

**Graduate Students and the e-portfolio:  
Practical Strategies for Successful Implementation**

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**Abstract:** As adult graduate students take up the challenge to earn higher degrees they may return to school less prepared in the area of technological skills as compared to those students who have recently left the university. One of the requirements to complete the Graduate Education programs at Trevecca Nazarene University is the creation of an e-portfolio. While the benefits of e-portfolios are understood by their users, the actual implementation of this technology can prove problematic for many graduate students. This paper presents the authors experiences in working with diverse graduate students in understanding and implementing the e-portfolio tool, LiveText. A corporate effort between the program coordinators and appointed “specialists” has produced practical strategies that have helped to develop a successful learning environment where technology challenged graduate students thrive. These strategies include the development of program specific templates, in-depth training sessions, and the availability of dynamic technical support and mentoring.

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Graduate students in this millennium use technology in many unique ways as part of their standard curriculum. From online course delivery programs such as WebCT or Blackboard, to use of Wikis and blogs as communication tools, to creating and maintaining e-portfolios. Each of these technologies require skills and knowledge that many adult graduate students may find challenging and yet in the long run, rewarding.

Trevecca Nazarene University, founded in 1901 is a fully accredited comprehensive institution of higher education located in Nashville, Tennessee. There are 47 undergraduate majors and 5 associate degree majors in 4 schools- Business, Education, Religion, and Arts and Sciences. Graduate degrees are available in religion, education, management, physician assistant, a library and information science, and counseling psychology. A doctorate in education is offered. The School of Education graduate programs have a current enrollment near 500. “Students come to Trevecca’s graduate program from all over the world from a variety of professions including business, management, medical and education. The cohort-based organization of Trevecca graduate education programs provide significant support from peers and faculty throughout the duration of the program. The diverse experiences of the TNU faculty results in classroom instruction that reflects quality thinking, creativity and demonstrations of best practices (Trevecca vi).”

Professional Portfolios have long been a requirement for course completion at Trevecca Nazarene University. The professional portfolio as described by media specialist Marilyn Heath is “an organized collection of self-selected artifacts and self-

generated reflections, developed for a specific purpose and audience that demonstrate the author's professional knowledge, skills, dispositions, and growth over time (2).” In 2002 it was decided by the Dean of the School of Education, Dr. Esther Swink and others, that Trevecca would pursue NCATE accreditation. This decision was the impetus for the university to move from print to electronic portfolios.

The accreditation management system provided by the company LiveText was chosen to provide the platform for creating the electronic portfolios. While this company provides a number of online tools and services the following key features are utilized at Trevecca: e-portfolio templates framed by program requirements, online sharing which allows peer-to-peer viewing capability and faculty review and assessment. An additional feature is that the purchase of LiveText accounts by students provides web space outside of the university network. Also, the accounts remain active for one year after the student's completion of the program allowing the candidates to present their e-portfolios when interviewing with principals. This marketing feature works as a motivational tool for the candidates.

It was decided that not all of the graduate programs would migrate from the print portfolio to the e-portfolio at the same time. The Masters of Library and Information Science program was the first to make the change which included creating a template for the students. With this program and in those to follow the tendency of the Program Coordinators was to try and emulate the print version. Attempts in several programs to make this work for the students revealed that a break from the previous model was necessary and that a new approach would be beneficial for the students. Each program now has a uniquely formatted template that has been created under the direction of the

Program Coordinator and placed in LiveText by the specialist to be copied by the students. The new format helps the students in organizing and presenting their work in a manner more logical for the electronic interface.

The main difference in the format between the programs lies in the candidates' placement of artifacts. Some of the programs templates are designed with sections delineated by courses. The candidate works in a section which is headed by the course title and then from that course selects artifacts. Once artifacts are attached the candidate then must identify the standard or standards which have been evidenced by their work. In another program the student begins with a specific standard and is allowed to select artifacts that have been completed at any time during the program. In either format students must write a reflection on the standard.

Reflections are a major component of the e-portfolio. John Dewey is accredited as one of the early educators who identified the importance of reflective thinking. He identified the process as "definitive units that are linked together so that there is a sustained movement to a common end (5)." By reflecting on standards candidates have the opportunity to link newly acquired knowledge to practice in the classroom. They can also express their own understanding of standards and give evidence of their professional growth.

There are a number of elements which help to create a successful learning environment for Trevecca's graduate students. In working with graduate students it is recognized that there will most likely be a number of students in each group who lack proficient computer skills. As recognized by Jane Manner, "Many of these nontraditional students did not grow up with computers, and may even have resisted the wave of e-

participation that has surrounded them. It is not uncommon for them to admit (with simultaneous pride and embarrassment) that their children or grandchildren know all about computers while they know little” (32). This barrier for some graduate students is illustrated in a study reported in the journal Educational Psychology. A survey of teachers who had little experience with computers, report that their greatest source of computer anxiety came from the fear of “getting stuck and not knowing what to do next”. The second greatest fear was “not understanding the computer jargon and the messages it gives (Bradley par 39)”. These facts helped to drive the development of what is called “LiveText trainings”.

At Trevecca the undergraduates are introduced to the e-portfolio early in their program as part of the Technology for Educators course and then are expected to build those on their own over the four years in the program. In contrast, the graduate students are given an initial training and follow-up sessions throughout the duration of their programs which range from 15 to 18 months. The initial training is an in-depth look at the tools and functions used in building the e-portfolio. Special attention is given to help them understand the “jargon” used. A tips sheet is distributed which addresses the most frequently identified areas where students might find themselves “stuck”.

Weitzenkamp and Heckathorn’s research study revealed that instructors might not adapt to new technologies “until they perceive that it will improve the potential for student learning.” Suggesting that “perhaps initial technology trainings are not immediate enough, or do not provide the personal meaning significantly enough, to be effective; therefore, an instructor may need to be paired with a technical advisor to serve as a mentor... (12).” This has been Trevecca’s experience and resulted in the appointment of

several LiveText specialists who work with each Program Coordinator in the creation of the template as well playing key roles in training students and providing technical support to students as needed.

Research done by Garrells entitled “Dynamic Relationships: Five critical elements for teaching at a distance,” identified vital components for successful online teaching. These included instructor enthusiasm, familiarity with the technology used, and critical support personnel (Weitzenkamp 4). These specialists are available for the students in their programs on a formal basis (scheduled training and follow-up sessions) as well as informally - by email, phone or even the scheduling of a small group working session in which the specialist is readily available for assistance if needed. The LiveText specialist has been the bridge needed for faculty and students as they create and maintain their e-portfolios.

The cohort model itself has lent support to this program’s success. As the students begin and end as a group a rich and trusting environment is created for students that encourages collaboration and fosters peer support. Peer support has proved very beneficial as students assist each other in overcoming technology issues. Also, as they share completed elements of the e-portfolio students build on peer’s know-how that results in a better quality end product. This peer support is encouraged by the faculty and the specialists.

A study completed by Quitadamo and Brown entitled Effective Teaching Styles and Instructional Design for Online Environments concluded that “it is the quality of human interaction that determines online learning success (7).” Trevecca has a unique and strong held commitment to face-to-face human interaction that permeates all aspects

of the university. While students are introduced to and encouraged to make the most of technology in diverse ways, the commitment by Trevecca to provide the “human touch” in their learning environment has contributed strongly to student success. Commitment to student success at Trevecca can be summed up by Trevecca’s motto “To be, rather than to seem” - the driving force to successful learning environments for our students.

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