

Solutions for Modern Learning

Claim Your Domain—And Own Your Online Presence



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Introduction: The Manila Envelope

A couple of years ago, my mother gave me a large manila envelope full of my old schoolwork, including drawings, writings, and photos from as far back as preschool. I remembered making some projects, but many I didn't recall. Mostly the envelope contained various administrative records—my report cards, various certificates of achievement, and some ribbons.

My mother, I should note, has always been fastidious about our family's recordkeeping. She saved almost everything, certainly much more than was in the envelope that she eventually gave to me. She stored boxes and boxes of papers in the basement, and she kept a closet full of scrapbooks that chronicled our family vacations and holidays in detail—my childhood as told through photographs, postcards, and travel brochures.

When my parents divorced, an awful disassembling and re-sorting of these scrapbooks took place, as my mother decided what would be hers to keep, what would be my dad's, what would be my brother's, and what would be mine. These were the records of our lives.

That manila envelope my mother gave me was a careful curation of what counts as my education records. They were only a small part of all the schoolwork she'd kept—all those piles of paper that, in a predigital age at least, I'd bring home at the end of every school year (or when commanded to clean out my desk or my locker). The

manila envelope didn't include every worksheet and quiz. My mom only kept, and in turn gave to me, what was *meaningful* to her. But these items were also a reflection of the meaningful work that I'd done in school. This was one of those moments of clarity: of all the work I'd done in school, only a fraction was *meaningful* work.

What happens now that schoolwork is increasingly digital (that is, schoolwork that isn't paperwork but has been digitized as work done directly on computers)? Is there a digital equivalent to my manila envelope? Schoolwork done on computers should prompt other questions too, such as: What counts as student work? Content? Data? What happens to that work, not just at the end of the school year but on a day-to-day basis?

Sadly, despite the great promise of technology to transform how we teach and learn, students continue to do menial, repetitive work in new digital worksheets and in new digital environments. One might not see this work as worth preserving in a virtual manila envelope, but it's still worth asking what happens to it. Are schools using the data for decision-making purposes? Are ed-tech companies using the data to build and refine their applications and algorithms? Do students or parents have any say about what happens to these data?

Are students able to retain control or retain a copy of their work? That is, once students work on software at school and not on paper, can they obtain their work to take home or store on their own devices? Can they obtain that work in a format that's actually readable by humans and machines and that's moveable, storable, and sharable as they or their parents deem fit?

Where Is the Digital Manila Envelope?

A couple of years ago, I met a young girl whose school was piloting a one-to-one iPad program. This girl's family wasn't particularly tech oriented, and they didn't have a computer at home. At the beginning of the year when the school offered them a chance to

buy the iPad, they declined. It was expensive. They didn't see the point. But by the end of the school year, they had changed their minds—the iPad was easy to use, and their daughter loved it. She downloaded several applications and used them to create a multitude of drawings and write several stories. So, the family approached the school about buying the iPad. But it was too late, the school told them. The purchasing opportunity was limited to the beginning of the year. Therefore, the family was required to return the iPad with all of their daughter's schoolwork, drawings, stories, and data on it. There was no manila envelope—physical or digital—for much of her sixth-grade schoolwork.

The family had no home iTunes account to sync with the girl's iPad data—that's what you're supposed to do to get your data off of an iPad, school issued or otherwise. You sync the data to your personal computer at home. There are a lot of assumptions in this scenario—about access, equipment, and the home.

Even if students do have computers at home, schools often create “dummy” accounts for the devices they issue to students and for the software they require students to use. That means, even if students *do* have their own computers or iTunes accounts at home, it doesn't matter. Their school-issued devices often are registered to “student25@school.com” or some other fabricated email account. That means the data likely doesn't sync. Perhaps the data can be exported, but it often cannot be accessed; it cannot be reconciled with preexisting accounts. There is no digital manila envelope.

This isn't just about flaws in Apple devices, of course. It isn't simply about how hardware and software are administered at school. We must ask a broader question: is there a safe digital place—*any* safe place—where learners can store their schoolwork and school records, not just for the duration of a course or for the length of school year, but for posterity?

Are we providing learners with those safe and secure digital places? If not, why not? And if they don't exist, can we build them? Can

we build a digital manila envelope? What would it look like? How would it function? These are questions worth considering, especially more than educators, administrators, parents, and students currently do as we compel and often require people to use technology in schools and in the workplace.

We must consider what student data are being created, what student data are being collected (and by whom), how to protect that data, and how to preserve it. Furthermore, we must put the control of that data into the hands of the students themselves, in no small part because learning now happens beyond school walls (and school software)—at home and on the go, thanks to mobile devices.

My mother wanted to preserve my schoolwork for posterity. *Posterity*—that word sounds a lot like *Posterous*. Posterous was a microblogging platform founded in 2008 and acquired by Twitter in 2012. Shortly afterward, it shut down. Users had the opportunity to download their data, and the Internet archive made a valiant attempt to preserve all the sites. Posterous was a free tool that many students, educators, librarians, and others used to share and store writing, photos, video, and other digital content. The closure of Posterous was hardly the first or the only time something like this happened to a digital tool—free or paid—that’s been popular for educational purposes. Schools often demand that students put their work into a learning management system (LMS), for example, where they lose access to it at the end of the semester or when they graduate. And for that flawed functionality, schools spend hundreds of thousands of dollars.

This is a reminder of how fragile our digital records might be. We’ve long been cautioned in school that “this will go down on your permanent record.” But now we exist at this strange juncture in which our school records are both much more permanent and much less so. We pour ourselves—our thoughts and ideas—into one application or another, and then these applications go offline. The company is sold or acquired, and our data are sold along with it.

Increasingly, we do not have the ability to look at our permanent records. We cannot access them or correct them. The data we've created in various digital learning environments is not ours to examine, let alone dictate who else might be able to view it. Can teachers access it? Administrators? Software engineers? Marketers?

So, when we demand a safe digital place to store student data, or their permanent records, it means a couple of things. The safety of data must include both permanence and privacy. That is, student data must be preserved, and it must be under student control. (Students should have the option to hit the Delete button.)

Creating the Digital Manila Envelope

I want you to imagine what a digital manila envelope might contain. Grades? Test scores? Attendance records? That's the stuff of traditional, analog education records. However, technologies are reshaping those records as we create massive amounts of data and metadata (or *big data*).

A digital manila envelope should be more than just storage for virtual report cards. What about the pictures a child draws in preschool and kindergarten? What about the poems, essays, and book reports he or she writes? Why not keep everything? After all, digital storage is cheap! This might include a list of every book checked out from the library, along with all the highlights from those books and notes in the margins. It might include titles of every educational video watched, along with the metadata from the viewing—all the pauses, rewinds, and fast forwards; all the comments on discussion forums and all the status updates; all that data a student might create thanks to computer technologies. This might include every single mouse click on every single piece of software, whether it's school issued or required, whether it's formally ed-tech or not. Suddenly, this digital manila envelope starts to sound a little invasive, particularly if someone other than the student has control over the data and the profile.