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## **WHAT DO STUDENTS SAY ABOUT EPORTFOLIOS: UTILIZING SOCIAL MEDIA TO EXPAND LEARNING SCENARIOS**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to understand how students value implementing open source ePortfolios as a 21<sup>st</sup> century learning strategy. This paper will present survey findings of current students and alumni about valuing ePortfolios for connecting formal and experiential learning, and for professional preparation. One professional program at the University of Oregon worked with ePortfolios based in an open source blogging platform, and which were integrated throughout the curriculum. Findings suggest that the inclusion of open source social media ePortfolio approaches to learning are valued by students for their support of making learning visible across the curriculum and in connecting co-curricular learning and professional development. This seven-year project reached hundreds of students, suggesting possibilities for an integrated technology approach to education and expanded learning scenarios in a global learning environment.

### **Introduction**

The University of Oregon has been working with ePortfolios in graduate and undergraduate professional programs since 2004. Students create and maintain learning ePortfolios that connect curricular and co-curricular learning and achievements, provide evidence of the development of professional skills, and a means to critically reflect and analyze about their learning progress while embedding technology-rich strategies in research and professional practice. Findings from the project suggest that “ePortfolio learning” fosters habits of mind conducive to 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and are fundamental to addressing challenges that higher education faces as alternative, technology-rich educational structures compete with traditional classroom learning environments.

## **Context for the project**

Daniel Pink (2006) wrote that: “The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind – creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers and meaning makers. These people – artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers – will now reap society’s richest rewards and share its greatest joys” (p.1). Pink further notes that,

*It is an age animated by a different form of thinking and a new approach to life – one that prizes aptitudes that I call “high concept” and “high touch.” High concept involves the capacity to detect patterns and opportunities, to create artistic and emotional beauty, to craft a satisfying narrative, and to combine seemingly unrelated ideas into something new. (p.2-3)*

The ability to synthesize, communicate, collaborate, and create something new are part of the range of so-called “soft skills” which both employers and education policy makers are now focusing on in identifying future education needs.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities suggest that ePortfolios can play a critical role in supporting students, faculty and institutions as a navigational strategy for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning outcomes. Central to ePortfolios is the process of reflecting on the growth of one's knowledge and capabilities over time with an emphasis on metacognition by intentionally providing structured time and space for learners to consider and document the process of learning and not just the product (Brown, Peterson, Wilson & Ptaszynski, 2008).

And, because they enable students to authentically represent their own learning in a way that makes sense to them and encourages them, students take responsibility for their own learning (Light, Chen & Ittelson, 2011).

U.S. employers complain that today's young adults are not equipped with the skills they need to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. In 2006, the Conference Board and three other organizations issued a report, *Are They Really Ready to Work?* Based on a survey of several hundred employers, the report concluded by calling for more focus on the development of such “21<sup>st</sup> century skills” as critical thinking, problem solving, creativity and communication. At the same time, as the *The Wall Street Journal* reports, increasingly employers are asking to see evidence of job candidates' web presence, rather than a resume:

*Companies are increasingly relying on social networks such as LinkedIn, video profiles and online quizzes to gauge candidates' suitability for a job. While most still request a résumé as part of the application package, some are bypassing the standard requirement altogether. (Silverman, 2010)*

## **Project description**

Building on the need to address these changes, the *ePortfolio Project* began with the idea of creating and fostering a digital neighbourhood, or “commons,” as the point of daily departure and return, where learning is fostered through sharing thoughts, ideas, events, and professional development. The project sought a way in which what was happening in classes could be shared and made visible, and to generate a forum for students and faculty to share how they were extending their thinking and applied practices to outside the classroom. The project also sought to create a virtual community where students articulate value, and where students, faculty, and professional partners foster connections between curricular and co-curricular work, and to make evident how students were transferring skills and knowledge across a range of experiences.

In the Arts and Administration Program at the University of Oregon, students create and maintain learning ePortfolios in a customized WordPress blogging platform throughout their graduate program. Faculty make use of the system to connect student learning ePortfolios with instructional weblogs, fostering a community learning environment conducive to student-centred learning. Students have the highest degree of control over the privacy of their ePortfolio and all the materials they publish on it – from fully private, to password-protected, to fully public ePortfolios that are searchable by Google.

Students are required to post their academic plan, and are encouraged to utilize the system in order to provide evidence of achievements, and to document their growth over time. In this way students are embedding habits of reflection, evaluation, and documentation. Students are also encouraged to document and provide evidence of their professional growth through their internships, practicums and other professional activities, and are encouraged to engage as thoughtful digital citizens. At the end of the term, students then reflect on their course learning objectives, and analyze how they participated in working towards their objectives, identifying transformative moments, and discussing and providing evidence of how their thinking has changed relevant to their future growth.

The author conducted a survey in March 2013 to assess how students use their ePortfolios, and to discover what they value about learning in and through ePortfolios in an open source environment. The survey was sent to current graduate students and alumnus via Qualtrics, an open source online survey platform. Of the thirty-two respondents, eighteen were current students, and fourteen were alumnus. The survey revealed both anticipated as well as unanticipated responses, and revealed that students were using their learning ePortfolios in support of project goals, but also extending the ways they used and applied both the product and process in unanticipated ways. The survey found that respondents use their ePortfolios for a variety of purposes, including posting assignments and reflections on readings and class discussions. Students also use it for aggregating their academic resources and materials, documenting their internships and practicum, as well as their graduate research. Many students use their learning ePortfolio for career advancement, offering it as a link to prospective employers.

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#	Answer	Response	%
1	<a href="#">Posting written assignments</a>	30	94%
2	<a href="#">Posting media/design assignments</a>	32	100%
3	<a href="#">Posting course learning objectives</a>	32	100%
4	<a href="#">Posting additional/optional blog posts</a>	17	53%
5	<a href="#">Aggregating academic resources</a>	13	41%
6	<a href="#">Documenting internship</a>	22	69%
7	<a href="#">Documenting practicum</a>	17	53%
8	<a href="#">Documenting graduate research</a>	14	44%
9	<a href="#">Communication with professors</a>	19	59%
10	<a href="#">Communications with students</a>	4	13%
11	<a href="#">Sharing with Family/Friends</a>	8	25%
12	<a href="#">Other</a>	5	16%

Figure 13. Student use of ePortfolios for classes and coursework

Respondents noted that learning to present themselves online through utilizing current web tools was a significant benefit to their participation. Also valuable was the ability to aggregate all their materials and resources, and to track their academic progress. Many respondents reported that their use of ePortfolios in the WordPress environment extended beyond their use in their graduate program. Students appreciated the skills that they learned through using ePortfolios for its relevance to their current jobs and to their internships. One respondent noted, “I ended up using the same blog software to create a program blog, and we now have high school student teachers blogging to document their experience in learning to teach art.” Others note that they apply what they learned to set up websites for their internship sites, and that they manage weblogs at their worksites. Students have also been invited to review professional web resources and to serve as guest bloggers on national professional platforms.

#	Answer	Response	%
1	<a href="#">Learning how to present myself professionally</a>	21	70%
2	<a href="#">Sending out to potential internship sites</a>	5	17%
3	<a href="#">Sending out to potential job opportunities</a>	8	27%
4	<a href="#">Becoming familiar with website development software</a>	29	97%
5	<a href="#">Becoming proficient with website development software</a>	17	57%
6	<a href="#">Other</a>	2	7%

Figure 2. Benefits of showcase ePortfolios

When asked if students used their ePortfolios beyond the minimum course requirements, students replied that they use it to aggregate resource materials, to document co-curricular projects that they are working on, and that they often use these skills at work. Many students make use of their proficiencies to create and document community-based and entrepreneurial projects that they are developing, or in demonstrating how they are connecting their research and professional practices through research weblogs.

When asked about the benefit of using ePortfolio, in addition to increasing their digital literacy, 29% of the respondents valued making learning visible, and demonstrations of achievement, and 36% of respondents valued developing habits of mind, such as critical reflection and self-evaluation.

#	Answer	Response	%
1	<a href="#">Habits of Mind: Critical Reflection, Self-evaluation, etc</a>	16	50%
2	<a href="#">Learning how to use wordpress</a>	25	78%
3	<a href="#">Using social media</a>	7	22%
4	<a href="#">Making learning visible - demonstrations of achievement</a>	16	50%
5	<a href="#">Having a visible record of my work over time</a>	15	47%
6	<a href="#">Blogging and digital citizenship</a>	7	22%
7	<a href="#">Other</a>	2	6%

Figure 3. What would you consider to be the most important benefits of using ePortfolios

Respondents also noted that participation in learning ePortfolios assisted them to increase skills in integrating technology into program development and documentation – an essential skill for today’s workforce – and found the skills they learned to be highly relevant to their job preparation and growth. What is most interesting here is the recognition of how critical are the habits of mind, an area that has the critical implications in the future of learning.

### Summary and discussion

While the small sample size of this particular survey makes it difficult to generalize about the impact of ePortfolios in helping to push the boundaries of learning outside the classroom, the results may be useful for discussions about the possibilities inherent in the use of new technologically-driven pedagogies for opening up learning environments. After working with hundreds of students in utilizing learning ePortfolios, it is apparent that ePortfolios support a more student-centred pedagogy that thrives in experiential, and experimental, education. The proliferation of education technologies liberates education from the traditional school day and traditional pedagogical and classroom structures. Advances in technology are allowing ePortfolio applications to demonstrate that ePortfolio learning is not about the technology, but about the learning and knowledge generation. EPortfolios capitalize on the social networking behaviours of entering students, in support and enhancement of meaning making, and multi-modal communication and interaction. ePortfolios helps to harness skill sets necessary for the next generation of meaning makers, such as critical thinking and collaboration, and to make learning (and knowledge generation) visible to students, to peers, to faculty, and to professionals.

Technology already pervades every classroom in the United States, whether it is the use of content management systems such as blackboard, clickers, mobile apps, or YouTube. The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) is embracing the application of technology education in 21<sup>st</sup> century schools. The USDOE publication, *Transforming American Education* (2010) summarizes the national education technology plan.

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*President Obama has called on our nation's governors and state education chiefs have begun to develop standards and assessments that measure 21<sup>st</sup>-century competencies and expertise in all content areas. Technology-based assessments that combine cognitive research and theory about how students think with multimedia, interactivity, and connectivity make it possible to directly assess these types of skills. This can be done within the context of relevant societal issues and problems that people care about in everyday life. (p.vii)*

This mandate, considered in conjunction with contemporary educational theorists, posits integrated approaches to learning within technology-rich environments. Henry Jenkins (2004) promotes an “ecological approach” to learning with technology, asserting that,

*Rather than dealing with each technology in isolation, we would do better to take an ecological approach, thinking about the interrelationship among all of these different communication technologies, the cultural communities that grow up around them, and the activities they support. (p.8)*

In the age of standardized testing, it can be difficult to argue for and advocate for making learning visible, as it implies risk and subsequently failure. However fostering “noble failure” is needed in our nation’s education:

*What we need in our schools -- what we don't have enough of -- is an environment where it is okay to fail, because that environment will make it okay to try. And, ironically, if failure is fun, if it is productive and noble, and if it becomes little more than permission to try again, our students will succeed more. (Landesman, 2010)*

Where a leading design company has the motto “Fail Often and Success Sooner”, (as cited in Landesman, 2010), it may be in everyone’s best interest to foster an environment of “high concept” and “high touch” (Pink, 2006), where the ability to reflect, iterate, and revise is the best evidence of capability and success in the workplace.

EPortfolios can provide a means to both practice and to demonstrate these transformations in thinking and learning. The ability for students to document and demonstrate what they learned from each iteration, and their problem-solving process, can lead to transformations in growth and learning. As educators, fostering learning in this way not only has the potential of preparing students for the new 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace, but of opening up the learning landscape to fuel global education rich in international connectivity.

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