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Composition, Computers, and the Common Core: A Twenty-First Century Research Paper

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Introduction

When I sat on that hard plastic cafeteria chair, watching another slide show on a Monday afternoon, I did not know how seriously I should take the information. An overhaul of curriculum standards? It's going to be adopted across the country? The Common Core was with us.

The most drastic of all changes calls for an increased emphasis on nonfiction writing across the disciplines. By senior year, all students will read nonfiction most of the time. Of course, this is spread across the disciplines, but the fact remained that educators are being asked to have students read critically in every subject, every day. It means that English teachers have a significant new role: bridging the gap between literature and nonfiction.

The Common Core standards were adopted in 2010. That means that as of this writing, many states and teachers have begun the difficult task of shifting their lesson plans and goals. One major question on the minds of all English teachers is, "How do I include argumentative writing into my literature classroom?" The standards called for 70% of reading by grade 12 to be nonfiction. This is applied across all disciplines, and it is a boon for English teachers. It means that all teachers are now responsible for teaching literacy. Since its implementation in 2010, dozens of scholarly articles and innumerable research papers have been written on these shifts and what it looks like in a classroom. Books and blogs have been published to give teachers a way to work with the new standards.

This unit seeks to give English language arts teachers a way in which to teach a Research Paper. I write this in capitals because it is a daunting undertaking with which every high school student must become comfortable. This is an argumentative essay in which students will research a topic, choose a side, and argue their point in front of their peers. This unit offers ways in which to take this paper into a presentation, which achieves more of the CCSS, and, as this educator has found, creates more student interest. Students feel positive pressure to do well in front of their peers, more so than they feel the need to do well on a piece of paper for their teacher. Additionally, there are tremendous benefits to presenting in front of a group, both in terms of skills needed and the authenticity of doing so. This educator knows that many students struggle to present in front of groups, so practicing as much and as early as possible will help students in class and in their lives.

The additional piece that brings this from antiquated research and word processing into the Common Core State Standards is the inclusion of technology throughout the unit. We are thirteen years into the twenty-first century. Technology is integral to how we live our lives and how we experience the world. By utilizing the software and online applications available, teachers can reach more students and students can produce more high-quality work. The planning and self-education necessary for this is considerable, but the rewards are considerable, as well. Students with special needs and children who often struggle with class work show improvement when using computer-assisted instruction. Some research shows that students do not see online teaching as school, but rather as fun. This takes down barriers to learning, bringing students in on their own level. This unit gives details on how to integrate technology throughout the unit.

The audience for my unit is specific: Ninth grade students of every level who have some, but limited exposure to research, structured writing, and rules around plagiarism. They have limited common knowledge. They have exposure to the five-paragraph essay, topic sentences, evidence, examples, and the severity of the consequences of plagiarism. They may also know transition words, such as "also," "next," and "in conclusion." Their inconsistent knowledge, however, plus a summer off of learning, means that all these skills need to be refreshed or re-taught. Students in this unit may be advanced or struggling learners. The format of the unit allows for advancement of all levels of learners. Key to the success of the unit is the integration of computer-assisted instruction. This will boost skills students already have and add pieces that they still need.

The unit can be applied and adapted broadly, although it was written with urban students in mind. That is to say that this was not written with the highly-motivated, highly-skilled student in mind. It was developed for struggling learners, students with special needs, or simply regular high school students who are not yet interested in school and lack general motivation to do work well. The strategies herein are aimed at reaching the difficult-to-motivate child in the back row, the eager young woman who is on the autism spectrum, and the young man who is five years below reading level. The mentality is to aim high and scaffold all the work so that every student can succeed. This mantra, that every student can succeed, serves as a guide for the entire unit.

Ultimately, students will produce a researched, revised, and publishable research paper on a topic of their choosing. The best papers will meet all criteria of the Common Core nonfiction writing rubric. The purpose of this unit plan it to help teachers make the shift to argumentative writing in the English classroom.

Truly, there is a limit to what from this unit can be achieved in just one or two months. I suggest teaching these skills discretely over the course of the year. Here, though, I will put them all together. This unit begins with acknowledging and assessing where students stand on the following skills:

1. Assessing the legitimacy and reliability of sources

2. Avoiding plagiarism

3. Citing sources in a List of Works Cited

4. Citing sources within the text of a research paper

5. Conducting research to learn new ideas, then to focus in on one theme

6. Writing a thesis statement

7. Organizing a paragraph into a topic sentence, explanation and examples, and a concluding sentence

8. Writing introductions

9. Writing conclusions that bring together the ideas of a paper into a new thought,

not just a summary of the body paragraphs

10. Typing a paper to meet high standards of neatness and completion

11. Using written language appropriate to audience and task

By the end of the year, students will have had assessments requiring them to do all these skills, which are required in the Common Core. They are also supported by years of writing and reading in the early grades. The key is to build these skills throughout the year and assess them in a research paper.

Rationale

There are many reasons why a research paper fits within an English classroom. First, research is applicable across all disciplines. What we teach in our English classrooms can be applied to all classrooms. A research paper is simply another method to explore ideas. Additionally, nonfiction is especially relevant and appealing to young males, a traditionally underserved and underperforming group in English classes. Look at the rosters of any Honors English class and note the ratio of males to females. Literature is for women, one might assume. By pulling in males with nonfiction, success in English class can be more attainable.

When students have completed their Research Paper, they will have a year of teaching and learning that they can apply for many years to come.

Rationale for Technology

The discussion around the use of technology in the classroom often centers on the need for college and career-ready skills. The Common Core State Standards and State-specific standards before them all included technological skills. Students use technology anyway. Classes require students to turn papers in online. Employers send their workers to conferences on how to compose emails more effectively. Some research is now only printed online, so online research skills are a must. With all these reasons and more, why do many teachers struggle to include technology into their classrooms?

The idea that technology makes a ninth-grader "career-ready" is not necessarily helpful to an educator struggling with a class. The idea that a state-test requires the use of a computer is hardly motivating. Therefore, I suggest that the reasons for using technology in the classroom should not be for outside, imposed rationales, but because they will help each child learn the material in a way that best suits his or her needs. This struggling ninth-grader should use technology because it engages and challenges the student.

There is research to show that computer-assisted instruction (CAI) is beneficial to struggling learners. A review

of research from 1985 to 2001 showed that struggling students who were taught with CAI in reading and math instruction improved their test scores. According to researchers, "the average students who received CAI scored 14 percentile points higher than the average students who did not receive CAI" (Motoko, 2002). This research by Akiba Motoko in 2002 offered further reasons why CAI benefits struggling populations.

- CAI is non-judgmental and motivational.

- CAI gives frequent and immediate feedback.

- CAI can individualize learning through designs to meet students' needs.

- CAI allows for more student autonomy.

- CAI provides a multi-sensory learning environment, such as images, sounds, and symbols (Motoko, 2002).

In sum, CAI offers educators a way to reach students that typically fall behind.

Unit Objectives & Implementing District Standards

Common Core State Standards – Writing Standard 9-10, Text Types and Purposes

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

New Haven Public Schools released the 9-10 English Language Arts Curriculum in the spring of 2013. It requires these skills to be mastered over the course of two years. This looping structure is based on much cognitive research, as well as the needs of our students, many of whom move between New Haven schools or come in from other states during the year. By looping the standards, as they are written in the CCSS, students stand a greater chance of mastering the material.

a. Introduce precise claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that establishes clear relationships among claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

b. Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly, supplying evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience's knowledge level and concerns.

c. Use words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims.

d. Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

e. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.

Unit Outline

The writing of the research paper can be broken down into the following sections:

1. Narrative

2. Context and summary of research

3. Claims supported by evidence from research. Discussion of both sides.

4. Synthesis of research

5. Call to Action

6. Take-away statement (akin to a slogan)

7. Images/Visuals/Self-produced film (Students must use technology meaningfully)

The technology-rich discussion begins in the following second, labeled "Teaching Strategies – Technology."

The first part of the project requires a narrative. Students will use story-telling skills that they have practiced for years. This begins in elementary school. The rubric calls for necessary details that engage the listener and reader. This should be written as a story for the audience that grabs their attention and makes them care about the issue.

The second part, context and summary of research, requires careful research skills and organization. Based on years of experience, I suggest the following teaching strategies. First, early in the year, speak to your librarian about the newest research engines online. According to CCSS, students must be able to use more than simple online search engines. They need peer-reviewed articles, both for their depth and level of text complexity. Librarians are also helpful because they see a broad range of students that an individual teacher has little access to. The librarian will have a greater understanding of where students are coming from and where they are going in their research skills. Finally, many librarians have lesson plans and units already developed. They may already have worksheets and organizational tools to help your students. The librarian will be able to help students one-on-one even better because he or she created the worksheets and know the databases. For students to be college and career ready, they need access to the best databases and the latest tools. Your librarian is the expert on these.

For organization, I like to start with a folder for each student. I count this as part of their final grade. I attach a checklist and the rubric to the front and inside. The folder also contains all of the handouts that a student will need for the project. For my freshmen, this means Source Information Sheets, List of Works Cited How-To, Paragraph organizers, Brainstorming pages, a full model of what I am looking for in a final draft, and a rubric for them to fill-out that is separate from the one I will fill-out. Again, I staple this to the inside of the folder to keep them on track. When students find and print resources, they will staple the pages together with a Source Information Sheet on the top. This page contains all the information they will need to create a List of Works Cited online. Using Bibme.com, they will easily create this important page.

For claims supported by evidence and research, I go through this throughout the year, allowing students more

and more autonomy with each unit. They are assessed on this in body paragraphs. In accordance with the standards, I teach the freshmen how to write a paragraph with a topic sentence, evidence, explanation of how this evidence relates to the topic sentence, and a concluding statement. When beginning with students who have not done this before, I like to say that they need four to six sentences of explanation for each piece of evidence. When they are not sure what to write, I continue to tell them to return to the topic sentence, then the thesis statement. Again, this is modeled heavily throughout the year. It also helps to tell students to remember that your audience is intelligent, but they do not know anything about your topic. You must explain it to them.

Synthesis of research brings together all the different sides of the argument. This is like a conclusion to any essay. After each point is delineated in a body paragraph, all ideas are brought together in a conclusion. I teach students to open this paragraph by rewording the main point of each paragraph. In a research paper, though, and based on the standards, students must "Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented." For this research, this is a Call to Action. I find that this wording empowers students to make a change, or be the change. They feel power over the issue when presenting a solution, not just a summary of the issue. This is the end of argumentation, anyway: A proposed solution to the problem that follows from the research presented.

The take-away statement can be a student's favorite part of the paper. I tell students that the audience, either a reader or a listener, is unlikely to remember many specific facts or details. However, they often remember an emotional, true statement that makes them think. Give students examples of your own or any empowering phrases from their favorite celebrities. You can also use silly expressions from celebrities that sound serious, but when they are broken down, show a lack of thoughtfulness. Examples include, "You can't change the world, but you can change yourself," Ghandi's "Be the change you wish to see in the world," Shakespeare's modern translation as, "Be true to yourself," or one from my students, "Animals do need us, but we also need them," and "Everyone should be able to love anyone." The statements are short and they are developed after careful research. This is important because students learn a lot while researching, and their initial beliefs on a topic may change. One student began her project on gay marriage in a highly negative, hateful way. By the end, she said, "Gay people are normal, just like me." While this may not be a sophisticated statement, it shows growth and a new understanding of a critical, moral issue.

The visuals are meant to support the research, not stand in the way of it. A visual may be presented as a PowerPoint, but limit this to two or three slides. I have found that with too many slides, students simply read their slides and do not learn how to speak extemporaneously. They also focus heavily on the slideshow, and not on the research and synthesis of a paper. Also, a poster is not sufficient to meet the demands of CCSS. There are limited applications of this in college or careers. Additionally, there is a richness to building visuals online that can teach graphic design and flow, that a simple poster cannot. Optimally, students would develop their own images, such as taking their own pictures and uploading them, or designing a Prezi presentation that students can refer to later. The research paper must include any images or slides and an explanation of why they are chosen and how they will be used. This also helps students during their oral presentations, as they will have more to say than, "This shows injured animals." Visuals must support and enrich the argument.

Teaching Strategies - Technology

Integrating technology into the writing process helps every student. Strategies can be implemented meaningfully into every step.

Pre-writing improves outcomes for students. One way in which to integrate technology to improve performance here is for students to create short slide presentations about their proposed topics. Teachers might assign the following slides:

1.) Research question

2.) Source Slides: Two online sources, one print, and one periodical. Each source is accompanied by the student's review of the source, thus requiring students to read each piece.

3.) Initial findings

This idea for a seven to ten minute presentation comes from teacher Allen Perry, as documented in "Educational Leadership" in 2004 (Yancey). His difficulty came from students waiting too long to begin a paper. By extending the pre-writing period and including kinesthetic learning through technology, he reported a greater turn-in rate as well as better papers overall.

Organizing ideas is central to good writing. There are numerous technological applications that will aid students in creating dynamic outlines that they can share with their peers and parents. Sharing plans is important because it helps students to achieve learning objectives. One online organizational tool is MindMeister. Using this software, students create online organizational maps. One teacher has his students answer KWHL questions to organize their ideas. These stand for: What do you *know?* What do you *want* to learn? *How* will you find out? What do you *learn?* (Pitler, Hubbell, Kuhn, 2012). The organizational template they are given is simple. There is a central box containing the Research Question. Around this box and connected to it are four bubbles, each one answering a KWHL question. Again, by putting this online, students can share their work with their families, which improves parental participation and, therefore, student achievement.

Building rubrics for students can be time-consuming and, ultimately, confusing. The formatting time alone is enough to make a teacher use the same thing over and over, or not differentiate for a new class. Online rubric-makers enable teachers to build assessment tools that they can store online, share with others, and adjust easily. RubiStar and Tech4Learning are two such websites. Both sites contain many pre-made rubrics that are customizable. Still, they also allow for creation of your own rubrics or just adjustments to theirs.

Collaborative mediums, such as blogs, allow for sharing and building of ideas, for exploration and discussion of new learning. A blog is like an informal online journal. The formality of the form changes, but a blog is frequently updated, with the latest post appearing first. Teachers use blogs in many ways. One way a blog could be used to teach a research paper would be simple. The teacher will create a blog for his or her classes. The teacher will post readings around the major topics being studied. Students will be assigned to write comments on these readings and to respond to comments by other students. Teachers, too, can comment on student contributions, creating a more authentic dialogue about a topic. Also, students and teachers can help each other with questions by linking information to their comment posts. For example, if a student is confused

by the current federal law surrounding gay marriage, another student or teacher can find answers online and post the link right on the blog. This is only one way in which a blog can be used for collaboration and ideas-generation.

For students with special needs or struggling learners, word processing programs offer many useful tools. Spellchecker, word-predictors, and grammar correction tools aid students in creating polished written works.

Classroom Activities

Lesson One: Gathering and Evaluating Resources

To prepare for writing a paper, students must read and analyze all of their sources. I find that using a packet with a separate sheet for each source helps students to keep their sources and ideas organized. The educator will need to space out this list accordingly, but the following can be expanded into a handout and photocopied for as many resources as you would like your students to have. This could also be uploaded as a Google Doc for students to complete online. This would also enable students to share resources easily and to quickly get an idea about whether or not the source is valuable to them, based on their peer's work.

Gathering Resources: Source ___ (ex: 1)

Source Author: _____

Source Title: _____

Publisher: _____ Date:_____

- Direct Quotation 1:

In my own words:

- Direct Quotation 2:

In my own words:

- What did I learn from this source?

- Does this relate to any of my other sources?

Lesson Two: Writing the Opening to a Research Presentation

The presentation of research is separate from a typical introduction. This is part of the audience for this research paper: Intelligent peers. Since the educator can choose to have students present their work, the students will need a different introduction than the one often used in strictly written work. The outline for this oral introduction can be as follows:

1. Hook (*A quick, fascinating statement or little joke to grab the audience's attention.)*
2. Background Information (*What you will talk about and what inspired you to write about this.)*
3. Narrative (*A story of someone who went through this or is currently dealing with it. This could come from an interview or source you found. It should include details that interest the audience, but only details that help you get across your point.)*

A word on each piece:

The Hook should be a fascinating statement or little joke to grab the audience's attention. Students are quick to note that jokes may or may not be appropriate for their presentations. The Hook can come as a fact, such as a startling statistic. It can also be something that people already know but are seeing now in a new light.

The Background Information can be brief. It is a statement of what the student will argue, plus why he or she chose to do this. As an example, I had a student complete a presentation on gay marriage. For her Background Information she said that she chose this topic because she thought that being gay was "wrong" and she wanted to prove that people who feel this way should not be married. However, she went on, as she worked on her research, she found that the prejudice that homosexuals face and the normalness of their lives convinced her that they can and should be allowed all the rights of straight couples. This introduction caught the audience's attention because of the honesty and straight-forward nature of her revelation. It combined her research with why she wanted to learn about this, as well as clearly stating what the rest of her project would prove.

The Narrative is often a student's favorite part of the project. The CCSS call for narrative writing as part of informational writing. Far from a disconnected story written for pleasure, which students can do by the ninth grade, it is an integral part of convincing an audience to agree with the speaker. The Narrative gives a human side to any argument. By placing this in the beginning, the audience is pulled into the argument. A Narrative must be either from the student's own life or from research. It cannot be imagined, as students will ask if this is okay. The educator can guide students to an answer for this, asking if a made-up story will help to convince the audience or if it will be fake and hurt their argument. The answer is obvious to students from here. This kind of question also shows the educator that a student is currently struggling to find a narrative, which is helpful to know. To write the Narrative, students can rely on beginning, middle, and end strategies, possibly leaving the resolution to the end of their overall presentation. Always direct students to thinking about the best way to convince their audience.

Lesson Three: Assessing Source Reliability

Students often struggle to find and assess the reliability of print and online resources. Using an acronym can help students make these judgments for themselves. Using the question I often get from students, I have created an acronym. The question I often hear is, "Can I use this source?" With the word "Use," students can evaluate their source by making each letter in "use" stand for something that they must consider. The "U" is "Unbiased point of view." The "S" is "Suitable date." The "E" is "Educated author."

For "Unbiased point of view," students need to judge whether or not the source shows bias. Of course, this does not make a source moot, but it does give the reader insight into what the source is saying on the surface, versus what is truly happening. Therefore, students need to consider the bias in the piece.

In order to decide the usability of a source, students must know when the piece was published, therefore, does it have a "Suitable date." For example, if the student is researching the stem cell debate, his or her information must come from the very recent past. The date of each source matters greatly in getting accurate information. Therefore, students must use "suitable dates."

Students can assess the quality of the author in many ways. First, if there is an author, what authority does he or she have on the topic? Second, if there are multiple authors, why are they working together? Does this add to or subtract from the reliability of the source? Third, what happens when there is no author? This question happens often. If you are committed to having students find sources with reliable authors, that is, each source has an author, you will need to allow extra research time. This is where it becomes necessary to work with your school librarian because he or she will give your students tools to search articles and sources that are, most likely, reliable. By holding students to finding "educated authors," you are demanding that they find the absolute best sources, that they search past mainstream search engines. This will make for thoughtful, well-read students.

The acronym is as follows:

Can I **USE** this source?

Unbiased point of view

Suitable date

Educated author

To follow-up with this acronym and student understanding of how to assess a source, it may be necessary to ask students to articulate in writing their source choices. Without forcing students to explain why they chose a source, they may miss the author or not think about how long it has been since 1995. Like all good instruction, it is necessary to hold students accountable. To bring this into a larger context, students can do online reviews of their sources, explaining in a blog comment or on a KWHL online chart how this source helped them to *know* something new, and why the author, date, or format enabled that. This is also a way in which students can share their work and gain resources from peers.

Extending Technology and Writing Instruction: Electronic Portfolios

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Since this unit focuses on using technology to improve writing instruction in the English language arts classroom, it is logical to include a discussion of electronic portfolios. There is an initiative across states to have Twenty-First Century Competencies Portfolios, which are electronic copies of student work over their four years of high school. More than a mandate, though, electronic portfolios encourage student participation and achievement.

There is work around the nation on using electronic portfolios in English classrooms. One educator, Elizabeth Beagle of Virginia Beach, uses them to improve writing in her classes. Her research and that of professor

Kathleen Blake Yancey focus on framing electronic portfolios for success. Yancey focuses on "collection, selection, reflection, and projection" ("Electronic…" 2004) in student portfolios. In other words, students compile their work throughout the year, choose the pieces that best reflect stated objectives, reflect on successes and areas of growth, make necessary improvements, and present their work as the portfolio. Educators report feelings of collegiality with their students, rather than harsher turn-it-in and get-a-grade assignments. With an electronic portfolio, students and teachers can have an authentic dialog about student work. The framework suggested by Yancey is necessary for seeing this through. It is important to note that an electronic portfolio is not an online deposit for papers. It is thoughtful, reflective, and evolving.

Struggling learners will benefit from electronic portfolios. Elizabeth Beagle, in a paper from 2004, listed the following as benefits of electronic portfolios for students: "Easy management, Faster revision/editing, More creativity, Skill acquisition, Audience concerns" (Beagle, 2004). Collected work is easily managed online because students do not need to keep track of numerous papers and drafts. It is all stored online. Revision and editing are completed more easily due to the recursive capacity of word processing. Greater creativity steps in when students are allowed to spend time on their own to embellish their sites with fonts, colors, and images. Some students, according to Beagle, did not even consider their writing on the computer as "work." They found it to be fun. The skill acquisition is clear here because students are willing to spend more time on their work, which, if directed correctly, leads to higher achievement. Also, while it is not best practice to tell this to students, the Smarter Balance exams require word processing, so repeated and meaningful use of these programs will benefit students on these high-stakes exams. Finally, the audience for online work can be broadly defined. Students may feel greater pressure to do well if they know that their peers will be judging their work. They may work harder to create new and better pieces if they know that future teachers will be able to see their work with ease. Additionally, they will be able to link their portfolios to social media sites, thus enabling them to share their work with peers voluntarily. Their parents will also be able to see turned in work as well as comments and revisions. Parental involvement is paramount to student success, making this just one more reason why digital portfolios improve student learning.

Resources for Teachers

Education Week – blogs.edweek.org

This resource connects educators with the roll-out of national initiatives, such as the Smarter Balanced exams. It provides commentary on the changes as well as forums to ask questions and get answers on classroom practice and up-coming national requirements.

t.h.e. Journal – Transforming Education Through Technology – thejournal.com

This online journal offers up-to-date news on Common Core updates and changes. It provides in-depth coverage of education news related to technology, which will become the main way that students take exams.

Foundation for Excellence in Education – excelined.org

This online blog and reference breaks down the changes from the old standards to the Common Core. It delineates the shift so that educators can see what they used to do and align it to what they are now required to do. It shows the overlaps and the changes

clearly.

Materials for Classroom Use

The following is a very brief list of online and software applications that will help educators to implement technology into their classrooms in a meaningful way. These do not add to what a teacher must do, but rather help the educator to do what he or she was already trying to achieve with students.

Technology for Organization

- Inspiration, MindMeister, Glogster

Technology for Communication and Collaboration

- TypeWith.me, Diijo, Facebook, Twitter, FaceTime, Skype

Technology for Presentations

- Prezi, PowerPoint, Keynote, Glogster

Appendix – Implementing District Standards

a. Introduce precise claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that establishes clear relationships among claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

This standard from the CCSS is new to the New Haven curriculum for grades 9-10. To fully implement standards meaningfully, students should know what they are. These can be a part of the objectives given to students and can be posted in the room, if students know that they are there. Additionally, it is helpful to give the standards to students and have them plan how they will achieve them. This can be part of the planning process for this research paper, completed in an online organizer or in class. By reflecting on this standard online, students can more easily see the ideas of their peers and add it to their own. This could also be a jumping-off point for a blog discussion. Students can check in and comment on how far they have come in reaching this standard. In an electronic portfolio, which depends on reflection, students can write about their experiences in reaching this standard. Not only will this enable a student to feel good about what they have achieved and where they are going, it will allow the educator to make changes for future classes. Giving students the standards improves outcomes. Giving students space online to reflect upon them improves outcomes for years to come.

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