When I began teaching English at Anoka Technical College, I was surprised to discover that the course description for first-year composition (FYC) included the statement that students “will compile a viable job search portfolio.” Coming from teaching at four-year institutions, I found it odd that Anoka Technical College required a job search portfolio for a FYC course. Teaching students to write resumes and cover letters seemed far from the goals I associate with composition classes: crafting arguments, analyzing audience, supporting claims with evidence, organizing ideas, and proofreading. However, my experiences at Anoka Technical College have convinced me that job portfolios are a particularly effective means to reinforce those very skills. In fact, the act of applying those skills to a new genre may facilitate their transfer.

There is surprisingly little academic work on the idea of using job portfolios to teach writing skills in FYC. While those such as Randazzo (2012) and Diaz (2013) have written about pedagogical approaches to preparing job portfolios, the focus has primarily been on using portfolios in business communication classes. However, because resumes and cover letters are essentially persuasive documents, they require students to apply critical thinking and writing skills developed from assignments such as the traditional research paper to a new genre. Relegating job portfolios to business communication classes misses an opportunity to apply the skills they have developed throughout FYC to new contexts.

In “Transfer, Portability, and Generalization: (How) Does Composition Expertise ‘Carry’?” Donahue (2012) argues that the transfer lies at the heart of composition: “Composition is focused in particular on certain types of knowledge we
hope will transfer. We want students—considering most of our outcomes statements—to learn strategies, processes, values, rhetorical flexibility, and linguistic knowledge not just for topic-specific gain but expressly for broader transfer, for use in new contexts” (p. 146). However, many FYC courses do not articulate that the content prepares students for other academic and professional contexts. Donahue also points out that students sometimes fail to apply prior skills in new settings because “they see tasks in different disciplinary settings as different, even though the assignments are similar” (p. 147). In some measure, teaching job portfolios addresses this problem. Brent (2011) also comments on the importance of providing students with assignments that prompt them to apply the skills acquired in one context to another: “transfer theory goes further in suggesting that it is important to provide explicit cues that encourage learners to consider the relation between the source and the target of transfer—in this case, between writing practices in the classroom and those in the workplace” (p. 413). While Brent focuses specifically on students taking what they have learned in academic writing classes to the workplace, teaching job portfolios in FYC helps students employ the lessons from an academic context in a standard business communication genre.

In order to create successful job portfolios, students must think about the purpose of the documents they are creating from the beginning, which starts their application of critical thinking skills early in the project. The job portfolio assignment requires students to analyze audience and rhetoric; make decisions about evidence, organization and word choice; and proofread carefully, but the project’s goals are more tangible. Wardle (2007) suggests that transfer is more likely to occur when students find writing engaging, with engagement defined by such factors as “The assignment is open to student ownership,” “The assignment relates in some way to students’ interests/future,” and “The assignment is intended to achieve a clear purpose, is ‘goal-oriented’” (p. 78). The job portfolio assignment fulfills these requirements for engagement.

Many students approach resumes and cover letters as bland, fill-in the blank documents, not realizing that job applicants must craft and support an argument for why they are excellent candidates for a job. Once students recognize that a resume and cover letter are not simply lists of past work experiences but a carefully crafted argument about how their skills, abilities, and even personal qualities best fulfill an employer’s need, they often begin to analyze their own
claims and the values implicit in those claims. Because a job portfolio is directed at very specific audiences, the portfolio assignment also helps students think about their arguments in relation to those specific audiences rather than solely from their own points of view. As Randazzo (2012) points out, instructors teaching about job portfolios “complicate the idea of audience in two ways: (a) we explore how a single document can have multiple audiences and (b) we demonstrate how different audiences have divergent needs, expectations, and values” (p. 382). A research paper’s audience can be difficult for some students to comprehend, but a job portfolio’s more tangible audiences helps students to consider how their argument might be perceived by readers in a variety of settings.

Having clearly defined audiences for a resume and cover letter also helps students select the best evidence to support their claims. A job portfolio asks them to think about evidence in a very specific and personal way. At the start of the assignment, many students want to make vague claims such as “provides good customer service” or “works well with others” without providing evidence to support the claim. When students put themselves in the hiring manager’s position, they begin to realize that such claims are unconvincing without specific support. One student moving into the accounting field used her work experience as an assistant manager at Domino’s to show her ability to work accurately with numbers. Instead of just writing, “Showed attention to detail,” she added, “when counting and maintaining inventory at closing time.” By providing a concrete example, her claim became much more convincing.

Students sometimes also list job duties on a resume without using the task to highlight their skills and abilities. For example, students who have worked as nursing assistants often list “perform patients’ activities of daily living” as a job duty on their resumes, which is a fundamental nursing assistant job duty, but it is a phrase that does not offer insight into a job applicant’s skills. Instead, one student described her work experience as, “Work independently to perform patients’ activities of daily living,” which highlighted her ability to work without constant supervision. Donahue (2012) argues that the application of previously learned knowledge to a problem in a new context is important for the process of transfer because “Transfer is thus enabled by the new context in which knowledge needs to be reused as much as by the way it is learned in the initial context” (p. 151). The resume and the cover letter invite students to consider the selection of evidence in support
of an argument, a skill that they have previously developed on the research paper assignment. However, while evaluating evidence for a job portfolio requires some of the same skills as evaluating evidence for a research paper, the skills are applied in a very different situation. In fact, selecting relevant evidence for a job portfolio may be more difficult because of personal attachment to the evidence.

Students working on a job portfolio must also organize their ideas effectively. According to Adams (2012) in *Forbes*, employers spend an average of 6.25 seconds looking at a resume. For students to draw an employer’s attention, they must design the page layout so that it is visually easy to scan. Students are also restricted by page length. To keep their documents easy to peruse, I recommend that neither the cover letter nor the resume go beyond a single page. Within that limited page layout, students must then decide what information to emphasize. It is easy to underestimate the challenge of organizing a job portfolio, but a cover letter and resume are not simply forms to be filled out because they are persuasive documents. They are in many ways like sonnets, with a highly restricted form that still allows room for creativity and craft. Not only do the cover letter and resume each need to be organized as a single, internally cohesive document, but they must also work together to create a unified package. Within this format, students must make difficult decisions about how to organize and emphasize their evidence. Organizing ideas in a restrictive format teaches that it is not word count or page length that matters.

The job portfolio helps students recognize that proofreading is an essential part of the writing process. Sometimes students working on a research paper treat proofreading as a hasty last step before depositing the paper into the dropbox, but they learn that the audiences for their job portfolios may use proofreading errors to weed out applicants. In her article, “Wd U Rite a Resume like This?” Fisher (2014) uses a study from Accountemps to show that while hiring managers are becoming more forgiving of proofreading errors than they were even in 2009, they still judge job applicants by their proofreading errors. Fisher notes, “Almost two-thirds (64%) of hiring managers polled said they’d look askance at a candidate who let even a single mistake slip through.” In her examination of why her students did not use the writing behaviors learned in FYC in other academic contexts, Wardle (2007) writes “that students did not perceive a need to adopt or adapt most of the writing behaviors they used in FYC for other courses” (p. 76). The high
stakes surrounding proofreading and job portfolios helps them perceive that proofreading is a vital step in the writing process.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the job portfolio assignment in FYC is the intrinsic motivation it provides. Many students at a technical college are writing averse, but they understand that a solid job portfolio represents job opportunities in a very tangible way. They approach the assignment with a desire to succeed that can translate into success in both writing and in their career. As Donahue (2012) points out, “writers are clearly influenced by motivational factors in their likeliness to transfer” (p. 154). While she is specifically speaking about writers entering a new community of practice, her point speaks to students for whom the job portfolio represents a kind of writing that will reward their effort.

Answering a course evaluation survey question about the most valuable aspect of FYC, multiple students have written that the job portfolio was the most beneficial learning experience because of its relevance to their careers. At a technical college, writing assignments that align with students’ career goals makes writing seem relevant. While I still value the research paper as integral to FYC classes, I have a new appreciation for the job portfolio’s ability to give students the opportunity to apply the writing skills from traditional FYC assignments to new applications.

References


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