

**Senior Capstone Courses:
Writing Gateways to Professional Discourse and Leadership
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We ask students to compile and present portfolios to demonstrate their abilities, to document their experiences, and to assess their progress. We ask them to present what they have done.

However, according to Kathleen Blake Yancey, “what we ask students to do is who we ask them to be” (739). In other words, when we ask students to develop capstone portfolios, we’re asking students to explore, practice, and develop their academic and professional identities—students present *themselves* to a professional world, not just their work. Student portfolios become students’ stories of their individual selves.

According to Stephen Denning, we tell a story to show people who we are—to stop being a stranger. Once upon a time, several eons ago, a stranger was a rare phenomenon. In a calmer, slower, more intimate time, people knew who we were by reputation. They knew our family. They knew our upbringing. They knew our history. They knew what we had done. We had lived together. We had grown up in the same village. We were already known.

Now in these turbulent, fragmented, rapidly morphing times, it’s hard to know who anyone is. People don’t have the background about one another that they once had. And they are often asked to trust others about whom they know very little. They come from different backgrounds, different education, different religions, different races, different countries.

How do we communicate who we are? People want to know what makes us tick, what gets us excited, what is driving us, what values we espouse, or what goals we have in life. How will we act in a crisis? Will we level with people? Will we save ourselves while stabbing others in the back? Are we someone who goes whichever way the wind blows? Or are we someone of character who stands up for what is good and true and right?

Thus if the audience can understand the critical experiences that have formed us as individuals, they can begin not only to understand the unique individuals who we have become but also to infer how we may act in the future. Giving them an account of one or more turning points in our existence can enable others to get inside our lives, to share our lives, to go through what we have been through so that they can themselves experience what sort of persons we are. (pp. 80, 82)

Senior capstone portfolios become the platform through which students tell their life stories in meaningful and appropriate contexts.

These stories, however, must be authentic and indicative, a “thin slice” (Gladwell) revealing an actual person allowing others to glimpse into what Bill George calls an individual’s True North. The True North is the internal compass that guides us successfully through life. It is our orienting point—our fixed point in a spinning world—that helps us stay on track as an individual and as a leader. Our True North is based on what is most important to us, our most cherished values, our passions and motivations, the sources of satisfaction in our lives (xxiii).

Perhaps the best way to exemplify how portfolios establish identities through stories is through one student’s portfolio. John Brassell will be our extended example. John graduated with a degree in English with an emphasis in professional writing and a goal for law school. In his final three semesters at the University, he made a late major switch from biology to English. John had classes from me each of those three semesters, including the two English capstone courses. His final semester, John was also my teaching assistant for my technical communication course and my business senior capstone course—both of which also require student portfolios.

Traditionally, a professional portfolio assumes a resume. Resumes are life stories, albeit concise—a life in a glance. But rather than submitting only a single page, generic resume, John posted three resumes: chronological, functional, and online. Each resume tells a similar story but in different ways, providing additional insights into his abilities and character. John did not limit his resumes to a single page. Rather each becomes a master resume listing all appropriate experiences and skills from which he can draw to customize future resumes to submit with specific applications.

Immediately after his name and contact information, John pulls attention to character traits in a boxed summary of keywords that tell his story as an individual. He bolds the significant words *focused*, *troubleshoot*, *team player*, *interpersonal*, *self-motivated*, *dependable*, and *bilingual*.

Focused and hardworking; able to **troubleshoot** complex problems. Effective **team player** with exceptional communication, presentation, and **interpersonal** skills. Manage multiple, diverse tasks simultaneously and work well under pressure. **Self-motivated**, decisive, and **dependable** with strong leadership background. **Bilingual** in Spanish.

John’s job and volunteer titles in his chronological resume present certain aspects of his life: research assistant, teaching assistant, theory of language tutor, caretaker/assistant manager, customer service agent, heavy equipment operator, truck driver, Special Olympics volunteer, full-time representative for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, NASA intern, Eagle Scout, certified scuba diver. Yet the lists of his skills in his functional resume present a different perspective of John: research, editing, leadership, communication, work ethic, and customer service. Then under each functional category, his story continues with specific details. For example under “Editing,” John indicates he has edited a total of 220 pages for publishable manuscripts; gained experience in

professional genre writing specifically business plans, press releases, sales letters, speeches and scripts, instructions, and news writing; co-authored and edited sections of playbook for BYU-Idaho production of *Oedipus Rex*; and translated worldwide materials and manuals into Spanish on a volunteer basis for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The artifacts that John chooses to include in his portfolio continue to flesh out his life story. These artifacts include an accomplishment statement, a personal statement, a leadership portfolio, and sample job interview responses.

Accomplishment Statement

One of the first formal statements required in my student's portfolios is an accomplishment statement.

A well-formulated accomplishment statement has two parts:

- The results or benefits that came as a result of our work.
- The action we took to achieve those benefits/results. (What steps we took or what techniques we used.)

Accomplishment statements provide a much better awareness of the skills and abilities that will be the foundation our authentic selves and demonstrate concrete credibility for everything we claim in the way of qualifications and abilities. We will have simple documentation of the value we can bring to an employer. Additionally, accomplishment statements establish a greater confidence in presenting ourselves to others. We will understand better that we are not "asking for a job," but rather we are offering a contribution to an employer.

The story that John chooses to tell for his accomplishment statement focuses on a one week experience he had while serving as a missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He briefly reports that in one week when he was 20 years-old, his girlfriend of four years emails to break up with him, his close mentor is struck in an intersection by a drunk driver and eventually dies, and because of political unrest, the U.S. State Department requests the evacuation of Americans from Venezuela where John has been for a year. Without any personal belongings, John leaves to finish an additional year of his mission in Chile.

John describes his anguish and personal loss, but after a few days he recognized that

I still had a message of hope to others and that I had a message that brought them comfort. I worked harder than ever before and with an energy that only comes to one who has already fallen and is trying to catch up. I ran. I doubled my efforts and doubled my faith and decided that I would control my own destiny and

happiness. I resolved not to let outside situations affect my ability to perform my duty.

John concludes with the success he has had because of his efforts during this extreme time in his life.

Personal Statement

John also includes a personal statement in his portfolio. He makes a clear distinction between his accomplishment statement and his personal statement. John's personal statement is reflective; that is, it demonstrates what he has thought about and how he has gained a clear perspective on his experiences and what he wants in his future. He gives readers a vivid and compelling picture of him as an individual—in essence, telling readers what they should know about him.

John's opening sentence for his personal statement reads, "The world need benevolent leaders." This becomes the framework for his statement. In a few sentences he establishes a historical example of benevolent leadership when General Ulysses S. Grant recognizes and responds to General Robert E. Lee's dignity at the surrender at Appomattox. Grant permits officers to retain their side arms, horses, and private property, and he declares to the Union soldiers, "The rebels are our countrymen again. We can best show our joy by refusing to celebrate their downfall."

John then shares a personal experience and commentary on benevolent leadership:

An out of state friend asked me to serve a lawsuit summons to the owner of his rental agency. Civil Service officers from three counties informed me that this owner had a dozen un-served summons; no one could contact her. For two months, I made numerous unsuccessful attempts at different times and locations. My friend suggested some legal but dishonest approaches to make contact easier, but I didn't want to be deceptive. On the seventh attempt, I made contact. As I handed her the letter, everything changed. I saw a drained grandmother working three jobs. Her eyes were sad; I couldn't help holding onto her hand as I handed her the summons. She recounted the difficulties of being a rental agency owner, sat down, treated me to dessert, and gave me a hug as I left. With moist eyes, she thanked me for listening.

Like Grant, I noticed the real person behind the angry face and snippy attitude. I saw the ivory grandmother with that pressed outfit she wore to three separate jobs. I was unwilling to deviate from my commitment, yet sensitive enough to see the big picture. Like Lee, this scared owner was getting served either way, but like Grant, I looked beyond the moment. I helped how I could and remained persistent, patient, and focused on the individual and my duty.

John thinks in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience and application.

Leadership Portfolio

For the most part, students do not view themselves as leaders. A significant section of the business capstone portfolio is leadership. To prepare artifacts for their leadership portfolio, students keep a leadership journal for ten weeks in which they respond to suggested prompts. The leadership journal is an adaptation of Bill George's *True North: Discover Your Authentic Leadership*. Some of the prompts include leaders in their lives, leaders who have lost their way, themselves as leaders, their greatest crucible or challenge, their values, their mentors, their successes, their leadership relationships, and integrating leadership in their lives.

John uses his missionary experience for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to demonstrate his leadership:

As a missionary leader in Chile, I managed forty missionaries serving 500,000 individuals covering 300 square miles of Santiago. Primarily, I helped resolve multiple setbacks by engaging in frequent, successful conflict resolution. I helped motivate, encourage, and support missionaries who struggled with conflicting cultures, language barriers, and strenuous schedules. I organized training meetings, conducted interviews, and implemented transfers. I sought to unify missionaries from different countries and cultures by overcoming individual challenges and meeting common goals. One missionary's lack of social skills and compulsive behaviors kept him from leaving the apartment and meeting people. He would withdraw and refuse to communicate. I individualized our daily schedule to make room for opportunities, like spending hours each morning picking up litter or teaching English to locals, which got him outside communicating with people. He eventually felt comfortable, confident, and had a successful mission.

John's leadership portfolio is unique from other students'. As my teaching assistant, John researched and developed case studies based on the fourteen United States Marine Corps leadership traits including judgment, initiative, integrity, and endurance. John helped create formal classroom leadership presentations on professional, religious, and military leadership.

John's portfolio includes these fourteen presentations, each with a brief definition and explanation followed by a simple sample case the class discusses. Below is John's description and case for the leadership trait of bearing.

Bearing is a general appearance, carriage, deportment, and conduct. By your bearing, you establish a standard for your peers and superiors. Your appearance should show confidence, competence, alertness and energy. Your clothing should be neat and clean at all times. Your voice and actions should be under control. Few things can steady the morale of others like a leader who, with full knowledge of the difficulties of a situation, neither looks nor acts worried. Never talk down to others nor allow sarcasm to enter the conversation. Vulgar speech, frequent loss

of temper, and irritable nature show a lack of self-confidence that others easily see. Your bearing should show dignity and control of both emotions and actions. Dignity shows pride and confidence in yourself and your abilities. Emotional control shows that any situation is well in hand.

You're at a friend's party where there are people you're meeting for the first time. You've only been there a few minutes when an individual becomes very outspoken and verbally bashes the political candidate and party you strongly support. You see flaws in the reasoning, and you want to outline those differences.

What do you do?

John not only describes these leadership traits, but he exemplifies them. From our class discussions, students are also able to participate and include these traits as part of their leadership training and portfolio.

Interview Responses

Finally, John's portfolio includes sample interview responses. A new and common practice for job applications now requires applicants to write brief (say 1600 character) responses to multiple questions that in the past were traditionally saved for the formal interview. Employers can now screen applicants based on both their resumes and pre-interview responses.

For the most part, these behavior-based questions seek to understand past behavior or conduct and the applicants' responses reveal what they believe, feel, think, or know. The focus is on actual past behaviors rather than on speculating about possible future actions.

Applicants are asked to tell about a time when they

- Experienced a difficult situation with a co-worker.
- Made a mistake or a bad decision.
- Experienced a significant success.
- Went above and beyond the call of duty.
- Experienced a work-related situation that caused stress.
- Were creative in solving a problem.
- Were required to make an unpopular decision.

My students are now writing these responses to include in their portfolios. The portfolio becomes a repository of carefully written, articulated responses that can become the framework for future responses.

In addition to these written responses, once a week, students participate in a "hot spot" interview in which they interview each other and practice sharing these brief experiences.

A sample of John's interview response anticipates a law school's question of why he changed his major late in his academic career to English anticipating law school rather than a biology major to become a dentist. John's response provides the concise answer.

For three years I shadowed a dentist whom I learned to love and admire. I desired to become the kind of man he was. We worked together to establish a path that would lead me to becoming a partner in his practice. When I enrolled at the university, I majored in biology thinking that would best prepare me for dentistry. Biology was very difficult, but I persevered because I wanted to make my friend proud and continue his legacy through dentistry. I gave biology all that I had and took advantage of tutoring, study groups, and office hours. But my heart was in it for someone else. Law on the other hand, has always interested me, and during one semester I managed to squeeze in an elective business law course among my biology classes. I loved the class. Over time I learned that to emulate an individual, I didn't need to have the same career, but I could follow his example in a career of my choice. After much consideration and thought, I decided I'd be the happiest and best suited for a career in law. I chose to major in English with an emphasis in professional writing. English has allowed me to communicate more effectively and provided the study and critical reasoning skills necessary for law school preparation. Having made this decision for myself, and with this real, tangible, goal in mind, I began to see success. I started and completed my English degree in three consecutive semesters taking up to 20 credits one semester. It is clear that with an accurate goal and a determined vision, I am capable of academic success.

Our students' professional portfolios become much more than a repository of their academic work. More significantly, their portfolios become a concrete demonstration of who they are, of their individual identities.

Works Cited

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