

## BUILDING A SIMPLE TEACHING WRITING PORTFOLIO TO TEACH WRITING IN COMPUTER-SUPPORTED LANGUAGE LABS AT GREAT EASE

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### INTRODUCTION

The employment of *Educational e-Portfolio*, commonly defined as a summative digital collection containing work that a learner has collected, reflected, selected, and presented to show growth and change over time, representing an individual or organization's human capital (Helen Barrett, 2005), has undoubtedly been gaining a respected recognition in the processes of teaching and learning languages. In the previous volume, on presenting the guidelines for having students majoring in English (*at the University of Dalat*) create and generate their weblog learning portfolios, we have already discussed the increasing popularity and widely recognized needs of students' learning portfolios as well as the growing necessity of introducing portfolio based approaches into the teaching and learning processes of English at the university.

Concerned about the issues of flexibility, portability and user-friendliness as well as desiring to make use of the digital technologies available in the Multimedia Labs of the Department of Foreign Languages (*University of Dalat*), we decide to introduce easy tooltips scaffolding the simplest ways of creating a digital teaching portfolio to be employed efficiently in teaching writing skills to English major students at the university. This article therefore focuses merely on the implementing steps of the makeup and utilization of *the simple digital teaching writing portfolio*, not on the professionally theoretical literary or academic philosophy involved. The targeted audience of this article will then be the teaching faculties of writing courses in the department, especially those who are not professionally acquainted with computing technologies but are to make the best use of the Multimedia Labs.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

*How should a teaching writing portfolio be comprehended in the specific context addressed in this article?*

Since 1998, *Teaching Portfolios*, also termed as teaching dossiers, uniformly defined as factual descriptions of a professor's teaching strengths and accomplishments including documents and materials which "collectively suggest the scope and quality of a professor's teaching performance" (Seldin, P. 1993) have become greatly important in the applications of process approaches in language teaching and learning. Carney (2001), therefore, recognizes a teaching

portfolio as “a theoretical act, a reflective tool, and a credential”, which can act as a repository for teacher knowledge, providing teachers of languages with efficient tools in assigning, accessing, reflecting, revising, monitoring and improving.

In the particular context of teaching and learning English, particularly in the subfield of teaching and learning writing skills the teaching writing portfolio is commonly comprehended as a narrative document in which a teacher of writing “concisely organizes details of his or her teaching efforts and accomplishments.” (Zubizarreta 1994). In a sophisticated case study (2000), Mues, F & Sorcinelli, M.D. define a teaching portfolio in the pedagogical context of teaching cognitive skills like writing, summarizing and reacting as a coherent set of material that represents your teaching practice as related to student learning. “Teaching practice” in its broadest sense extends beyond the obvious activities that go into teaching a course to include all activities that enrich student learning.

Obviously, definitions of teaching portfolios vary depending on their specific purposes, audience, institutional contexts, and individual needs. Intended as a beneficial servant to the teaching process in writing classes conducted in the Multimedia Labs, the teaching writing portfolio we address in this article should be apprehended simply as a summative collection of the teacher’s processed resources and aids as well as his or her reflected artifacts on a particular writing course (*e.g. academic paragraph writing, academic essay writing or critical writing*). Archives of students’ compositions, collections of writing samples, galleries of comments and libraries of evaluating rubrics, for instance, are therefore the major components of the teaching writing portfolio as demonstrated later in the following sections. Once employed in the computer-based classroom environment, these archives will obviously be built up, generated and saved in digital formats; the mentioned portfolio is then commonly termed as the e-teaching writing portfolio, the computer-based teaching writing portfolio, or the digital teaching writing portfolio (DTWP).

### ***Why should a DTWP be employed in the teaching of writing courses in the Multimedia Labs?***

The benefits from the integration of a teaching portfolio into a specific teaching process have long been globally recognized and respected; the most widely mentioned usually include providing different sources of evidence of teaching performance, reflecting more of teaching’s intellectual substance and complexity, offering convincing evidence for teaching improvement and setting further goals, ensuring the collaborative work among faculties on the same course and so on (Mues, F & Sorcinelli, M.D. 2000). In the case of teaching and learning processes of writing skills in the Multimedia Labs, the digital teaching writing portfolio has proved to be

even more beneficial to the teaching due to its comprehensively compatible integration into process approaches and computer-based environment practices.

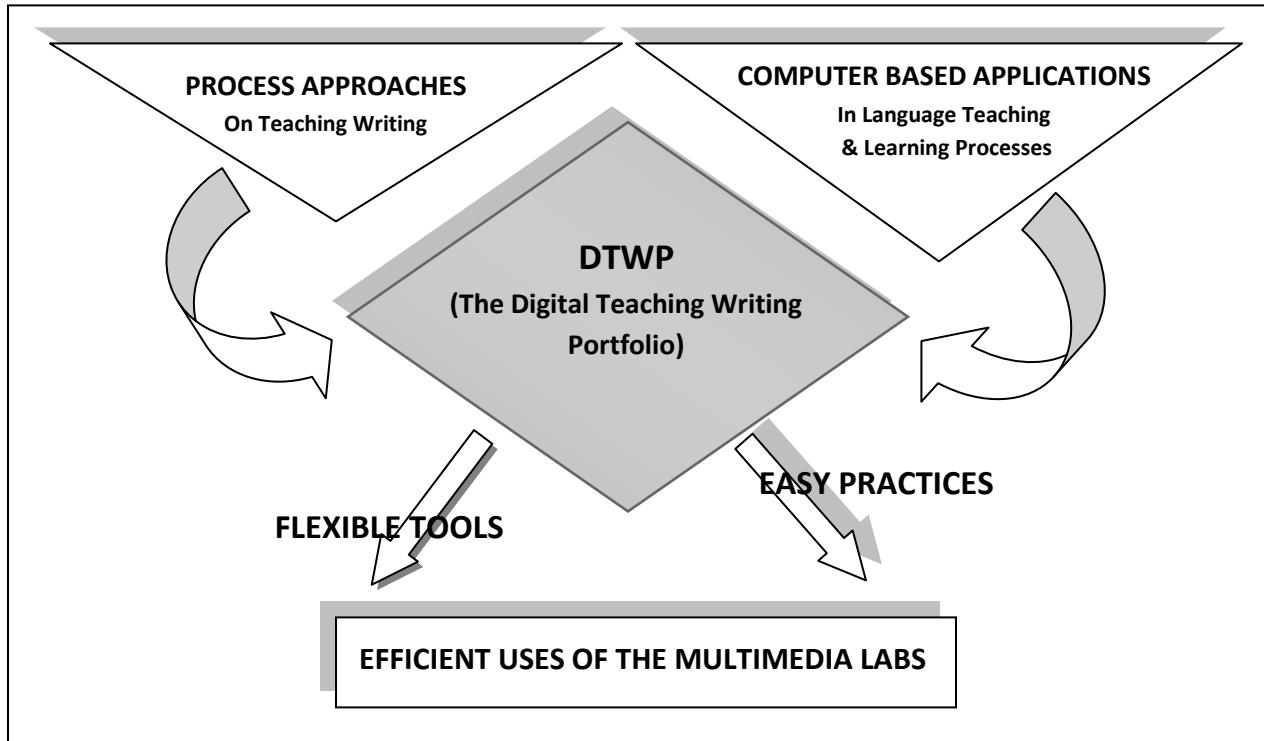
### *A teaching writing portfolio fits in the today pedagogical approaches on process writing.*

The application of process approaches to the teaching and learning of writing skills has long been popular and convincing. Recently, acting as a dynamic tool for demonstrating abilities and demonstrations in students' processing skills in writing, the portfolio based strategy has significantly enhanced the belief among teachers of languages in the must-have of process writing approaches. In 2006, on clarifying portfolio based writing approaches, Hyland, K & Hyland, F conclude that writing courses employing portfolio based approaches appear to provide a fertile environment in which teachers and learners can engage in feedback on writing and thus mesh well with process approaches.

### *A teaching writing portfolio successfully fits in computer-based writing classrooms*

We have experienced that teachers using a digital teaching writing portfolio which stores documents, materials, teachers' notes and all kind of resources in electronic formats will find it an effective teaching assistant in their computer based classrooms. Since setting off with integration of teaching portfolios into the processes of teaching writing courses in the Multimedia Labs at the University of Dalat, we have been enjoying the ability of conducting flexibly and coincidentally incredible amounts of workload (*e.g. demonstrating with slideshows, correcting students' writings, analyzing sample compositions, commenting on group-work products and so on*) within the limited time of a class.

This valuable role of teaching writing portfolios has been verified since 1998 when Palmquist and his colleagues initiated great projects involving numerous participants of various majors: teachers of languages, teacher-trainers, course-designers, students as well as administrators of computer based language classrooms to testify the practical demands of applying computer-based instructions as well as the recognized role of portfolios (both the learning portfolio and the teaching portfolio) in the successful processes of teaching and learning writing skills. Pamquist and his team spent several years capturing the richness of teaching and learning in computer-based classrooms evoked through qualitative data (classroom observations, teacher interviews, teaching logs and email archives) as well as through quantitative data (teacher-student contacts, student-student contacts, demographic information) to conclude that the computer classroom, with the feasibility of employing both the learning and teaching portfolios, "allows early and frequent opportunities to help students overcome the myriad writing problems they encounter as they work through complex writing tasks."



-Figure 1-

The DTWP, as depicted in Figure 1, has been acting as a dynamic, portable and compatible teaching database, providing flexible means of coincidentally applying advanced pedagogical process approaches of teaching writing (*portfolio based, reviews and reflections based, and so on*), as well as supplying teachers especially those are digitally challenged with easy tools to implement their writing lessons efficiently in the computer-based environment: the Multimedia Labs.

### **WHAT SHOULD BE SET UP AS MAJOR COMPONENTS OF A SIMPLE TEACHING WRITING PORTFOLIO?**

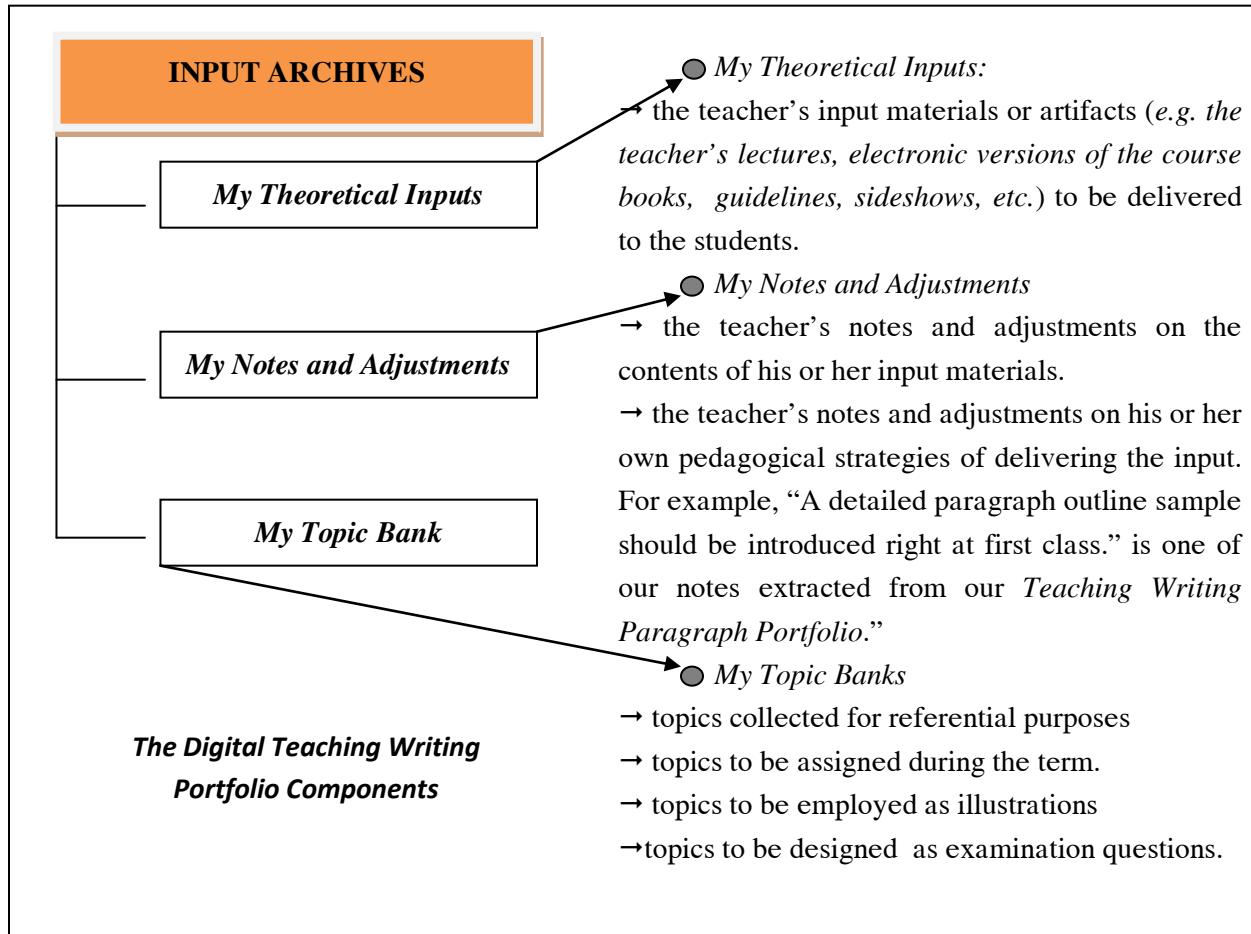
The following portfolio component description is not intended to cope with the commonly recognized organization of components in a teaching portfolio discussed in today pedagogical forums. The structure presented in this section aims at the simplification and compactness of an essential teaching writing portfolio to be specifically employed within the teaching processes of writing courses in the Multimedia Labs.

#### **1-Input Archives**

The Input Archives Component is composed of all materials and resources or artifacts that the teacher wishes to streamline into the students' acquisition as the inputting process. In a particular context of teaching essay-writing skills (*Writing Three*), for instance, the teacher's

own notes on how to write an effective Cause-Effect Analysis Essay, his or her archives of how to write Cause-Effect Analysis Essays effectively, the common format of a Cause-Effect Essays, the sideshow on the pitfalls on writing Cause-Effect Essays and so on can be classified as contents of the Input Archives of the *Teaching Writing Essay Portfolio*.

Thus, the Input Archives Component should be subcategorized as demonstrated in Figure 2.



-Figure 2-

In order to help the teacher make smart and quick choices of topics to be used in practicing sections, in designing assignments or preparing for the Ending Course Test, it is strongly recommended that the topics stored in My Topic Bank be ranked in terms of their levels of difficulty, their levels of compatibility (*e.g. the compatibility with the schematic background of students a certain class*), their levels of popularity and so on. However, the ranking criteria and framework certainly vary depending on the specific needs and interests of each teacher of a particular writing course. The following examples extracted from our own *Digital Teaching Writing Essay Portfolio* (*to be employed in teaching Writing Three*) will act as illustrations.

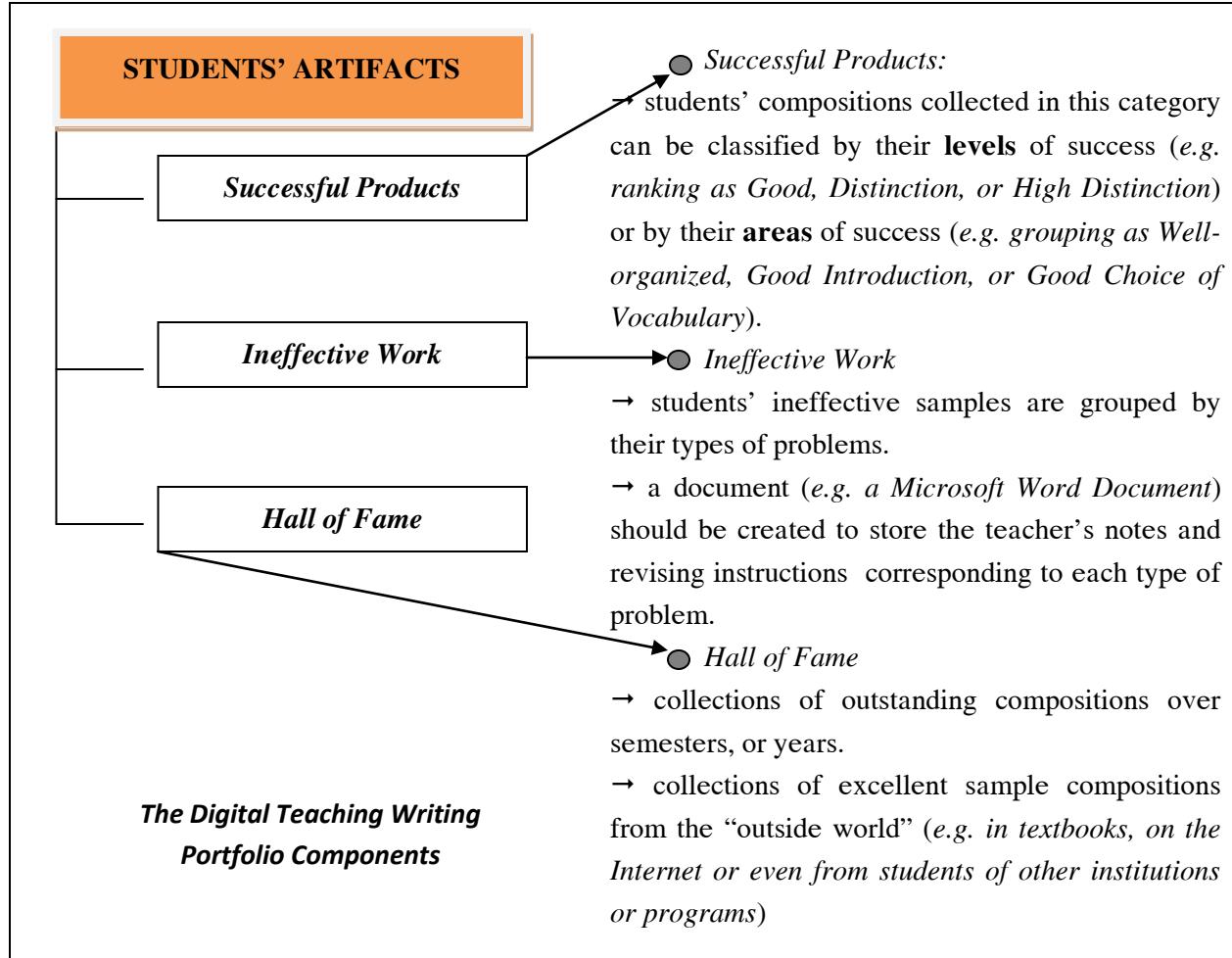
MY TOPIC BANK: CAUSE-EFFECT ANALYSIS ESSAYS				
	TOPICS	DIFFICULTY	POPULARITY	COMPATIBILITY WITH THE FINAL EXAMINATION
<b>1</b>	Write an essay to clarify the causes for popularity of Dual SIM mobiles ( <i>mobiles supporting 2 SIM card slots</i> ) in Vietnam today.	☆☆☆☆	☆☆	☆☆☆☆
<b>2</b>	Write an essay analyzing the major effects that the Internet has on your own studying.	☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆

Obviously, once built up as instructed above, the Input Archives Component holds most of the principal functions of a teaching portfolio which range from organizing the teacher's prepared resources and artifacts, providing easy ways to update the teacher's archives to providing documented evidence of teaching that is connected to the specifics and contexts of what is being taught and leading the teacher to his or her practical self-reflecting so as to achieve improvements in classroom performance as well as motivations for revising editions or further studies.

### ***2-Students' Artifacts***

Unlike the Input Archives Component storing artifacts edited and written by the teacher, this component, as it is termed, contains students' compositions (*either successful or not*) selected by the teacher as well as the teacher's own notes, comments or revised suggestions on these student's writing products.

Artifacts stored in this component therefore fall into the three subcategories of Successful Products, Ineffective Work and Hall of Fame as illustrated in Figure 3.



-Figure 3-

The Students' Archives Component of the digital teaching writing portfolio has always proved to best fit in classes of correcting student's work for it allows the teacher to edit, revise and dynamically move back and forth among different samples or compositions just by simple steps with a word-processing program on the computer. The teacher is then not only released from the heavy burden of time-consuming and boredom but also given a wide variety of possible activities to improve both the effectiveness and performance of these student's work correcting classes.

### ***3-Archives of Rubrics and Students' Profiles***

-Archives of Rubrics: collections of rubrics of the teacher's own choice.

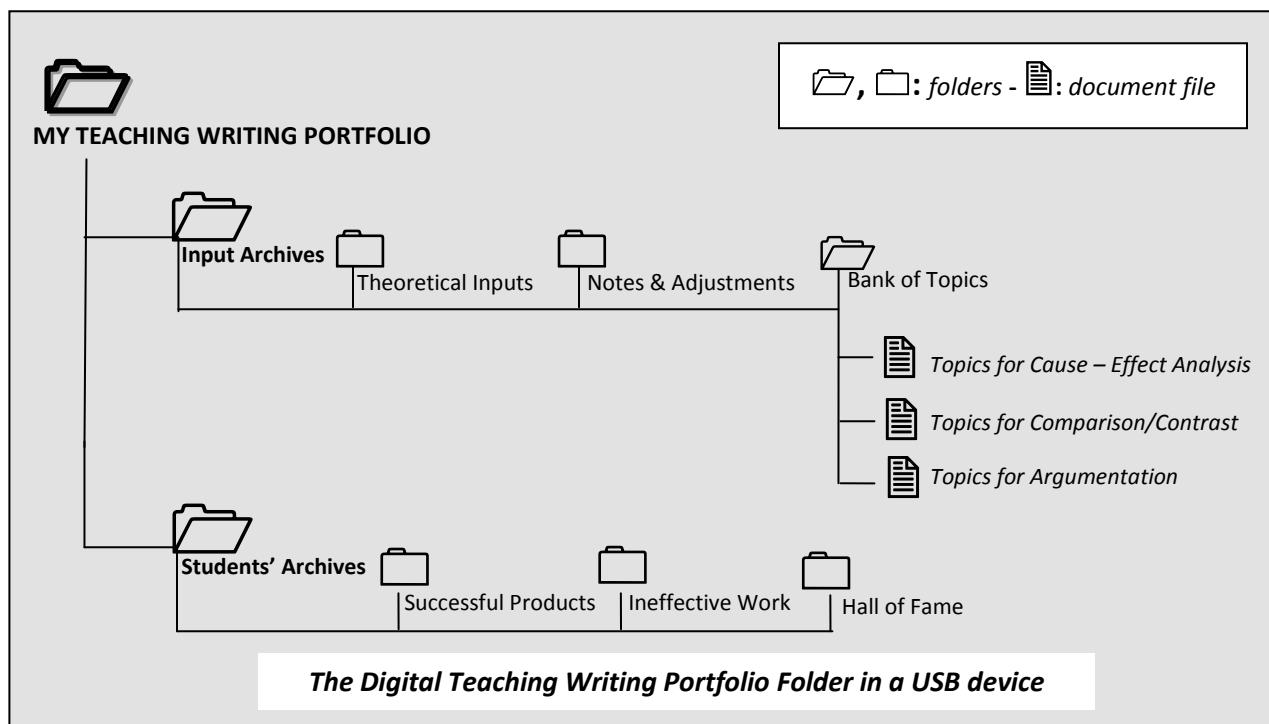
-Archives of Students' Profiles: lists of students, records of students' assignment results, students' feedback test results and so on.

Unlike its above counterparts which serve the benefits of classroom performance, this component works for the teacher's administrative activities instead; except for the fact that the teacher may wish to have the students discuss on certain rubrics to set up or adjust their writing strategies for success.

### **LET'S DIGITALIZE YOUR TEACHING WRITING PORTFOLIO!**

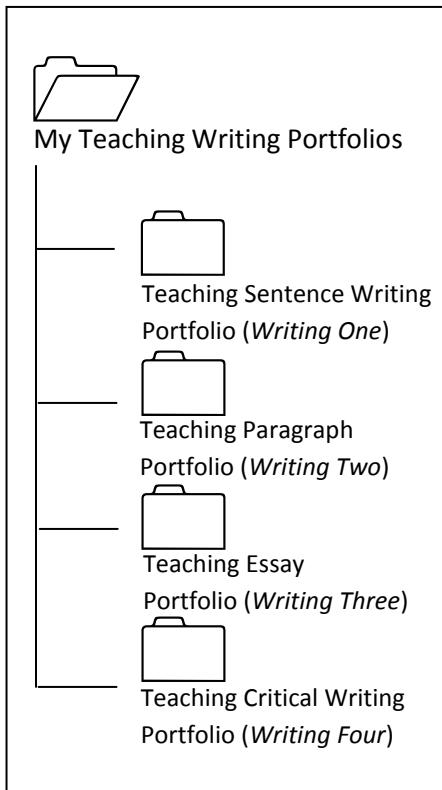
As mentioned in the Introduction, the audience of this article will be faculties of English, especially those who haven't got much professional training on computers. The currently respected methods of digitally generating the teaching and learning portfolios such as employing specialized software, using Internet-based techniques and applying Web-blog advances are thus not addressed in this article. Instead, we recommend the easiest way of computerizing the teaching writing portfolio, which is simply creating a folder that contains all the portfolio's contents and save this folder in a USB device.

Figure 4 graphically demonstrates the scaffolding structure of the folder named: My Teaching Writing Portfolio as an illustration.



-Figure 4-

It is also strongly recommended that several teaching writing portfolios be stored in one folder titled My Teaching Writing Portfolio provided that the teacher is working on several writing courses as shown in Figure 5.



-Figure 5-

Apart from its compactness, flexibility, mobility and frequently updating, self-reflecting support, a teaching writing portfolio (*even as simple as the one modeled in this article*) digitalized in a USB device also offers the teacher of writing a wide range of activities which seem to be impossible if performed in a traditional “paper-based” classroom environment due to the great constraints of time. The simplified implementation of an activity enjoying the benefits of The Students’ Archives Component in the Teaching Essay Portfolio described below is an illustration.

### Activity: Outline Comparing

\* *Step One:* Transfer the Outline Format of Comparison/Contrast Essays to the students’ computers.

\* *Step Two:* Transfer several outlines of the teacher’s choice from the Successful Products folder in The Students’ Archives Component to the students’ computers.

\* *Step Three:* Transfer several outlines of the teacher’s choice from the Ineffective Work folder in The Students’ Archives Component to the students’ computers.

\* *Step Four:* Have the students perform comparisons to give comments on the two series of products transferred.

\* *Step Five:* Evaluate students’ analysis results and have students consider the teacher’s own comments if necessary.

## CONCLUSION

It is commonly known that a computer-supported language lab sometimes functions as a black hole to many teachers of languages in that it requires them of so much time and effort just getting to know what to do with the whole intricate operation of complicated devices. However, as Selfe (2005)’s case study reveals, these inevitable problems seem minor in comparison to a growing realization by faculties, staffs and experts worldwide that computers can play a valuable role in teaching writing, helping to blur the traditional pedagogical constraints in writing lessons and boosting both the teacher’s creative improvement and the student’s ability of producing the targeted language.

Therefore, on demonstrating a simple digital teaching writing portfolio which can be easily set up and saved in a USB device, we wish to limit the technical constraints at most so as to help the faculty of writing courses in the department to start experimenting their Multimedia Lab teaching comfortably and effectively. Specific approaches and particular activities for integrating the teaching writing portfolio into the classroom performance of writing courses are then set as our further studies.

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