Chapter 21
Strategies for Implementing Digital Assignments

Paige Normand
James Madison University, USA

Alexa Senio
James Madison University, USA

Marlena Luciano
James Madison University, USA

ABSTRACT

In chapter, the authors draw from their in-class experiences, one-on-one tutoring sessions, focus-group interviews with students, and discussions with all of the course-embedded peer tutors about their experiences working in digital communication across campus, to discuss some of the "behind the scenes" issues that students face that might be invisible to faculty. The authors' observations and reflections over the past two years have led them to identify common hurdles on their campus and identify solutions for faculty interested in incorporating digital assignments into their curriculum. The chapter addresses the following obstacles faculty might face and offers solutions: (1) students do not understand the value of the digital assignment, (2) students are not confident the faculty will accurately evaluate their digital production, (3) students' skill development is hampered by their anxiety about their aptitude and confusion about their process for digital production, and (4) students do not feel comfortable sharing honest concerns and anxieties about digital composition with their instructor.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the authors define "digital assignments" as any class assignment that asks students to create content that is publicly available or sharable online, typically through websites, digital stories, and professional portfolios. Faculty and institutions' push for these assignments reflects changes in higher education to prepare students for the key demands of the knowledge economy: solving complex problems, adapting to new technology, and communicating effectively online. Digital assignments offer an

opportunity for students to take greater ownership of their learning (Ng 2015), improve their autonomy as learners (Ting 2015), increase their confidence with digital tools (Smith and Chipley, 2015), engage in active learning (Simatele, 2015), and connect their learning across disciplines (Eyon, Gambino, and Török, 2014). When faculty develop digital assignments in their courses, they offer their students an opportunity to produce content that not only furthers their disciplinary knowledge, but also helps them share their work more publicly and reflect on their development as learners. Academic digital projects have the ability to be more transferable, both because digital assignments are often created for audiences outside the class dynamic and because students can more easily collect and showcase digital work in an online portfolio, which offers a comprehensive overview of their academic accomplishments.

However, digital assignments often require significant changes to traditional assignments. To produce digital work, students need to develop new skills that might not necessarily connect to the course material, such as digital literacy skills, understanding and consideration of copyright, accessibility, and privacy, as well as potentially communicating to a large audience of readers. Through their public availability, these assignments can decentralize the typical work of the classroom. When their assignments are reframed as projects for an external audience or work that can be showcased on a digital portfolio, the instructor is no longer the sole or perhaps most important reader of the students' work. Eyon, Gambino, and Török (2014) in their assessment of over 24 campuses' implementation of online portfolios found that external audiences can "raise the stakes for production" and that when students gather their work in a digital portfolio, it helps them "engage more deeply with content and concepts, integrate their understandings, and develop a more purposeful approach to learning" (p. 102).

BACKGROUND

While students might think of professional portfolios as a practical tool for the job market, faculty should consider how assigning digital projects and discussing the value of a digital portfolio can help students more accurately reflect and describe their role as learners, work through complex problems, identify areas they want to develop, and hold themselves to standards external to their course grades. Eyon, Gambino, and Török (2014) report "ePortfolio practices correlate with substantially higher levels of student success, as measured by widely recognized indicators, including: course pass rates, GPA, credit accumulation, retention across semesters, and graduation" (p. 96). As more faculty integrate digital assignments into their courses, more students are given the opportunity to synthesize and demonstrate their intellectual development through a digital portfolio that showcases their growth, skills, and academic experience.

Digital Native Myth

Due to college students' increasing use of social communication online, both faculty and students often miscalculate students' ability to adapt to new communication tools. Social media companies, such as SnapChat, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, design their products to be incredibly user-friendly and gratifying through the constant reward of notifications, communication, and validation. However, professional digital communication tools require much more thought and consideration to use the tools effectively and share meaningful messages. Academic tools, such as StoryMap JS and Timeline JS produced by Knight Lab at Northwestern University, and professional storytelling platforms, such as Atavist, require significantly more practice, skill development, and troubleshooting than social media.

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