

8 Benefits of Creating Homeschool Portfolios- More than a Scrapbook of Your Child's Work

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Most people think of a portfolio as a collection of their work. This might be like a scrapbook in which you keep your artwork or pictures of the events in your life such as a wedding or the birth of a child. Others think of a portfolio as a professional presentation for a job interview or to convince a client of their talents.

I first became interested in portfolios when I investigated the Iowa homeschool laws and saw that one option for supervision was to submit a portfolio at the end of the school year. At that time I had a very fuzzy idea of what a portfolio was or what might be involved in creating one. Although the idea of keeping a portfolio of my children's work intrigued me, I never got around to doing it. And so the idea simmered for a few years.

This winter, while I was looking at ways to spend my time and effort (down time), I remembered my interest in portfolios. I created a website for my kids' portfolios. Nich will be applying to colleges in a few years, and I thought I'd better get started on this now. With a web-based portfolio, he can add items and descriptions on his own and participate in the selection of items (artifacts) that he wants to include as examples of his educational and personal growth and of his best work. It also occurred to me that if I had an online and ongoing portfolio of all the kids' educational work, I could show their progress over time.

Like any good homeschool mom, I got lots of books on the topic of portfolios. I scoured them. I slept with them. And in the end, I digested them. Eventually I learned some important things about portfolios. Above and beyond the recordkeeping, above and beyond the documenting of change of the child's abilities over time—two important aspects of creating and maintaining portfolios of children's work—I learned about several other benefits of creating portfolios for the kids that I had not even considered. If you give your student the responsibility of creating her own portfolio, she will do the following:

1. Learn to Self-Evaluate

One of the skills we want to teach our children is how to evaluate their own work. This involves knowing when they have done their best work and comparing what they have done to what they wanted to do. It may sound trivial, but it is a more difficult task than it sounds at first. Even adults have problems with this. Our children (those whom we homeschool) hear us point out improvements they might make in their work. And we tend to hold them to a higher standard than they hold themselves. However, developing self-evaluation skills as an internal trait is a bit different, and that is what we are trying to promote as a long-term educational goal. We want them to be able to look critically and objectively at their work and honestly appraise its quality and growth over time. They need to learn to ask themselves these questions: "How would someone else see this item? How might an expert in this field view this item?" This is a huge skill above and beyond cutting and pasting a picture into a scrapbook.

2. Gain Confidence

Confidence comes from seeing how your own work improves over time. Because the portfolio will cover a longer period than a single piece of work, the child (let's call her Alice) has the

opportunity to view her work over the duration of the portfolio. Whether the portfolio will cover a year or two in a traditional three-ring binder portfolio, or cover several years in a digital portfolio, Alice will see examples of her work evolve over several months or years. Viewing the work over a longer time allows Alice to see where she started, where she is now, and the progression from there to here. She will do several things: she will learn something about how she learns, realize the fact that she learns (no small discovery even for adults), and gain an appreciation for what she learns. She will own this knowledge.

3. See Trends and Growth in Interest Areas

Alice will have a physical (concrete) example of her learning over time in her areas of interest. If she already knows she has an interest in history, for example, she will be able to see that she also tends to do most of her projects on the American Revolution. She may realize her special interest within a general category and become a relative expert in her “field.” These realizations can lead to lifelong interests. Additionally, the ability to specialize and develop expert knowledge is noticed by colleges and universities as well as employers. If Alice can focus on and learn a body of knowledge about Lincoln’s private views on slavery, then she can do it in other areas as well. Colleges, universities, and employers eat this up and, in fact, are humbled by it.

4. Create a Large Body of Work

Most adults have little to show for the years they put into their education. And many will even denigrate their knowledge or experience from schooling. Again, I think this is an area where homeschooled children have an advantage. Alice will have a large body of work to document her education. Even if just her high school years are documented, she will have four years of accomplishments and a record of growth over time to look over. She can see all of the projects she has done in literature from ninth grade (or year, or when she was 14, or however you speak of these years) to when she graduates (or completes her home education). This will grow to a large body of work. It is even larger when you include all the subject areas. For Alice, this body of work is an affirmation of her abilities, her fortitude, her determination, and her total education. What a confidence boost. Rather than being able to show only a few scraps a paper from a public school (report cards and a certificate of graduation), she has a large amount of evidence for her own abilities. Alice can see that she has the ability to master information in many subject areas. Her confidence in her ability to learn will be nearly unassailable. She will feel ready to venture into the world of work or continue her education at an institution of higher learning.

5. Learn to Use the Selection Process

A major part of creating a portfolio is the selection of artifacts for use in the portfolio. Alice must decide which artifacts to use and where to use them. She must decide if and when to replace an artifact with an artifact of higher quality. Because Alice wants to show her work accurately, as well as show the best qualities of her work, the selection process is very important. She must choose between artifacts that show her work and those that showcase her work. She must characterize and understand her audience. She may need to decide whether to emphasize content or delivery, what she’s saying versus how she says it. Developing this filter is an important part of her learning. In any situation we want her to learn to present her best self. This critical eye will serve her well no matter how she chooses to extend her education.

6. Learn to Use the Reflection Process

Once Alice has selected the artifacts to include in her portfolio, she must also identify and describe each selection and how it contributed to and represents her education. The reflection

process, or the act of describing the artifact, is an important process as well. Alice will reflect on her learning, what it meant to her, and where it might lead her in the future. Self-reflection is a skill. For Alice, self-reflection will help her know who she is, why she does what she does, and where she wants to go with her learning in the future. These are no small questions. If you think about it, these are the major questions of the teen years. Many adults have not mastered these skills. More than any other aspect of portfolio making, the reflection process is powerful. This is the meat of the matter. The questions, “Who am I? Why do I do the things I do, make the choices I make, think the things I think?” and “What do I want for my future?” are critical questions as Alice enters adulthood.

7. Create Documentation of Knowledge and Skills

I have mentioned colleges, universities, and employers before. We all know that most institutes of higher learning now admit homeschoolers and are happy to enroll them. One avenue for showing Alice’s work and knowledge to her college of choice is her portfolio. Sometimes it is difficult for colleges to quantify Alice’s education as a homeschooler. They have boxes they want checked off and forms they want filled in. “What did Alice do for history her junior year?” is a question you might hear. Rather than having to try to explain this or come up with it on the fly, Alice has concrete documentation of what she did during her third year of high school history. Seeing the artifacts and reflections of Alice’s third year of high school history studies is impressive to admissions department personnel. The portfolio, along with test scores (ACT, PSAT, and SAT) and an essay, will show the admissions personnel how serious Alice is about her education and what an asset she will be to their institution. The same goes for employers.

8. Develop Marketable Skills

If the portfolio is electronic, the process of creating it is educational in and of itself. This will be especially true if Alice learns a techie skill in the process. If she is developing a digital portfolio (those created with the express intention of being displayed on a computer) Alice will learn skills she can market later. She will also gain competence and confidence in her technical abilities. The very process of creating the digital portfolio will show colleges, universities, and employers that she has these skills.

In addition, Alice will learn that once she has mastered skills in one area of technology, learning skills in other areas, such as a new software program, is much easier because she already has a schema for the learning process and the commonalities between software programs. The “Help” option is always the help option, no matter what program Alice uses. The “Print” option is always the print option, no matter what program Alice uses. Having learned these types of details in one or several programs speeds the learning of new software programs. Alice has learned transferable skills. Let’s face it; we are all impressed by this. People who can easily pick up software skills are thought of as geniuses. The very process of creating her portfolio will give Alice important and marketable skills. In the techie world we live in today, this is also no small thing.

I was impressed with all that the portfolio process can impart to both students and parents. In creating my own children’s online (web-based) portfolios, I gained many new skills. Some will be marketable even for me. My son Nich will have the record of his learning he needs when applying to the college of his choice. Like Alice, he will have gained many marketable skills,

and he will impress admissions personnel and employers. But the most important aspect of creating his portfolio is the one I had not anticipated, had not even given thought to: that he will gain important self-knowledge. He will have a clear idea of who he is, what he believes, and why. He will know what he knows and that he worked to gain that knowledge. He will have the confidence he needs to learn new skills and information. He will have learned to self-critique and self-select his best work. These skills will follow him through life and serve him well, no matter what choices he makes about his future.

Biographical Information

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