By Bernajean Porter

**WHERE’S THE BEEF?**

*Adding Rigor to Student Digital Products*

Are your students overly enamored with media novelties, such as flying words and spinning images? Learn how to steer them to create more robust digital projects.

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Effective communication skills start with content that is worthy of sharing. Since the expression “Where’s the Beef?” was first used as an advertising slogan for Wendy’s in 1984, it has become an all-purpose phrase questioning the substance of an idea, event, or product. Students exploring and using various technologies, unfortunately, easily become enamoured by media novelties, such as flying words or spinning images, and produce digital products with no beef. Using digital tools does not make their cutting and pasting of summary information more valuable.

Mastering technology tools is no longer enough. Using digital products to demonstrate what students know and understand creates a performance task that maps with all NETS for Students and American Association for School Libraries (AASL) standards for the 21st-century learner, but only if inquiry or problem-based learning—not technology—guides students’ learning tasks.

Educators need to help students rehearse thinking, creativity, and communication skills that go beyond repackaging existing information. The need for 21st-century skills and meeting the NETS•S creates an urgent demand on learners to acquire and practice the higher-order thinking skills from the top of Bloom’s Taxonomy: analyzing, evaluating, and creating knowledge beyond existing facts.

Student work has traditionally focused on topical research. For example, students are often assigned change the intellectual work of the content. It is still a summary report decorated with media. But asking students to create a book trailer that sells the book as a public service announcement or to create a sound track that represents the emotional journey of the storyline helps learners become knowledge producers, because they must demonstrate understanding beyond existing facts.

Think Rigorous Content First
When you reflect on digital products in your classrooms or see student work created with technology tools at conferences, try to peer past the technology glitz and ask questions about rigor. Does the content have substance worth sharing? Are your students’ digital products demonstrating what they know and deeply understand about the topic beyond existing facts? Or are their digital products primarily demonstrating the exploration and acquisition of technology skills?

Of course you can have both quality and craftsmanship, but only if you start with rigorous content.

In 1999, in partnership with North Central Regional Lab (NCREL), I developed a comprehensive set of research-based scoring guides for digital products. We wanted evaluation tools that used a database of indicators to encourage teachers to begin their students’ digital communication products with a purpose beyond recapping facts. We also wanted an assessment process that would increase student learning rather than just monitor it—an assessment for learning.

After two years of field testing and products. Traits in each scoring guide are divided into two parts: content communication and craftsmanship of communication (see “Nine Scoring Traits for Digital Products,” page 16). Educators can access an online version of these evaluation tools for personal classroom use at www.digitales.us/evaluating/scoring_guide.php.

Begin with Types of Communication
Before asking students to create multimedia products, use a flow chart that starts with clarity about the type of communication, then select the mode that best suits your purpose/audience, and finally identify the tool.

The type of communication establishes the depth of knowledge, format, and cognitive style you expect in the communication of a digital product. Suppose the topic is the Civil War. If the task is to tell about a Civil War battle, the type is a summary report, which is nothing more than new packaging of existing information. If the task is to describe/conclude, analyze/persuade, or create a docudrama, the approach demands that students demonstrate their understanding of Civil War concepts beyond existing information.

Next, authors choose a mode for their content. Mode is the packaging of the message, such as podcasting, comic books, dramatic blogs, or movies. The expectations for shaping the content would be the same regardless of the mode. Each mode influences how others experience the message. Students will need to use a variety of modes over time to develop “fluency” in each. Creating graphic novels, for
to “go look up and report back”
to demonstrate that they are good
consumers of information. A book
report, for example, typically expects
students to distill the facts to dem-
strate that they know the book.
Putting that paper book report into a
slide show, podcast, Animoto, movie,
VoiceThread, or Comic Life does not
aligning with numerous state and
national standards, we created a set
of 14 comprehensive scoring guides
based on type of communication (see
“Types of Communication,” page
14). Each type of scoring guide has
detailed statements to assess nine
traits for limited, developed, and
exemplar qualities in digital media
example, can be technically easy, but
the artful use of this mode requires an
understanding that each panel needs
to express a defined emphasis, that
images traditionally include dramatic
perspectives, or that the number of
panels used creates different emotion-
al experiences with the story line. We
want authors to master maximizing

Contrast). Students could have used
GarageBand, PhotoStory, or Audacity
software (tools). Whatever tools you
use, putting the priority on rigor and
fluency of the modes will benefit stu-
dents long after tools become obsolete
or new tools become available.

Allowing students to choose their
own types, modes, and tools as well
as to personally select the assessment
indicators that you will use to evaluate
their digital work increases student
ownership, affinity, and independent
learning skills. We want students to
become designers of learning tasks and
consumers of assessment information
and take responsibility for using evi-
dence of their own progress to under-
stand what comes next for them. Using
the online scoring guides easily enables
learners to define and understand what
success looks like and to determine
how to do better next time.

Digital Work as a Body of Evidence
The ability to validate scoring pro-
cesses for digital products not only
enables quality feedback on student
work but also makes it possible to
organize a body of evidence for data-
driven schoolwide content goals. Est-
ablishing schoolwide goals for digital
products across the curriculum allows
all learners to rehearse the work of
knowledge producers while they learn
to develop substance and design com-
munication with impact, influence,
and attention. Using student scoring
guides in classrooms across grade
levels and content areas provides a
common database for narrative and

NINE SCORING TRAITS FOR DIGITAL PRODUCTS

Content Communication
1. Preparation Process
2. Content Knowledge
3. Format/Organization

Craftsmanship of Communication
4. Text Communication
5. Image Communication
6. Voice/Sound Communication
7. Design of Communication
8. Presentation Communication
9. Interactivity of Communication

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Educators need to help students practice thinking, creativity, and communication skills that go beyond repackaging information.

Develop student portfolios that include digital products to create a rich field of validated data for documenting student growth. Although high-stakes tests are here to stay and provide substantial data on student achievement, many state content standards are not covered in the annual tests. Having multiple data sets influence with various media as they artfully create information experiences that come alive for others.

Finally, authors select the digital tools to mix their messages. Available tools will vary over time by grade level, hardware platform used, and software licensed. For example, middle school students created a series of podcasts (mode) called “Then and Now: Life in Our Community” (type = Compare/}

Teachers as Knowledge Creators
Knowing how to use technology tools does not necessarily support teachers transitioning from traditional text-based products to the rigor of activities and media-based tools that develop information seekers, collaborators, analyzers of credible sources, problem solvers, and effective communicators. Teachers need to create their own digital works to understand the multiple skills associated with authoring multimedia products, such as:

- Defining audience and purpose
- Documenting credible research
- Using elements of effective communication
- Writing rigorous and engaging scripts/story lines
- Designing information and media planning
- Editing audio, images, and videos
- Collaborating
- Managing projects

Assessment for Learning
Over the past 10 years, I have conducted workshops and onsite evaluations that included digital products and consulted on grant initiatives using the scoring guides in this article. They are designed to support assessment for learning. Use them to:

- Elevate perspectives for using technology
- Shape achievement goals
- Identify strengths and weaknesses in standards
- Set the stage for a multitude of skills needed to develop successful learning environments in the digital age

I have also found that students who have crafted serious pieces of work are a lot less interested in “cluttering” up their message when designing their media products.

The student scoring guide tools and collaborative processes enable leaders to organize educators to develop more rigorous student uses of technology. And seeing achievement and learning through the lens of student work is informative, eye-opening, and fun.

Bernajean Porter is a featured speaker, workshop guide, and facilitator at national and international events who shares strategies for using technology to rediscover and accelerate joyful learning.

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