



What Is the Purpose of an Electronic Portfolio? Is the Answer the Key to Your Successful Implementation?

By Margaret Price, Spelman College

Editor's comment: Among many themes, Margaret Price explores the theme of purpose in her Viewpoint. One purpose of ePortfolio is to reflect on change from a beginning to a later point in time. In a future Viewpoint, Margaret will return to the SpEl.Folio and we'll see how her thinking and her project have evolved.

As the director of [Spelman's](#) newly-instituted Electronic Portfolio Project (SpEl.Folio), I've come to realize that a central question of our project is, "What is an electronic portfolio?" Is it a medium? Is it a genre, or a set of genres? Is it a delivery system? Is it an assessment tool? Is it a means to reflection and learning? Is it a savvy career move? Is it a flashy new container for the work students already are doing? Is it a pain in the butt?

Readers of *SmartClassroom* have thought about these questions, and probably have well-developed responses to them. But the audience that concerns me most is the students and teachers at Spelman, a historically black liberal-arts college for women. They sometimes seem to view the electronic portfolio as a flashy container and/or pain in the butt. It's this audience, and the perceptions they ultimately form, on which the success of Spelman's project relies. And, as frustrated as I might get when explaining for the hundredth time that an eFolio is not simply in Kathleen Yancey's memorable phrase "print uploaded," I must pay attention to these responses. For, if the users and authors of SpEl.Folio view it merely as a flashy container or pain in the butt (or both), that's exactly what it will be.

History of SpEl.Folio

Students at Spelman demonstrate the ease with digital technologies we've come to expect from the "Net Generation." They text message and instant message, manage multiple e-mail accounts, and perform most of their scholarly research online. However, as Cynthia Selfe and others have pointed out, being a user of digital technologies is not the same as being a *critical* user, and Spelman students, like others, are still learning about issues such as copyright and fair use, assessing Web sites, and what [Wikipedia](#) is and is not. Faculty are also learning these things; my anecdotal impression is that many Spelman faculty, more so than faculty at the large state universities where I've taught, approach digital technologies with hesitation. Fortunately, the availability of smart classrooms, equipment such as computer projectors and video cameras, and free workshops at Spelman is excellent and may help to build faculty confidence during implementation.

In short, we have most of the *stuff* we need, and the SpEl.Folio Project's greatest task is not in acquiring space and machines, but in developing students' and faculty's understanding of the project – most importantly, how their purposes as learners and teachers can be served by the project. Spelman's Office of the Provost has responded to the pilot project with enthusiasm, perceiving that its purpose in educating young black women to be scholars and leaders can make use of the interdisciplinary and reflective power of SpEl.Folio. In fact, SpEl.Folio has become intertwined with the administration's current project of revising and clarifying Spelman's [Statement of Purpose](#), which focuses on students' abilities to integrate their intellectual, personal, and professional work. Participants in SpEl.Folio find ourselves in an exciting space: instead of attempting to fit ourselves into a college mission that doesn't quite match our vision, our project's purpose and Spelman's purpose are evolving in unison.

SpEl.Folio grew out of the college's Comprehensive Writing Program (CWP) in part because the CWP has been using an interdisciplinary writing portfolio for more than a decade. In its original paper form, the portfolio was designed to foster reflection and assessment of students' writing in their first year. Each portfolio contained several essays from a student's first-year classes, as well as a reflective letter. Portfolios were collected in paper form (housed in manila folders) and assessed by a jury of faculty from across the disciplines. In 2004, as we began to investigate the possibilities of a shift to an electronic version of the First-Year Portfolio, we held a series of group interviews with students and faculty to learn their impressions of the paper portfolio and of a possible migration to electronic form.

One thing we learned from this study that didn't surprise us was that students' main feeling toward the paper

portfolio was annoyance: it was something to “get over with,” rather than a means to learn, synthesize, or reflect upon their work. Over and over again, as they described their work on the portfolio, students in different groups repeated the same gesture: a pantomime of placing papers in a folder, slapping the folder shut, and pushing it away. What did surprise us was that, when discussing the possibility of composing electronic portfolios, students expressed cautious interest, but also a concern that such a time-consuming project would be more appropriate for personal rather than academic work. As explained by one student, Chandra:

I wouldn't really want to do it for school because, for me, it would take me a long time. I'd have to put music on it, get every picture that I want, I would have to get it perfect for me... But for school I'd rather do something like what we had to do [the paper portfolio]; just a little something to do and be over with.

What strikes me about this remark is Chandra's separation of work done for school and “for me.” Clearly, she is willing to devote considerable energy and time to a project that has significance for her; but she also seems to assume that projects done for school and “for me” have no overlap.

These findings were both discouraging and exhilarating. As we moved to an electronic portfolio, we charged ourselves with the task of bridging this perceptual gap between work done “for school” and “for me.” We envisioned an electronic portfolio project that encouraged students to understand that their personal concerns *are* academic concerns, and vice versa. We wanted to create a model by which reflection and synthesis were not additions to an existing body of work, but entwined with the work itself. For, as we (idealistically, but truly) told each other and students, lifelong learning does bring together personal and intellectual concerns.

The question was, how?

SpEl.Folio: The First Three Years

Bolstered by our initial study, Comprehensive Writing Program staff set out to make the project purposes transparent to portfolio authors, and to ask students to help us understand their own purposes – actual and desired – for their portfolios. Our design is intended to be slow-growing and dialogic, ultimately engaging all students across the entire curriculum. As electronic portfolios spread into more classes and across more majors, we will keep asking students and faculty alike: “What do you want from this portfolio? What are you using it for? What do you think you are being asked to use it for? How can this project be more responsive to your own purposes?”

The initial project design was simple: enlist a small team of volunteer instructors, and ask them to integrate electronic portfolios into a few pilot sections of first-year core classes. Portfolios were built using Web editors (primarily FrontPage and Dreamweaver), and stored on CDs. In the first two years of the project, these classes were in First-Year Composition and the Computer Science program. Students who had composed course-based portfolios also completed their First-Year Portfolios in electronic form. In our present, third year, the volunteer instructors come from a range of disciplines, including [history](#), [chemistry](#), drama/dance, and biology, and teach both in the core and in upper-level major courses.

Thus far, we deliberately have avoided selecting a central system for the building, storage and dissemination of SpEl.Folio. Possibilities abound, from open-source to prepackaged to custom-designed, but we have delayed because we wanted to learn more about just what it is we're placing into that system. We believe that the system selected will have much to do with the quality of learning it fosters. As Kathleen Yancey has pointed out, “What we ask students to do is who we ask them to be.” We fear instituting a system that will push students and faculty away from our central goal of author-determined and reflective purpose, and so we will gather experiences until Fall 2007 and then implement a central system.

During this slow-growing process, we've taken the following steps to enact and learn more about our desired focus on purpose:

- Students and instructors in the pilot classes complete introductory and exit surveys that ask how they perceive the electronic portfolio, especially in terms of audience and purpose.
- Each year, workshops are held to support faculty and students working on the pilot project. Some of the workshops focus on technical skills, but most of them are centered on discussions and development of learning: how to design assignments, manage assessment, and engage in ongoing reflection.
- Pilot faculty meet informally for lunch to talk about their course-based electronic portfolio assignments.
- The Comprehensive Writing Program hired four student assistants whose job is to help students and faculty work on

multimedia projects. These assistants offer one-on-one tutoring, and visit classes on request.

- A steering committee with representatives from the Spelman student body, faculty across the disciplines, administration, and library staff was formed, and works to share concerns from these diverse populations and to guide the project's forward progress.

Findings of the Pilot Project

Some of the findings from the first three years of the project have been unsurprising. For example, the most common concerns expressed by students and faculty are what new technical skills they'll have to learn, and how much extra work electronic portfolios will entail. Two findings, however, have been surprising: first, the persistence of the question, "What is an eFolio?" and second, the revision of curricula at Spelman that has grown along with the SpEl.Folio project.

What exactly *is* an eFolio? As I continue to hear this question (in workshops, written on surveys, in quick hallway conferences, relayed from students to me by multimedia assistants), I've come to realize that this question is more about process than product. As project director, I regularly offer a working definition, drawing upon various sources, but, like the questions, "What is an essay?" or "What is reflection?," this question is better served as a source of ongoing dialogue than as something to be answered and moved on from. To insist that the answer is straightforward or that all participants in SpEl.Folio should share a definition would work against our project's central focus on purpose. I'm a believer in clear *guidelines* for various contexts, but I've learned from the students and faculty involved in SpEl.Folio that the question *What is an eFolio?* not only can be, but should be asked again and again, with attention to the rhetorical implications of its many possible answers.

The other discovery made as we've researched the first three years of SpEl.Folio has been that it is deeply involved in the revision of curricula at Spelman – ranging from individual courses, to majors, to the College's own mission statement. I don't argue that SpEl.Folio has caused this shift, but it has indisputably played a role. When I began this project, I envisioned it to be small and contained: simply a shift of medium for the First-Year Portfolio. However, as it's continued to grow throughout the core curriculum and in the majors, I've realized that it touches on some of the deepest questions that educators must ask: "What do I want students to learn? What do I mean by terms like *engagement*, *writing*, and *critical thinking*? What are we teaching in our majors? How do we know when our teaching has been successful?" The project's focus on purpose has come to be even more salient than we initially believed, for the purposes we are questioning and re-visioning are not only students', but our own as faculty and the college's itself.

A few days ago, I showed a colleague two questions I wanted to send to department chairs who are considering incorporating SpEl.Folio into their majors. The questions I'd written were these:

1. What goals or ideas in your major do you hope to serve if you incorporate an electronic portfolio?
2. How can the SpEl.Folio Project help you reach these goals, or develop these ideas?

My colleague, putting her finger directly on the key issue that has arisen this year, suggested that I add a third:

3. If you incorporate an electronic portfolio in your major, what in your department will have to change?

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