From the Stage to the E-Page

BY SHAWN MAUREEN POWERS

The Gaze across the River

We lived in a third-floor walk-up, about eight blocks east of the banks of the East River in Queens. The apartment building was at the top of a slight incline, which made walking to and from the elevated subway sometimes precarious in icy winters. But the building's subtle command of the surrounding architecture also offered a spectacular view of the Triborough Bridge and the Upper East Side of Manhattan. At night, the lights of Manhattan drew my gaze beyond the apartment windows, beckoning me to reflect on the life I had paused when I left Manhattan and returned home to Queens.

It was in this apartment in the 1980s and '90s that my roommates would often find me lost in that gaze. I was an actor working "downtown," doing low-budget, experimental theatre. My gaze back towards Manhattan was typically devoted to that day's rehearsal or that evening's performance. The gaze often involved problem solving. Focusing on a stage moment that wasn't working, a moment that didn't seem to be effective for my scene partner, our director, or myself, I would think back to the myriad technique classes I had experienced to find an approach that might unlock the mystery that surrounded the troubled moment. Or the gaze through our apartment windows may have been devoted to a particularly great moment that

had occurred on stage or in the rehearsal room. In those instances, I was trying to analyze the technique I was using to make it effective so that I could call on it again in the future.

This conscious effort to analyze and reflect on my work was important to me as a theatre artist because my own experience with the art form had transformed technique into intuitive behavior. This intuitive or instinctual way of working usually served me well. My years of training had become embodied and I could trust my body/mind to make interesting choices. But when my intuition failed me, it became imperative for me to find a solution through conscious, intellectual analysis. Without realizing it, I was engaging in a formative assessment practice. The performance on stage in front of an audience was the summative act.

For the artist, there is a compelling drive to engage in such assessment practices. The creative process is possessed by the need to find the right balance among elements, to revise the canvas or the latest draft, to engage in a "constant correcting of errors" (Esler, 2011). Because of the nature to contemplate both work done in the past and its influence on work to be done in the future, this drive can be likened to Damasio's extended consciousness (Given, 2002). This kind of assessment develops the individual by influencing "imagination of what might have been and what might be" (Given, 2002, p. 107).

Cardboard and Duct Tape

I bring this experience to bear in my new role as the coordinator of general education at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU). Moving out of the arts field and into an administrative position within higher education has been a journey of discovery to find the connective tissue between arts practice and educational leadership. I find myself in constant movement back and forth between these worlds, translating the intentions and aptitudes of the skill sets of one field into the other.

General education at SNHU is a competency-based program of coursework that students are required to take outside of their majors and minors. In my own undergraduate career as a drama major, the general education requirements had me taking botany and geology as well as history and philosophy alongside dramatic literature and advanced acting. The program at SNHU possesses some of those same distribution requirements but seeks to integrate learning across disciplines and apply it to essential ques-

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tions in regard to ethics, diversity, global and popular culture, and other topics of interest and concern for 21st-century young adults.

My position includes a focus on program assessment to try to determine the outcomes students are achieving in their general education experience. At the time of my hire, the university was using an electronic portfolio (e-portfolio) system for a variety of purposes, including a plan to gather students' artifacts and their assessment scores within general education courses. Though I had used assessment practices within my own program evaluation activities as an arts educator, the world of e-portfolios was new to me.

One of my first inquiries into e-portfolios focused on any instrumental difference there might be between using an e-portfolio and the physical portfolios art students construct out of "cardboard and duct tape" I queried whether different cognitive skills are called upon depending on the medium used for the portfolio (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2007, p. 37). My attempts at literature reviews around this question returned nothing of a direct response to the inquiry. However, I did find what might be a link in Hetland, Winner, Veenema, and Sheridan's (2007) *Studio Thinking*. The authors' description of Jim Woodside's drawing class at Walnut Hill School for the Arts noted that making portfolios out of cardboard taught students that "basic to being an artist is a kind of resourcefulness" (p. 37).

Yet, this resourcefulness, I later learned, is not restricted to the portfolio work and learning of artists. At a general education conference, I encountered colleges and universities that utilize free platforms in their portfolio projects. Nevertheless, I made the decision to always refer to the portfolio work that SNHU students were using for general education assessment as e-portfolio work. Perhaps a nascent Luddite instinct was evolving within me in that I needed to retain a distinction between the physical world of cardboard and duct tape and the virtual world of blogger and Google docs. Though I didn't have a literature review to buttress my decision, my empathetic colleagues and supervisors at SNHU supported my nomenclature.

It was with an assessment outlook that I attended my first Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) annual meeting in Washington, D.C., in 2012. As a newly hired general

education coordinator, I embarked on an immersion in e-portfolio practice.

A Digital Presence

My immersion project started early in the conference schedule at the pre-meeting symposium. I participated in a workshop called "ePortfolios from the Ground Up: Planning, Creating, Implementing." The session was led by Bret Eynon and J. Elizabeth Clark of LaGuardia Community College. As the title suggests, the workshop was an overview of the pedagogy, uses, strategies, and considerations of using e-portfolios in higher education. While I was approaching my quest from a primarily assessment outlook, I became transfixed by what these presenters had to show when it comes to the breadth of outcomes associated with e-portfolios.

The uses of e-portfolios are manifold. The presenters organized these uses according to the following frameworks:

1. course e-portfolios for documenting learning in a single course in a single semester
2. integrative e-portfolios for documenting learning over time, making connections across courses and experiences
3. showcase/credential e-portfolios for use in evaluating status for transfer, employment, evaluation, registration, and credentialing
4. assessment e-portfolios for program review or student competencies
5. learning e-portfolios for metacognition and deepening learning and making connections (Eynon & Clark, 2012)

I was inspired by the case studies the presenters shared from their work at LaGuardia. Their use of e-portfolios had expanded from a framework of limited use within courses (number one in the preceding list) to an expansion as capstone tools for analysis and integration of learning across disciplines and experiences (number five in the preceding list). This progression from a limited use to a metacognitive capstone experience was marked by the increased use of reflective practice among the students.

Additionally, LaGuardia Community College's use of e-portfolios correlated to improved student learning. The college was experiencing higher course-pass rates as well as improved retention. Their Community College Survey of Student Engagement was also finding higher levels of engagement within key areas of academic performance.

The presenters also provided evidence to support what I thought was my Luddite-inspired decision to distinguish the SNHU students' use of e-portfolios from the portfolio practice of visual artists. E-portfolios, unlike their cardboard cousins, build technology and web-authoring skills (Eynon & Clark, 2012). They promote a positive digital presence that might otherwise be limited to associations with #regrets or #cheatsheet, which won't assist students in their post-college work or education goals.

The SNHUfolio

Upon returning to the SNHU campus from the conference, I was stirred by what I had encountered. I was moved by the metacognitive effect that e-portfolio learning had on students. I wanted our new general education program to maximize the power of e-portfolios: I wanted our assessment practice to connect to metacognition. Some departments at the university were already using e-portfolios for many of the manifold uses that LaGuardia Community College had shared with us at the AAC&U conference. I wanted this practice to become a university-wide culture.

The new general education program seeks integrative learning in its design. Students are required to study a topic and its essential, big questions from a variety of perspectives as part of their general education. They will be exploring questions around diversity through coursework in economics, literature, and sociology. They are going to contemplate ethics through studies in philosophy, history, and science. At the time of my hire, there were already some general education curricular designs in place for students to create e-portfolios in their junior and senior years that demonstrated their learning and achievements. But those e-portfolios and the learning outcomes that they could possibly engender have to be achieved over time. Our tool for achieving this is the SNHUfolio.

Every student entering SNHU as a traditional freshman or transfer student has to take a college success course to assist with his or her transition to college on the SNHU campus. In the pilot of this new transition course, the students created course e-portfolios to help train them in the use of e-portfolios. Many will not touch an e-portfolio again until their junior year, when they take another required transition course, titled Life After SNHU.

The SNHUfolio is designed to be used throughout the students' careers at SNHU. Their freshman/first-year transition courses impress upon them the importance of uploading their coursework as artifacts into their SNHUfolio. Doing so ensures that they develop a substantial library to draw from as they approach their development of professional e-portfolios for Life After SNHU and their senior general education capstone. They are urged to "collect, select and reflect" (Stefanakis, 2002, p. 14) during their time at SNHU.

We only just launched the new general education program and its SNHUfolio in fall 2012. Presently, there isn't any data to provide insight into success or lapses. There have been some anecdotal incidents that make me optimistic that students will be able to make connections. One of these situations involved a work-study student who assisted us in building the assessment mechanisms for the new general education program. The program assessment is administered through our e-portfolio program. On her own initiative, the student started exploring the SNHUfolio. She uploaded dozens of artifacts that connected her learning and college experience to the general education learning outcomes, in addition to an area devoted to workforce skills and traits. She explicitly reflected on how her experience connected to the outcomes and skills. She was integrating and applying her learning across disciplines and situations. This example gives me hope for her classmates.

Kismet and an Extended Conscious

As we await the first round of assessment data and the full launch of the new program, I have built a professional e-portfolio for communication with my supervisor. Though we meet face-to-face on a regular basis, I provide him with weekly updates of my work. The e-portfolio provides a place where I can share with him artifacts of my work, which can range from presentations and marketing materials to decision-tree models and curriculum design. When my performance review takes place in the spring, we will have rich documentation to draw from in discussing my performance at SNHU.

I also share with him other moments of my life, such as a digital representation of a painting at the Museum of Modern Art that stopped me in my tracks during a summer visit to New York City. Or a link to an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* that gave me pause when contemplating the power and necessity of education in the aftermath of the Arab spring. These particular moments of reflection provide my supervisor with multimodal insight into his new hire.

For myself, I continue to translate the practice of art making into higher education leadership. This includes a connection to John Berger's description of drawing as a "constant correcting of errors" (Esler, 2011). My own professional reflections in my

e-portfolio that I share with my supervisor come about through a constant correcting of drafts and revisions. How I want my work week to be presented to my boss involves taking the time to reflect on my perspective and that of my audience. It is not unlike my young gaze back across to Manhattan, where I had paused my work for rest and reflection. My pause in New Hampshire allows me the opportunity to understand my choices and how they meet the expectations that have been set for me.

It is not lost on me that the foundational significance of my e-portfolio quest came about through an interaction with LaGuardia Community College. The college is located just a few miles south of that apartment in Queens that overlooked the East River—kismet that brings me delight. My reflective practice allows my work in the past to influence my present work and what I will produce in the future. It is an extended consciousness that has crossed the East River to New England and connects my life as an artist to my practice as an educational leader.

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Shawn Maureen Powers is the Coordinator of General Education at Southern New Hampshire University in Manchester, NH. She is also an adjunct instructor in the Education Department at Plymouth State University, Plymouth, NH and in the Liberal Arts Department at the New Hampshire Institute of Art in Manchester, NH.