; NCTE-WPA White Paper, 2008). This means that instructors must have sufficient time to familiarize themselves with new programs, and students should have access to instructors and other support options when the tools being used to assess their writing change. It is important that the field and programs looking to make changes recognize the need for discussions about preparation, instructional training, and assessment training.

Furthering this line of discussion, it is also important that we continue to question our assessment tools. Aside from the digital portfolio, Midwestern also used a standard paper-based rubric for portfolios. Teague acknowledged that this rubric, which had four broad categories, didn’t provide a space for evaluating issues of audience, design, or delivery (Tulley, 2009). While this ethnography demonstrates how one program began to move towards an assessment method that accommodates changes to the types of texts students are composing, further work must be done. Questions must be raised that consider whether our traditional understandings of “good” writing work in new environments.

Classroom Implications

While the goal of this dissertation has in part been to explain how eportfolios are being used and why they may be an appropriate tool for assessing writing, it is also important to understand that the options for such assessment are varied. In the case of the program, the larger University already had purchased stake in Blackboard for not only a universal Course Management System, but also the additional options of the Content Management System to
allow file storage and digital portfolio creation. Because this system was already in place, it made sense to build off of this established program in the Writing Program’s own pilot. When a program is institutionally supported, there are several guarantees or expectations that accompany the program and its stability.

To begin with, when an institution invests time and resources into a program like the Content Management System, there is a certain level of support that is expected. In the case of Midwestern, this support came in the form of institutional support and support from the program. Furthermore, in the case of this system, the institution had a long established relationship with Blackboard as a Course Management System, which meant that instructors had been using the tool for other purposes. This opened up another level of support as peers with more experience using Blackboard could help with some issues and questions for those instructors and students with less experience. For offices on campus and off campus, using this system for digital portfolios in the writing program guaranteed a certain level of support that other options may not have had.

In addition to being institutionally supported, there were other strengths to this system. Because administrators, instructors, and students had been using Blackboard in their classes and teaching, there was less of a learning curve when transitioning to eportfolios. Because there is a certain level of expectation that instructors use Blackboard to upload assignment sheets and syllabi, it is likely that all had used Blackboard both to retrieve documents and to post documents. On the other hand, because the digital portfolio pilot took place in the spring semester, nearly all students, if not all, had used Blackboard for at least one full semester. Even if they had only enrolled at Midwestern in the spring, because the portfolio creation process took place later in the semester, students were guaranteed at least a few months of experience with the
program. Those who took part in this pilot – instructors, students, and portfolio evaluators – all had experience with Blackboard and a familiarity with what a course shell in that system looked like and how it functioned. Using digital portfolios that mirrored this experience allowed for a level of comfort that other systems may not have provided.

Finally, one additional strength worthy of considering in such a system is the level of consistency for both teaching and evaluation purposes. Because the system allowed for some level of customization (for example, the color of buttons and text), the portfolios were customizable, while still having a shared structure. For example, even though the names and design of the buttons or links could be altered, all portfolios had this commonality. The way they functioned differed depending on how the portfolio creator set up their page, but the buttons or links were still a standard function and still directed the portfolio reader to the essays or assignments.

Even with the previously mention strengths of the portfolio system, programs contemplating a transition to digital portfolios must consider possible drawbacks. For example, in the Content Management System program, there are financial, spatial, and technical support issues that can make this system less effective. Because Midwestern was a small campus piloting only a small set of courses, this system worked well. However, a much larger program may not be as fortunate because of the needed server space and bandwidth required to execute such a program. Furthermore, because the system is housed within a University construct, once students graduate, they no longer have access to their portfolios. Along this same line, portfolios were not public, which made them more difficult to share. Each of these drawbacks, in addition to the obvious limitations in design and presentation associated with a standardized system, must be considered when picking a portfolio program.
The fact of the matter is that there are many options for digital portfolios. In addition to institutionally supported programs such as the Blackboard system, there are other programs where students can create accounts to host their portfolios. For example, the Epsilen portfolio system is associated with some institutions, but anyone with an email address can now create a portfolio with this program. Similar programs include the eportfolios through Colorado State University’s “Writing@CSU” website. These tools require minimal personal information and allow creators to upload essays and assignments and share work with others. These free tools are options worth considering in individual classrooms when entire programs are not ready to move to digital portfolios. While they are free, which may be their biggest selling point, these tools also limit portfolio keepers in terms of design, space, and support.

On the other hand, the option of using either blogs or hosted websites for digital portfolios is yet another option worthy of consideration. There are many free options for blogs, including Blogger, Wordpress, and more, and many institutions allow for web hosting and some level of support. With minimal experience, both of these options become a possibility for digital portfolios and at the same time allow for easier sharing of portfolios. In most cases, students remain in control of their blog accounts after the term ends and perhaps after they graduate. Of course, lack of support and limitations to design continue to be potential drawbacks to these options. At the same time, the lack of confidentiality involved with such websites is a notable consideration for students who wish to protect their privacy.

Perhaps the only definitive statement that can be made about electronic portfolio systems is that no system is perfect. Whether the tool is too closed off from sharing or too wide open,

---

6 The CSU portfolios can be found at the following link: [http://writing.colostate.edu/login/login.cfm?returnPath=/tools/portfolios/index.cfm](http://writing.colostate.edu/login/login.cfm?returnPath=/tools/portfolios/index.cfm)
whether there is not enough support or not enough freedom, all eportfolio tools have strengths and weaknesses. Understanding this, and having spent time observing how digital portfolios work, below I have proposed questions to consider when picking a digital portfolio platform for an individual class. These questions include:

• What technologies are available to me and to my students?
• What tool(s) do my students feel comfortable using?
• What tool(s) do I feel most comfortable using?
• Is there existing knowledge of a certain tool(s)?
• What is my goal for using this eportfolio?
• How do I see the content from this course/this portfolio being useful to students outside of this class? What is the best way to facilitate this?

Though this list of questions is surely not exhaustive, it is one way to start thinking about the goals of eportfolios and builds on the multi-stakeholder approach to assessment suggested by the design and implications of this ethnography.

Future Research and Conclusion

As with many researchers, as I come to a close with this project I am left with more questions that deserve answers. Because of space and time constraints, however, these questions must be left for future study. While this project creates a rich picture of one institution’s transition to digital portfolios, the picture painted through the course of this project remains limited. Institutional size, student population, instructor population, multiple levels of support, and technology availability are all issues that make Midwestern an ideal program to pilot digital portfolios. In addition to these points, Midwestern entered into the project with a history of paper-based portfolios, was self-piloting only a few select classes, and had administrative and
faculty interest. In future studies, it would be equally interesting to look at other programs where the support is less universal, where the technology is less accessible, where the student population is more prepared or less prepared for college, or any combination of other situations. Future research may take up some or all of the research questions that guided this project and look at other institutions. Examinations of how other institutions implement digital portfolios would deepen the field’s understanding of how web portfolios are changing assessment, how they are accommodating writing pedagogy, and the ways these tools can be used to benefit students, instructors, programs, and institutions.

On an instructor level, further research on the reading process of portfolios deserves more attention. This may include comparative studies between paper-based portfolios and digital portfolios or examinations of the accuracy, validity, and reliability of digital portfolio assessment. Additionally, a deeper analysis of the reader’s process of viewing and interacting with eportfolios deserves additional research so as to better understand how assessment methods change the writer/audience relationship.

In addition to furthering the current line of questioning, there are additional lines of inquiry that this research has suggested. For example, in Dr. Longman’s class she asked the students to view the creation of their portfolio as their final “essay.” Looking at how students use digital portfolios as textual creation deserves additional attention to consider not only multimodal writing, but also other lines of questioning. These questions may include investigating how the act of creating a portfolio may lead to new levels of agency, or exploring whether the tools used for reflection (such as Power Point, videos, and podcasts), affect the level of reflection that is taking place. These and other questions that continue to emerge are important to consider and research. Even though “[p]ortfolios have the potential to disrupt the
prevailing negative attitudes toward assessment,” careful and conscious theory-based pedagogy is necessary to keep them from being “a sort of glorified checklist” (Huot, 2002, p. 71).

Continued research, then, remains important, and the previous questions are only a starting point for mapping such research trajectories.

The research questions that have informed this discussion stemmed from the overarching research question: Why eportfolios? As I approached this study and tried to figure out what exactly I wanted to understand, this question was raised again and again. I believe this dissertation provides one possible answer to this question. It also suggests a means for assessing the writing we are asking our students to do and the multimodal writing that is expected of literate citizens in the 21st-century. While this dissertation examines a single institution, the approaches and findings from the rich picture generated from observations, interviews, and analysis can act as a starting point for future discussions of programmatic and institutional transitions to electronic portfolios.
REFERENCES


(Eds.), *Ethics and representation in qualitative studies of literacy* (pp. 134-154). Urbana: NCTE.


http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/123773.htm


LeCompte, M. D., & Schensul, J. J. (1999). *Designing and conducting ethnographic research: Ethnographer’s toolkit*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira P.


College Composition and Communication, 5(3), 123-126.


application for expanding the teaching of composition (pp. 43-110). Logan: Utah State UP.


The University of Findlay undergraduate catalog. (2007). Retrieved from


University of Minnesota. Welcome to ePortfolio! University of Minnesota. Retrieved from https://portfolio.umn.edu/


considerations in writing assessment. In B. Huot & P. O’Neill (Eds.), *Assessing writing: A critical sourcebook* (pp. 57-80). Boston, Bedford/St. Martin’s.


faculty, and institutional learning (pp.15-30). Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education.

