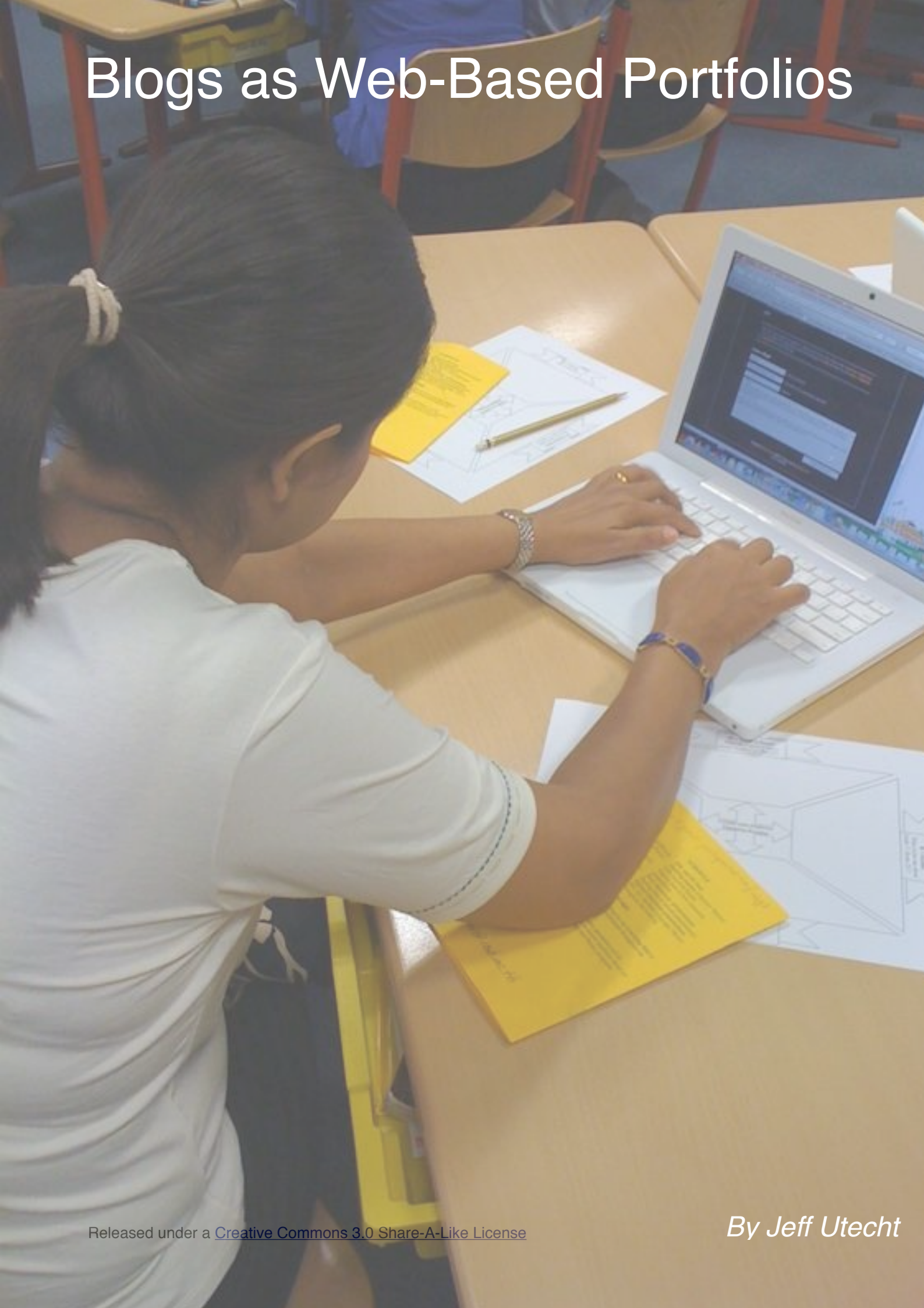
Blogs as Web-Based Portfolios



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The Purpose

The purpose of this PDF is to help schools looking at adopting Web Based Portfolios (WBP) as a form of assessment with students over a period of time. By adopting a web-based platform as a container in which to house portfolio content, schools give students a web-based vehicle with endless possibilities to create, collaborate and communicate their learning to the world.

All-In-One Assessment Vehicle

Web Based Portfolios have been gaining ground in recent years as the skills needed to create digital content have become less complex. Remember the days when a digital portfolio meant courses in Dreamweaver or some other programing language? Those days are behind us as the tools of the web have taken over and simplified things to a point where a true Web Based Portfolio is possible.

In the past, schools, teachers and even students had to decide what their portfolio was going to reflect. Was it going to be a portfolio that showed assessment ***for*** learning or assessment ***of*** learning? The decision had to be made because in a paper-based world you just did not have enough space to physically hold all of the content to show both. In fact, in a paper-based world many teachers and schools started out envisioning their portfolios as a way to reflect on assessment *for* learning. In many cases, due to physical requirements in holding the amount of paper it took to show the learning process, many teachers and students ended up creating portfolios that showed assessment *of* learning. When a choice has to be made because of limited space to keep a rough draft or a final copy students will keep the final copy, and so will teachers.

WBPs if nothing else, solve this age old portfolio issue. With the cost of servers and web storage continuing to drop, creating endless storage space for students to show the learning process and allowing teachers to assess *for* learning is cheap and getting less expensive every day.

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When students have endless space, a WBP not only shows assessment *for* learning, but also assessment *of* learning. We now have a vehicle that has the space to allow students and teachers to have the best of both worlds all in one place and the ability to track learning over great lengths of time.

Learning Over Time

The biggest issue a WBP solves is an issue that, up until now, we could not even talk about because we did not have a vehicle that allowed us to even have the discussion.

When we talk about assessing learning over time, or tracking learning over time, historically schools have done a good job of tracking assessment *for* learning year by year. Students come into 3rd grade, keep a portfolio of their work, and at the end of that year take their work home with them. The next year they come back as 4th graders and repeat the process all over again.

Education never had a system that allowed educators to look at learning year after year other than maybe a few teacher picked samples to go into a student cumulative folder. Of course these cumulative folders are better at giving us a snapshot and focus on assessment *of* learning not *for* learning in the long run.

With a WBP that belongs to the student, controlled by the student, created by the student, education now has a vehicle that can extend beyond space and time of a school year. Once a student creates a WBP and owns that space, the assessment *for* learning over a long period of time becomes natural. Students have one spot, with unlimited space to create, gather, and reflect on their own learning.

Think of the possibilities as a 7th grade teacher if you had students who were in your school system for four years and were able to look back at how they progressed as a reader. Students would have the ability to reflect on their growth as a mathematician

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from 3rd grade to 7th grade. The power of reflecting on one's own learning *across* grade levels not just within them is something that until WBP, was a difficult if not an impossible task. I can imagine a day when a senior in high school has a body of knowledge all in one place that is his or her learning journey. Think of the wealth of information that would be contained within that portfolio. Think of the wealth of knowledge for the school to be able to track learners over time looking at a particular student as a learner.

This would never be possible in a paper-based world. The amount of information, knowledge, and understanding that would be in that one portfolio would not be able to be stored in a paper-based world…now think of all the students in your school or district. The paper-based world can not compete.

WBPs not only solve some of our biggest frustrations as educators but they create new opportunities that we haven't even thought of tapping into yet.

Student Ownership and Conferences

A critical shift in moving to a WBP system is the notion that students own the portfolio. This, I believe, is a huge shift in the way we view portfolios. For many educators this will be a scary step. When students own their own learning, when they are able to reflect on their own learning, have some choice on what their portfolio looks like, acts like, and when they are able to update it anytime and anywhere, the control of the content shifts from the teacher to the student.

Otherwise known as student-centered learning, students become the true drivers of the content that is put within their WBP. The WBP reflects who they are as a learner. With the guidance of the teacher, students make choices on what learning artifacts deserve more attention than others and find ways to make those artifacts stand out (assessment *of* learning). In this way you have assessment *of* learning embedded within, surrounded by assessment *for* learning, which creates a learning assessment ecosystem that is rich with data, content, and reflections.

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Many portfolio initiatives in schools stem from Student-Led Conferences. The Student-Led Conference, or conference format in which the student and student learning is the center of the conference, have gained momentum in the last decade and usually include a portfolio *of* learning.

As an elementary teacher I know the drill: Conferences are fast approaching and you realize you haven't had the students working on their portfolios for the upcoming conferences. You drop everything, and for two weeks focus strictly on creating portfolios. 3 reading examples with reflections, 2 writing pieces with reflections, 2 math papers, a spelling test, a piece of art, and the list goes on.

Portfolios are created for conferences, not necessarily to truly reflect student learning. WBPs allow content to easily be collected throughout the school year. Students might take a picture of their work, or something that represents their work, and put it in their portfolio. They might reflect on ten assignments, create and embed two videos, record themselves reading twice and write a reflection about it and upload all of it to their WBP.

Come conference time, the student creates a new category or tag called "conference 2010". They then categorize or tag the content they want to show at the conference and are able to choose from a wealth of information-anything they want to show. They might in fact, show a sample of writing from 5th grade and one from 7th grade, demonstrating to their parents how they have grown as a writer over time. Or they may choose an audio recording of themselves reading as a 3rd grader not pronouncing their Rs correctly and then in 7th grade reading with emotion and having a great laugh about how far they have come and what they have worked on as a reader over time.

When we separate the WBP from the conference, it becomes a true vehicle of assessment for learning. With a WBP, educators can think about learning over time, in ways never before possible. We can find ways for students to deeply reflect on their own learning and allow students to truly own their learning. WBPs not only solve many of the issues that paper-based portfolios had, they create whole new assessment and reflection opportunities educators have only dreamed of.

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Finding the right Web-Based Portfolio Container

Web-Based Portfolios (WBP) can come in all shapes and sizes. There are literally hundreds of programs and ways you can create a WBP. The issue then becomes which way is the right way? That I believe, needs to be determined on a school-by-school or district-by-district basis.

The most important idea to keep in mind when choosing a WBP is the flexibility it allows you in embedding content from other parts of the web. There are many amazing Web 2.0 programs that are being used in education and have embed codes that allow you to pull content from their sites and services into your WBP. VoiceThread, YouTube, Flickr, SlideShare, are just a few that students can use to create/manage content and pull that content back into their WBP. In the end, what your WBP needs to be is nothing more than a container for content of any kind or variety.

When choosing a WBP platform, understanding what its limitations are is critical to being able to know what you can fully do with the container itself.

Blogs as a Web-Based Portfolio Container

There are many reasons why blogs as WBP make sense. They are easy to use, highly customizable, allow you to embed almost anything the web has to offer, upload your own content, and they can be installed locally or hosted virtually. Blogs are a natural web-based container for portfolios. Even their reverse chronological order of placing the most relevant ideas, knowledge and understanding at the top is a way to show

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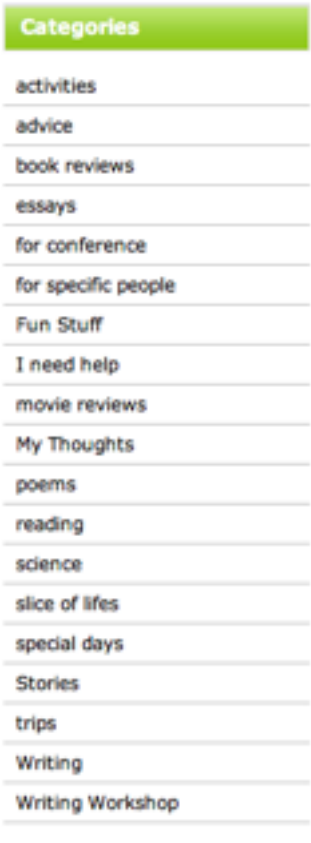
learning over time. Here's what I learned today, scroll down to see what I learned yesterday. The newest learning is always on top.

Ease of Use

The basic blog post could not get much easier. Write your title here, your thinking here, and click publish over here and you're done! It is a similar process for embedding content from somewhere else on the web. What makes blogs so easy to use is that the same interface, the same process once learned, is applied to all media.

Organization is Key



With any portfolio organization is key. Blogs have a built in organization feature in what they call categories. Much like folders on your computer only more dynamic, categories make keeping your blog organized easy.

Isabel, a 5th grade student at the International School Bangkok, has agreed to allow me to use her blog as an example for other educators to see how a blog can be used in the classroom. To the left you'll see the categories that Isabel has created for her blog. Some of the categories, reading, science, writing, slice of life, are categories that her teacher has asked her to make and use for assignments and reflections from the classroom. The rest of the categories were created by her as she has written things both for class and on her own. Isabel uses her blog as a container to store her own learning over time, not all of it at school, and not all of it asked for by her teacher. The category "for specific people" has her

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reflecting on her 1st grade buddy, and friends.

You'll also notice the category "for conference". The week before her spring Student-Led Conference with her parents, she wrote learning goals to share with her parents during the conference.

Teacher Driven vs Student Owned

One key aspect of a WBP that truly shows learning overtime is having students own the space. When students feel as though the space belongs to them, there is a sense of ownership in what is posted. There is also a freedom that comes with having your own "web site" where you can talk about the things that matter to you the most. WBPs in this way become more than a teacher driven activity that must be completed. They take on a life of their own, allowing students to freely write, and create for their portfolio those aspects of their life that are most meaningful to them. The categories of "movie reviews" and "book reviews" are categories that Isabel has created on her own and used to reflect on movies she has watched and books she has read.

Many teachers feel they need to control the WBP of the students. When the WBP is seen as "just another assignment" or something else students need to do for school, the interest is lost. The sense of ownership of the portfolio is lost and students' interest in telling their stories, reflecting on their lives quickly fades.

That's not to say that you can not require certain posts from students within their WBPs, but you must be careful in the limits you put on students on what they can post on 'their' site. Allowing students to write about what they did over Spring Break, a trip they took, a book they read, a movie they watched, a game they played all has relevance to the learning of that particular student. By reflecting on these other aspects of their lives they learn to think deeper, become more introspective, and of course just write more.

I've seen teachers who have tried to control the content that goes within the WBP and it doesn't take long before all interest is lost. Giving the students a sense of ownership over their WBP not only shows respect and responsibility, but allows teachers to have open conversations about cyber safety, appropriate use of the Internet, and building a positive digital footprint.

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Customization Generation

This generation, more than any before it expects to be able to customize every aspects of their lives. Whether it's their own legos, their clothes, their shoes or their technology. Customization and the ability to put your personal brand on things that belong to us is a way to show ownership. It's important that we allow students to customize their WBP in a way that allows their personality to show through. By using a blog platform, it is simple to allow students limited choice to customize their WBP. As a school you can decide what themes (colors, layout, structure) you want your WBP to be. You can add themes or limit the number of options. It's not the amount of options that matter, it's the simple fact that there are options and that each student gets to choose the option they feel best represents their personality.

Building a WBP Blogging System

As educators it's our job to build the systems that allow students to have WBPs to organize their thinking, reflect openly, and customize their space. There are a number of free and low cost solutions available to schools and districts today that make putting a system in place relatively easy. The hardest part will be determining what system best meets the needs of your school or district. It is important to determine if the system is scalable to the needs of the school or district, and put structures into place to ensure that the system can be maintained over time. All of these decisions need to be made locally. For me to say that it should be this way or that way without knowing the school or district is not feasible. Much like students in our schools, schools themselves are diverse places with different needs, and financial responsibilities. I am certain however, that there is a solution for every school out there. In the next section we will look at the options available to schools today and discuss the positive and negative aspects to consider when making a decision on a WBP system.

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Options for a WBP Blogging System

There are three different ways you can build a WBP Blogging system for your school. Each option has both positive and negative factors to consider. In the end a conversation with the educational technology people in your building will help to decide what is the best system for you to adopt.

Option 1: Self-hosted System

The best system by far is to set up a self-hosted blogging system on your own school network. This allows the school full control over the content, look and feel, and even the space allowed to users. Using a powerful open-source program like Wordpress makes setup and installation straight forward.

The self-hosted system allows a school to also brand the WBP system allowing the look and feel of the system to align with school communication standards. A school can also control if the system is open to the world or installed only internally, or a combination of both. Using blogs as WBP allows a school or district a great amount of flexibility in designing the system as well as controlling the system as it grows over time.

The downside of hosting a system is that a school must commit both financial and hardware resources to the project. Although server space is cheap, it still costs money and as the portfolios grow over time more space will be needed. A school can also find inventive ways to outsource videos and images, which tend to take up the most space. Images for example could be outsources to a photo sharing site such as Flickr or Picasa. Videos can be outsources to places such as YouTube,SchoolTube, or TeacherTube.

There is also the human resource factor that a school is reliable for. Having an IT technician that can oversee the servers and the upkeep of the system is probably the largest expense a school will have in setting up a self-hosted WBP system.

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Option 2: Cloud Server Based System

If you can't afford everything up front for your WBP system. Then consider a Cloud Computing Based System. Cloud based systems like the hosting company Rackspace just released called Rack Space Cloud is a great alternative. With their 24/7 Support line, you get all the support you need any time you need it. One of the great benefits of going wit a cloud based system is that you only pay for what you use. No need to spend a lot of money buying servers and up keeping them because some day you might need the space. With cloud computing you only pay for the space you use. No need to order new servers, transfer content, etc. Starting at around $2,000 a year it is a great alternative for small and large schools alike.

The downside of course is that you are relying on another company with your data. Not a big concern with a reputable company like Rackspace. But some schools are funny about stuff like that. Also once you out source your system outside the walls of the school, having a strong Internet connection is key. As all traffic to and from the system is web traffic and not just internal network traffic. Most schools today have an Internet connection that can support this type of outsourcing of servers. Any money saved in servers the school would have bought should go to increasing the Internet bandwidth into the school.

Option 3: Use a free service

The last option is not highly recommended but if you are at a school or an individual teacher who does not have the funds to set up a proper system, using one of the many free blogging platforms on the web today is an option.

Of all the systems out there I would recommend Wordpress.com. It's clean, ad free, and a wonderful free system. Each student could create an account on Wordpress.com and be up and running in minutes.

The downside to the free services is that you play by their roles. Most free services limit the amount of upload space to a blog. Again, using video and image storing services can hep this (see option 1), but as the WBP grows year after year, storage will be an issue. There is also the limitations that every free service comes with. They might not have a lot of theme choices, or allow you to use plug-ins that would personal the WBP for students. Even worse is the restrictions that some free services

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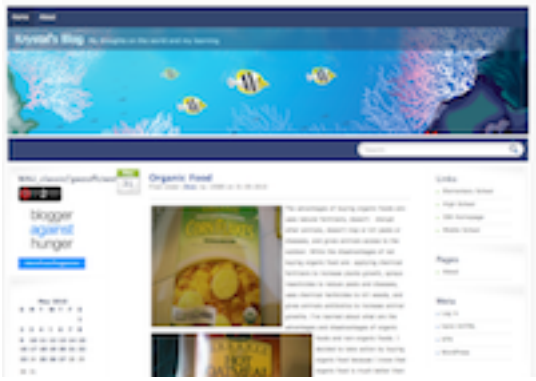
put on what types of media can be embedded. Every free service has limitations and before choosing one understanding what the limitations are of each system is important. There is a price to pay for free and it's usually limitations.

In the end no matter what option you or your school decides to go with having a system is the most important part. Each of these systems allows you to either have open WBP for the world to see and comment on or to have closed systems that only your school/classmates can see. There are many benefits to having an open WBP system. Although there are some risks, I believe the opportunity for growth out ways them, and all risks are opportunities for learning. In the next section we'll talk about why I believe a WBP system should be open.

Making your WBP an Open Platform for Learning

The two major benefits of having a Web-Based Portfolio are:



1) They are accessible from any Internet enabled device
2) The ability to share knowledge and information with a wider audience

It is point number 2 that I feel WBP holds the most impact on students and their learning. When students have an audience that extends beyond the walls of their classroom something happens. Their writing, their content, their creations become important. Time and time again I have had teachers from 4th grade through 12th grade come to me and talk about how their student's writing changes (always for the better) when they have an audience beyond the walls of their classroom.

I believe there is a mental shift in all of us when we know that this post/product, is going to be read, watched, or listened to by others. We do better work, we try harder, and we want it to be good. By giving student a space, allowing them to own it, and encouraging them to share their knowledge within it, we receive better work from our students. Students produce exactly what we require them to produce. If we require them to produce content that is potentially viewable by billions of people that is exactly the content we get.

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If you are not going to make your WBP open to the public then there really is no point to create WBP in the first place. The public part is what makes WBP so powerful. It's what allows a 5th grade student to teach other 5th grade student about variables, or an 8th grade student to teach other middle school students around the world about Internet privacy. When we allow students to openly reflect we never know what connections will be made or where it might take those students. It feels good, no matter how old you are, to know that someone else is reading your writing. WBP give authentic power to students to create content not only for the purpose of school but also for the purpose of self worth, and self motivation.

Conclusion

In the end I believe that giving students a web-based container that they control, that they have ownership of, creates for a powerful Web-Based Portfolio solution. There are many ways and many places that these container can be housed, but allowing students to take control of their own content and their own learning is the first step. Trusting in them, and teaching them to be positive contributors to society, and to create content worth reading is what we try to do in education everyday. Creating a system that allows students to reflect over grades, years, schools, and time in an open way can only have positive outcomes when it comes to learning. WBP do not come without work. It will mean time shifting that 3 weeks before conference you spend on putting together a portfolio to committed time ever week both at home and at school to create a portfolio that truly reflects student learning. A container that can house not only the best work, but the work that needs the most reflection. What excites me most about WBP is that by moving to a student-centered student controlled approach we create meaningful learning opportunities both online and off and allow students to reflect and learn not only with the 20 or 30 students in their class, but with the billions of people around the world that, like them, are hungry for knowledge. Blogs as Web-Based Portfolios are a great way to allow students to share their knowledge and learning with the world.

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