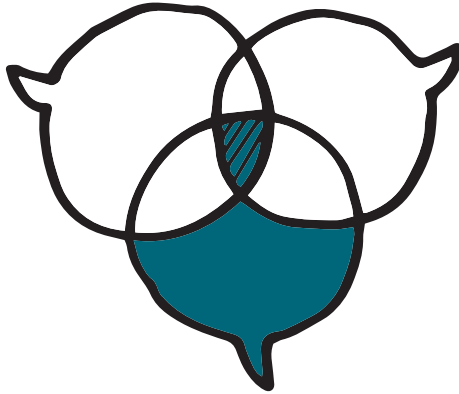


CHAPTER 10



Students Communicate Directly With Parents About Their Progress

“Communication leads to community—that is, to understanding, intimacy and mutual valuing.”

—Rollo May

The expectation that a single teacher can keep 30–150 families abreast of their students’ progress is unrealistic. In an era of digital gradebooks when parents can request a text message notification the moment a teacher enters a missing assignment, teachers feel increasing pressure to keep parents in the loop. I remember having a moment a couple years ago, after fielding a particularly angry email from a parent, when I thought, “How can I communicate more with my students’ parents about their progress?” As soon as I asked the question, I caught myself. I paused and reframed. “How can *my*

students communicate more with their parents about their progress?” As soon as I reframed the question, I began brainstorming strategies designed to increase the flow of communication between my students and their parents. This simple reframing exercise, which I described in Chapter 3, helped me to generate ideas for communication with parents that were sustainable because the student played a leading role in the process.

IT'S UNREALISTIC FOR TEACHERS TO COMMUNICATE WITH ALL PARENTS REGULARLY

I don't think the responsibility of communicating with parents should fall on the teacher alone. Students need to “own” the conversation with their parents about their learning. The student should be providing the parent with regular updates so that the grades are not a surprise. The goal of increasing communication between the students and their parents is to ensure that parents know when their child is struggling and needs help. On the flip side, parents enjoy hearing when their child is working hard and improving. There aren't enough hours in the day for the teacher to make sure every parent receives regular updates about their child's progress.

If teachers partner with their students to set goals, build metacognitive skills, provide real-time feedback, and conduct side-by-side assessments, students should have a clear sense of where they are in their journey toward mastering specific skills. In this learning environment, students should be able to communicate directly with their parents about their progress to ensure that their parents understand how they are doing in the class. Even young learners should know enough about their learning to articulate their goals and describe what they are doing well and what they are working to improve.

Technology tools make it possible, easy even, for teachers to support students in both updating their parents about their progress and sharing work samples so parents can see what their child is producing.

EMAIL UPDATES

One of the major benefits of providing students with real-time feedback as they work is that it's easier to keep track of who is completing the work and who is falling behind. Early in my career, I did not discover that students had not completed the work until a final draft was submitted. I always felt guilty entering a zero into the grade book for a large-scale assignment without giving the parents a heads up that their child was falling behind. Now, as I work with students in my teacher-led station or conference with them as they make progress through a playlist, I make sure parents are aware of students who are not completing the work I've asked them to do and which students are making significant strides in terms of their growth and development.

When students arrive at my teacher-led station or sit down for an individual check-in or conference and they have not completed the required work, I ask them to write their parents an email explaining the situation. My students CC me and use a template, like the one below, to format their emails. I tell them that the purpose of the email is not to apologize, but rather to make it clear what they plan to do to catch up on missing or incomplete work. I want the students to use the email as an opportunity to think about what they need to do to be successful.

Requiring students to contact their parents and take responsibility for their work at various checkpoints during the process of completing an assignment creates an incentive for students to prioritize their work.

This strategy is so simple and so effective! Students are rarely asked to take ownership of and responsibility for their work. Typically, a parent does not realize there is a problem until a zero is entered into a grade book or report cards are sent home. Requiring students to contact their parents and take responsibility for their work at

various checkpoints during the process of completing an assignment creates an incentive for students to prioritize their work. This strategy also takes the pressure off of the teacher, who has traditionally been expected to reach out to the parents when there is an issue.

Dear Mom and Dad,

In [insert class name], we are working on [insert the name of the assignment]. I am supposed to be [target for the class]. Currently, I am [state progress]. My plan for catching up is [insert steps needed to catch up with completion dates].

Love,

[Name]

The most rewarding part of this strategy is getting to witness the conversations that take place between parents and their children. Because I am CCed on the initial email, parents typically “reply all” and keep me in the conversation as they dialogue with their child. I love the questions parents ask in their follow-up emails, like “Why weren’t you able to complete this part of the assignment when it was due? How are you using your class time? What can I do at home to help you get caught up?” There is value in encouraging students to have these conversations with their parents if they are going to become independent learners. As soon as I adopted this strategy, more students completed their work on time, and several parents thanked me for keeping them in the loop about their child’s progress, or lack thereof.

As more and more emails went home about missing or incomplete work, I decided I wanted to expand my use of this strategy to include positive

updates. There are so many moments when I am working with students and see significant growth and improvement. In those moments, I wanted to create a routine where students would pause and email their parents to share their success. I created a series of positive email templates, like the one below, for students to use when they email their parents about their progress or growth.

Dear Mom and Dad,

Today I had a real-time feedback session with Mrs. Tucker. She asked me to send you an update on my progress. I've demonstrated significant growth in [state specific skill/area]. My work shows [describe progress and specific evidence of growth]. I plan to continue [state next steps for growth OR new area of focus].

Love,

[Name]

A couple of things are happening in this email. First, I hope that parents will read the phrase “real-time feedback session” and ask their students what that is. I know some of our class routines are unique. I hope that by including language about what is happening in class, it will inspire a conversation between the parents and their children about our class. Second, the student must describe his or her growth in relation to a specific skill or area of focus. This is an opportunity to put the metacognitive skills we have been honing to work by describing their development and progress. Finally, the student must end by either identifying additional steps he or she can take to continue improving this specific skill or identify a new area of focus. This directly ties back to the work students do setting and monitoring their goals.

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Inspired by Catlin's procedures on having students update parents on missing work, I decided I wanted students to keep their parents or guardians updated more often on their progress. At the beginning of each semester, my co-teachers (Special Education teacher, Mr. Daniel Wirley, and Gifted Support teacher, Mrs. Jill White) and I begin by having students compose and send e-mails home once every three or four weeks. Parents are the recipients and my co-teachers and I are CC'd (as well as any Special Education or Gifted Education case managers, guidance counselors, or coaches).

A half hour of class time is normally sufficient for students to reflect once they are accustomed to the process. We provide a Google Doc template to our students that include the following:

Subject Heading

Salutation: This can be edited with whatever the student calls his or her parents: one of my favorites so far has been a “Parental Unit.”

Note from Teachers: At the suggestion of my English teacher colleague Mrs. Stacey Hetrick, we’ve begun asking questions for parents to “Reply All” to: What is a story from your freshmen year of high school? How do you cope with stress? What words of advice can you offer your student?

Prompts for Reflection: These include learning targets we’re working toward, reflections on major projects, or even a further debrief on class discussions.

Closing Line: We often provide options of “Sincerely” or “Love,” but some students adjust it to “Your Favorite Child” or something else that fits their familial relationships, whether formal or playful.

Post-script: This allows us, teachers, to include any brief notes on the curriculum or upcoming events or deadlines.

The parental response (even when not elicited!) has been extremely positive, and this has served to empower our students’ voices and bolster home–school relationships. I have also had students type in English and their home language. This process allows some parent–child relationships to shine in reading responses, but it has also built some meaningful connections. One father reported that he did not know his son could communicate his feelings until he read an email!

PUBLISHING STUDENT WORK

Often the work students do and the progress they make isn’t visible to parents. Technology can bridge the gap between home and school. Teachers can leverage technology tools to make work visible to parents and provide students with an authentic audience, which is the best incentive we can give them to do high-quality work. If the teacher is the only audience for student work, that puts a lot of pressure on the teacher to provide all of the feedback. Engaging parents in this process can ensure students receive feedback from multiple sources.

Digital Portfolios

Younger students can share work with their parents using the digital portfolio tools that already exist in popular education tools, like Seesaw or Class

Dojo. Students can share photos, videos, drawings, digital files, and journal entries with parents using these technology tools. The ability to upload photos and videos of student work provides a window into the classroom that most parents don't get until Back-to-School Night or Open House. With a digital portfolio, students can share a steady stream of their work with parents and family members.

I've worked as a blended learning coach in classrooms where the teacher will remind students to make sure their work is "Seesaw worthy," which highlights the power of having an audience. If students are working on something that will be posted online where their parents and family members can see and comment on it, then kids want that work to be *good*. It is also helpful for teachers to allow students the opportunity to select a piece from the week that they are excited to publish. This gives them agency as they choose what they *want* to share with their families.

When students post work to Seesaw or Class Dojo, the teacher can review it before it can be viewed by families. When work is shared via one of these tools, families receive a notification via text or email alerting them to new student work. Teachers can message parents directly, and parents can respond to their child's work using voice or text comments inside of these platforms. This functions to extend the partnership around learning to include families who can support students after they leave the classroom.

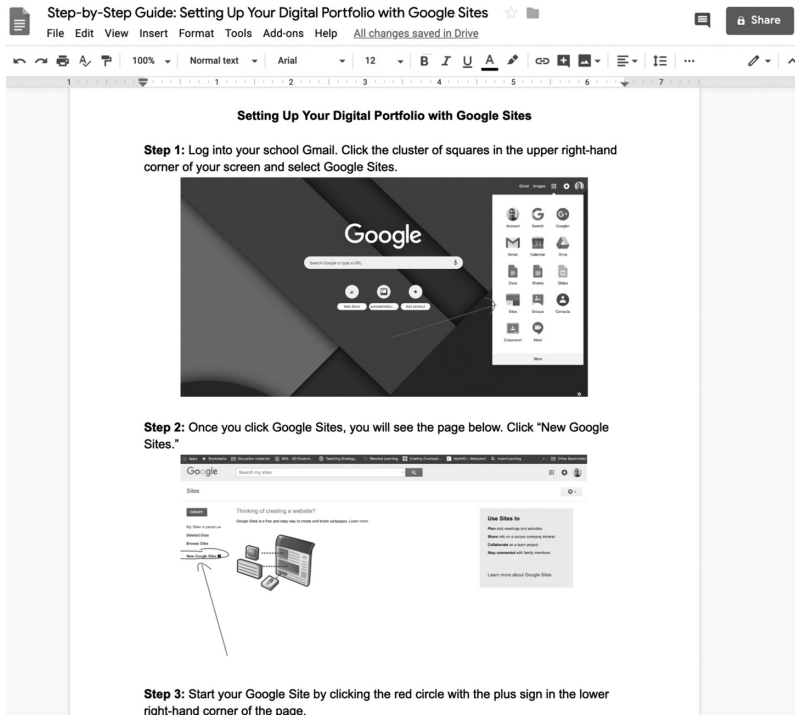
Digital Notebooks

At the high school level, my students create digital notebooks using Google Sites. They organize their Google Sites like they would set up a physical folder. Each page coordinates to a topic or subject. They also create a page that functions as a learning blog where they post their Goal-Setting documents (Chapter 6) and their Plan Your Attack, Learning Log, and Ongoing Self-Assessment documents (Chapter 4). This section of their digital notebooks is extremely helpful for me because all of their metacognitive work is in one location.

When students create their websites, as opposed to using technology tools with portfolio functionality built right in, I would suggest teachers do the following:

1. Create clear instructions for setting up a digital notebook or portfolio.
2. Provide students with time in class to create their websites.
3. Talk about privacy settings and what is appropriate to publish.
4. Add links to the students' websites on your class webpage or learning management system (LMS).
5. Make sure parents know where to find their student's work.

FIGURE 10.1 Step-by-Step Guide for Setting Up Your Digital Portfolio



Source: Created in Google Docs.

Create Clear Instructions for Setting Up a Digital Notebook or Portfolio

I walk through the process of setting up the website before I have students do it. That way, I can create a detailed Google Document describing the process that students will need to follow. I break the process down into individual steps and include clear written directions and annotated screenshots to guide them as pictured in Figure 10.1.

If the directions for setting up a digital notebook or portfolio are explicit and detailed, the students can create their websites with minimal support from the teacher. Instead of leading the class through the process, the teacher can allow students to self-pace through the setup process, and the teacher can circulate to support individual students and troubleshoot technology hiccups.

Provide Students With Time in Class to Create Their Websites

Even though many students are proficient users of technology, some students are not used to using technology for tasks beyond communicating with friends or engaging on social media. Setting up a website to display work is a multi-step process that requires time. It's also worth noting that many parents may not be able to assist their students if they are attempting to navigate the parts of this process at home. Instead, I would suggest that

teachers with access to a class set of devices design a Whole Group Rotation in which the class is working simultaneously online to set up their sites. For teachers with limited devices, I would create an online station in a Station Rotation lesson dedicated to setting up their websites. That way, if students are working on setting up their websites in collaborative groups, they can ask one another for help. Students are the most underutilized tech support on campus. I encourage teachers to instruct their students to ask each other for help when they get stuck. If they cannot troubleshoot a technology issue with a peer, I encourage them to search Google or look for a YouTube video tutorial before they ask me for help.

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Talk About Privacy Settings and What Is Appropriate to Publish

I'm a big fan of publishing student work for an authentic audience, but I am not naive. I know there are trolls online who spend their days posting negative, and often offensive, comments on other people's work.

I have never wanted to limit what my students share or restrict their work to the eyes of people within our school's domain out of fear. I feel too many people in education make decisions from a place of fear. That mentality limits what students can accomplish. That said, I want students to know how to protect themselves and limit who has access to their work. Most of my students opt to share their websites with anyone who might stumble on them. However, if a student feels strongly that they don't want to publish their work so that it is searchable, then they can limit who can access it, by sharing it directly with me, their parents, and anyone else they are comfortable with. That is the beauty of working with a website creator like Google Sites.

In addition to discussing privacy settings, we talk about protecting ourselves and our personal information online. It's important to remind students not to share their phone numbers, addresses, or other personal information on their websites. If they want to include a link on their academic website to a social media account, like Twitter or Instagram, then they need to make sure they are not posting inappropriate pictures or sensitive information to those accounts either. It's eye-opening to have conversations about privacy, personal information, and public persona with students. It is clear to me that these conversations need to happen more frequently in school. Students are using technology tools that many of their parents don't use. Without incorporating these conversations into educational settings, I worry that students will not make smart, informed choices online.

Add Links to Your Students' Websites on Your Class Webpage or LMS

Once the students have created and published the websites that will house their digital notebooks or digital portfolios, I suggest teachers create a list of

websites on their class webpage or LMS. I typically type a list of first names with last initials and organize them by class period then hyperlink those to the students' websites. This makes it easy for the teacher, students, and parents to view the students' digital work.

Make Sure Parents Know Where to Find Their Students' Work

Parents will only check out their kid's work if they know where to find it. I send out an email to parents explaining why the students are creating their websites. I want parents to understand the purpose and value of the websites. I also include instructions for how to access their student's work. In addition to the initial email I send out, I also mention them at Back-to-School Night and in conferences with parents.

Each week, at least one of my stations or online activities is focused on giving students time to update their digital notebooks with their work and write a short reflection on their learning in the learning blog section. Online websites make it possible for students to display their multimedia work and reflect on their learning, which helps students continue to build those metacognitive skills we discussed in Chapter 4.