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The write stuff



English professor Chris Gallagher is leading a pilot study involving eight writing instructors and roughly 350 students. (Photo by Lauren McFalls)

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English professor Chris Gallagher encourages his students to think of themselves as curators of an exhibit at a gallery or a museum.

But instead of collecting Dalis, Picassos or Van Goghs, they're picking out their best writing—from analytical essays to professional documents—and reflecting on the process they used to create the work. They're compiling E-portfolios through which they'll showcase their progress as writers—and facilitate Gallagher's research on the development of undergraduate writers at Northeastern.

"I think of an E-portfolio as an exhibit where a student writer curates and offers a reflection on what each piece taught him about writing and what he accomplished," says Gallagher. "From a research perspective, we're examining the quality of writing as well as the process."

Gallagher, whose scholarship focuses on the history of composition and assessment, is leading a pilot study involving eight writing instructors and roughly 350 students. The ultimate goal of the project is to improve student writing while developing a reliable assessment tool for the University.

Before joining the Northeastern faculty, Gallagher taught English at the University of Nebraska, where he led an evaluation of the state's K-12 assessment system. More recently, Gallagher has turned his attention to postsecondary writing assessment, publishing in the journal *Writing Program Administration*, and in a forthcoming issue of *College English*.

For this pilot study, Gallagher and his colleagues are using the E-portfolios to examine specific markers of progress—how, for example, do students' abilities to use sources evolve between their introductory and advanced writing course?

Researchers have compiled study after study on the progress of the youngest of writers, but there are only a handful of long-term studies on the maturation process of college-level writers, says Gallagher.

"Part of the challenge," says Gallagher, "is figuring out how to develop reliable assessments where you can trust the results while remaining focused on actually teaching students how to be better writers."

Gallagher says the E-portfolios are a useful way to capture writing over time and for multiple purposes and audiences. And because their portfolios are posted online, students are more likely to get the kind of widespread feedback they need to hone their writing skills.

That, in turn, serves the bottom-line goal of the writing program: To prepare students to succeed in their lives and careers by making them better writers.

Regardless of profession, "It would be tough for any college grad to succeed in the real world without good writing skills," Gallagher says. "There are very few non-writers in the world these days."

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