

The ePortfolio as a Living Portal: A Medium for Student Learning, Identity, and Assessment

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This research examines the influence of college students' electronic portfolios (i.e., ePortfolios) on learning, identity, and assessment. The study creates a narrative of students' experiences with ePortfolios that integrates critical hermeneutic theory. Findings demonstrate the diverse experiences of research participants who used ePortfolios for advising and mentoring purposes or to present an academic identity to employers or faculty. This research presents ePortfolios as a way to engage with others about identity, to expand on prior understandings and ways of being, and to create a coherent narrative of past, present, and future. The implications may guide educators in developing ePortfolio programs that prepare students for authentic, ethical living in a global and ever-changing world.

On college campuses throughout the United States, there has been a shift towards assessing a student's education through learning artifacts and outcomes, instead of traditional measures such as grades and graduation rates (Association of American Colleges and Universities [AAC&U], 2011). The trend is prompted in part by accreditation agencies, which are requiring more comprehensive evidence of learning, and by professional organizations that encourage institutions to document learning outcomes (AAC&U, 2011). Additionally, new pedagogical approaches encourage college faculty and staff to guide students in authoring their own learning (Baxter Magolda, 2004). These influences in higher education have fueled growth in student electronic portfolios (i.e., ePortfolios). In 2010, almost half of all public and private institutions used ePortfolios in some fashion on their campuses (Green, 2010). Institutions utilize ePortfolios in a variety of ways at the student, class, and school level to assess and encourage student learning (Green, 2010). While ePortfolios vary in function and audience, they commonly take the form of a comprehensive personal website that is meant to be shared with others. In the online portfolio, students reflect on their lives, education, and goals.

The ePortfolio is presently understood as an online space for students to share and reflect upon learning artifacts and academic experiences. Traditionally, ePortfolios have been studied through scientific or developmental paradigms, where they are often viewed as a tool to measure outcomes or student progress. This paper contributes to the understanding of ePortfolios through a critical hermeneutic approach (Herda, 1999), in which the ePortfolio is one medium, among others, for learning. The approach is grounded in critical hermeneutic theory, which is oriented in terms of language, understanding, and identity. This framework highlights the role of the student in narrating his or her own life. The focus on identity in this research may add an additional dimension to discussions about culture and technology.

The interpretive approach of critical hermeneutics offers new insights into ePortfolios within an ontological tradition based on ways of being. This research, based on the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur (1984, 1992), viewed the ePortfolio as a medium in which students can learn about self and the world. New understandings expand one's horizon, bringing about new ways of living, which Hans-Georg Gadamer (1988/1975) conceptualized as a fusion of horizons. This approach to ePortfolios provides educators with enhanced ways of understanding learning, identity, and assessment in higher education.

This research moves beyond an epistemological approach based on knowledge, where the ePortfolios are viewed as an object or linear process, into the ontological world of being, where learning is about living life through a search that has meaning for oneself and others. As Ricoeur (1991) explained, life can be understood as a "story in search of a narrator" (p. 425). This interpretive context offers an expanded approach to learning that may complement existing practices to better serve institutions and students in preparing for an ever-changing world that lies beyond the college experience.

Significance of the Issue

The primary significance of this research is the shift from viewing the ePortfolio as an online tool and an individual reflective process to the construct of an ePortfolio that takes on meaning as a portal, or medium. The ePortfolio holds potential for the creative process of expressing oneself in relationship to the other and describing identity through narrative. In a more applied sense, an ePortfolio serves as a "living portal," through which students may continually re-articulate their ideas of self to others, bringing about new understandings and ethical intentions (Nguyen, 2013). Ricoeur (1992) characterized ethics as "aiming at the 'good life' with and for others in just institutions" (p. 172). This concept

emerged throughout the research and relates to students living an authentic life while pursuing their unique interests.

While there has been a shift by educators to expand notions of learning from grades to outcomes (AAC&U, 2011), the underlying paradigm remains developmental. A critical hermeneutic orientation extends beyond pre-defined learning and looks at new understandings about oneself and others. The implications may guide administrators, faculty, and staff in developing ePortfolio programs that encourage interpretive notions of student learning, in which students are active participants in creating and assessing their education among others.

Literature Review

There are three primary areas for the literature review of this research, including ePortfolio literature, critical hermeneutic theory, and anthropological theory.

ePortfolio Literature: Learning, Identity, Assessment

Prior ePortfolio literature summarizes existing research, with a focus on student learning, identity, and assessment. With the rise in ePortfolio usage in the last decade, the research has expanded in regards to traditional notions of student learning. In the literature, learning is frequently marked by the student meeting outcomes established by the institution, or by documenting progress in a program. The research that examines student-defined learning maintained a developmental focus. According to the self-authorship theory (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010), colleges best prepare students for success in the modern world by guiding them towards defining independently their own identity and learning. The model focuses on understanding students' ways of knowing what they know. Further, reference guides explore ePortfolios as a means for the "transformation of learning systems" (Jafari & Kaufman, 2006, p. xxxiv) or for "deep learning" (Zubizarreta, 2009, p. xx). Reflective practice in the prior research often referred to a student reviewing past assignments and intellectual experiences in order to "make knowledge by articulating connections among portfolio exhibits, learning, and self" (Yancey, 2009, p. 5) or to facilitate self-knowledge through a cycle of reflection (Barrett, 2011). Other research explored ePortfolios as a framework for a student's integration of distinct learning experiences (Peet et al., 2011). Most of the literature addressed ePortfolios in the received tradition, focusing on knowledge and skills. This study will contribute to the existing literature by offering instead an ontological examination of the student learning experience with ePortfolios.

Another area of exploration in ePortfolio literature that relates to this study is student identity. Previous research includes analysis of ePortfolios in relation to cultural and academic identity. Eynon (2009) examined how ePortfolios relate to students' understanding of their personal culture and the academic culture of the institution. Other research examines student identity theoretically in light of the ePortfolio process (Cambridge, 2009, 2010). Cambridge (2009) contended that the online representation of a student in an ePortfolio includes two parts of identity, including a "networked" aspect that is flexible and changes with connections and choices, and a "symphonic" aspect that is more permanent, reflecting the enduring and whole elements of identity. Cambridge (2010) further explored the expression of identity in ePortfolios, and noted that the self "does not reach its full power until it is made clear through representation . . . by expressing who we are, we are defining ourselves, calling ourselves into being" (p. 13). For Cambridge (2010), ePortfolios encourage the expression of authentic selves.

In addition to student learning and identity, assessment is one of the most widely addressed issues in the literature relating to ePortfolios. Assessment in the prior literature refers to institutional processes for measuring learning, often for accreditation purposes, curriculum reviews, or student evaluations. Institutional assessment practices have often been researched as case studies (Lowenthal, White, & Cooley, 2011; Shada, Kelly, Cox, & Malkik, 2011). Penny Light, Chen, and Ittelson (2012) examined assessment practices through ePortfolios, with an emphasis on documenting learning. Ring and Ramirez (2012) described how ePortfolios are used for general education requirements at one university in order to "build a mechanism through which core competencies can be both demonstrated and evaluated" (p. 187).

Throughout much of the prior literature, the assumption remains that student learning should be measured through established objectives. The epistemological perspective applies external criteria to student learning, while an ontological approach extends to the internal experience of the learners and their changing ways of being with others. In this study, assessment is considered in light of critical hermeneutic theory, which underscores narrative identity and ethical action.

Critical Hermeneutic Theory

The critical hermeneutic theories that inform this study include Ricoeur's (1992) concept of narrative identity, Gadamer's (1988/1975) description of the fusion of horizons, and Ricoeur's (1984) theory of mimesis. These concepts provide open-ended insights for assessing student learning and identity. Narrative

identity, as conceptualized by Ricoeur (1992) in *Oneself as Another*, maintains that personal identity is known through a narrative of self in relation to others. Through narrative, one emplots, or creates a cohesive story, out of life events. Ricoeur (1992) posited that “it is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character” (p. 148). Gadamer (1988/1975) conceptualized the fusion of horizons to explain how our understandings change through exposure to the unknown, often through texts, conversations, or experiences. When horizons merge, our current horizon expands to incorporate concepts that were once foreign. Gadamer (1988/1975) explained, “to acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it, but to see it better within a larger whole and in truer proportion” (p. 272). When a fusion of horizons takes place, learning occurs. Finally, Ricoeur’s (1984) concept of mimesis informs the student experience of creating a narrative in an ePortfolio. Mimesis explains the relationship between time and narrative, which Ricoeur (1984) referred to as “the mediating role of emplotment between a stage of practical experience that precedes it and a stage that succeeds it” (p. 53). Through the three stages of mimesis, past understandings and future imaginings come together in action in the present.

Anthropological Theory

Anthropological theory—including Sapir’s (1949/1921) work on linguistics, White’s (1971/1949) notion about the primacy of technology in culture, and Geertz’s (1973) interpretive contention that culture is a text conveying symbolic meaning—also relates to this research. The critical hermeneutic orientation of this article, in particular, has a foundation in anthropology. Early anthropologists developed approaches and theories that opened discussion toward the interpretive orientation. Literature from these anthropologists also provides a background for this study on the student experience with ePortfolios. In 1921, Edward Sapir (1949/1921) posited that language shapes perception. Sapir’s student, Leslie White (1971/1949), put forth theories in a 1949 book about culture in general, suggesting that technological, or structural, systems are most important to society. Finally, Clifford Geertz (1973) shifted the conversation in anthropology towards culture as a text, in which symbolic action could be analyzed for meaning. The contributions from these early anthropologists inform an analysis of ePortfolios.

Research Questions

This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the ontological student experience with ePortfolios in terms of identity, learning, and assessment. In critical

hermeneutic participatory inquiry, theoretical categories guide the research (Herda, 1999). The research categories that inform this study on ePortfolios are the narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis. The research questions include:

- Through engagement with the ePortfolio, did participants come to think of their personal narrative differently in relation to and with others? How so?
- What new understandings of self and world, if any, emerged through the ePortfolio process?
- How did participants view their past, present, and future differently through creating ePortfolios?

The research questions served to direct the conversations and led to more in-depth understanding of ePortfolios and student learning.

Method

As I have previously discussed (see Nguyen, 2013), the research protocol of this study is critical hermeneutic participatory inquiry (Herda, 1999). Herda (1999) explained that participatory inquiry “allows us to recognize, challenge, and evaluate our worlds of action as well as to envision new, possible worlds” (p. 86). This interpretive framework guided my research on understanding how ePortfolios may encourage students to refigure their past and imagine new possibilities. This research topic lends itself to interpretive participatory research. Most notably, the introspective and thoughtful process of presenting oneself in an electronic portfolio requires imagination and openness about oneself and others. The aforementioned categories of narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis provide a foundation for exploring ePortfolios through an interpretive paradigm.

Participants

An intention of this study is to create a narrative of students’ experiences with ePortfolios that integrates critical hermeneutic theory. The participants for this study included selected Stanford University students who created ePortfolios. Forty students partaking in different ePortfolio programs were contacted and asked if they would like to participate. Eight students agreed to participate in the study and to speak to me about their experiences with ePortfolios. Of the eight participants, two were male and six were female. The participants included two master’s students, two juniors, and four freshmen. Their fields of study included engineering, education, biology, and political science.

The research participants engaged with ePortfolios through various programs. One student created her ePortfolio as part of an ongoing research project with an engineering faculty member. She reflected on the engineering research projects while also providing a context for her larger intellectual endeavors. She shared and discussed her ePortfolio with the faculty advisor and other members of her research team. Another participant was part of a program sponsored by the career center and the diversity/first generation office to shadow alumni mentors in their professional positions. In this program, students created ePortfolios for the alumni to review and provide feedback to the students about their career aspirations. Four of the students utilized ePortfolios through an expanded advising program within the Stanford community centers, including the Black Student Center and the Latino and Chicano Student Center. Two participants were master's students; one managed the technical elements of the expanded advising program, and the other served as a graduate mentor to freshmen. Each created an ePortfolio and also reviewed others' portfolios. Finally, an undergraduate experimenting with ePortfolios for an ePortfolio initiative program participated in this study.

Procedure

In critical hermeneutic participatory inquiry, the theoretical categories guide the data collection and analysis. The aim of this interpretive research is to gain a deeper understanding of the topic, as opposed to following traditional research methods focused on scalability or generalizations. The research protocol follows specific steps as outlined by Herda (1999), which include the following:

1. Record and transcribe conversations with participants;
2. identify significant statements and categorize them according to themes;
3. examine themes and important ideas in light of critical hermeneutic theory;
4. offer participants opportunities for continued conversation utilizing the transcribed text;
5. discuss the research topic through critical hermeneutic theory; and,
6. determine implications from the conversation text. (p. 98-99)

These steps were carried out through the theoretical categories of narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis.

A letter of invitation was sent to each person. If the student agreed, he or she was asked to share

reflections on creating an electronic portfolio during a conversation that was up to an hour long. The questions below, categorized according to the selected research theory, directed the conversation and led to new understandings about ePortfolios and student learning.

Narrative identity, as conceptualized by Ricoeur (1992), highlighted the significance of expressing our lives through stories. Emplotting life experiences through narrative leads one to new understandings about self, which changes the way in which one views others. The following questions guided my conversation with research participants in regards to narrative identity:

- Tell me a story about sharing your ePortfolios with others.
- How did the process of creating the ePortfolio influence your idea of who you are?
- Have you changed through the process of creating an ePortfolio? How so?

In addition to narrative identity, the fusion of horizons guided the research for this study. Gadamer's (1988/1975) concept of a fusion of horizons provides a hermeneutical approach to understanding learning. Ultimately, when individuals experience a fusion of horizons, they understand differently and change their way of thinking. The guiding prompts below were used to encourage a conversation about a fusion of horizons:

- Tell me a story about something that you came to view differently through creating the ePortfolio.
- What did you learn through the process of creating the ePortfolio that you did not know before?
- How has your view of your ePortfolio changed over time?

The final research category for this study is mimesis. Three stages of mimesis mediate past understandings and an imagined future in the present. By creating stories, through ePortfolios or otherwise, our lives come into full meaning, and in turn these stories can be revealed to others. To understand ePortfolios in light of mimesis, I guided the conversation with the following questions:

- How do you view your past differently after creating an ePortfolio?
- How has the ePortfolio process promoted your thinking about your future?
- Please provide an example of an action you took as a result of creating an ePortfolio.

Data Collection and Analysis

With the students' approval, I recorded the conversations and then transcribed them. Afterwards, I sent the students a thank-you letter, along with the conversation transcript for review and approval. They had the opportunity to review, edit, and delete any sections of the transcription. The final transcription fixes the conversation in a text, thereby creating distance from the conversation, and the transcribed text then becomes the basis for analysis. As Herda (1999) maintained, "research analysis discloses a possible world from the texts—the medium in which we understand ourselves" (p. 86). The results represent the final step of appropriation, where I interpret meaning through the selected critical hermeneutic theories.

Results

Through the interpretive approach of critical hermeneutic participatory inquiry, as described in the method section above, this study incorporated variations of the participants' stories while creating a larger meaning out of their narratives. The data presentation and analysis are based on the three selected critical hermeneutic theories of narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis. The following themes emerged in this interpretive data analysis: (1) the ePortfolio serves as a sharable narrative of identity, in conjunction with others; (2) new understandings of self, and different ways of evaluation, emerge in the ePortfolio; and, (3) ePortfolios create a space in the present to both refigure the past and imagine one's future.

Narrative Identity

Narrative identity provides a framework for exploring college students' changing sense of self and others in the context of ePortfolio programs. Ricoeur (1991) indicated that "life is lived and the story told" (p. 437). In other words, life is a series of events that gain meaning when configured in narrative. The ePortfolio gives students a way to create a narrative applicable to academic, professional, or personal aspects of their lives. This narrative is comprised of text, as well as images, multimedia, artifacts, and other creative expressions. With narrative identity, a person is "understood as a character in a story" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 148). Ricoeur (1988) further posited that "narrative identity . . . can include change, mutability, within the cohesion of one lifetime. The subject then appears as both a reader and the writer of its own life" (p. 246).

In the ePortfolio, students are charged with the task of reading and writing their lives. In particular, some research participants expressed a newfound resilience

through their engagement with ePortfolio programs. One freshman involved in the ePortfolio initiative explained, "Most people just brush things off and don't think about it later. Unless you sit down and take time to do it." A junior Chemical Engineering major who participated in the Black Community Center advising program realized, after the experience of sharing and discussing his ePortfolio with an alumni mentor, that "I shouldn't wait for my insecurities to go away. But instead to form my identity on those insecurities and make it so that I don't just back down, but I use it to motivate myself." By portraying challenges and reinterpreting stories, some students saw their lives differently in relation to the lives of others.

College is a critical time for recognizing ethics in life and living responsibly with others. Ricoeur (1988) wrote, "On the ethical plane, self interpretation becomes self-esteem" (p. 169). In the ePortfolio, a student emplots various experiences into a coherent narrative, increasing their self-understanding and gaining an awareness about how to live well with others. When students narrate their stories in the ePortfolio, they are often compelled to live and act responsibly, which may be understood as authentic living. Further, Ricoeur (1992) posited that "gathering together one's life in the form of a narrative is destined to serve as a basis for the aim of a 'good life,' the cornerstone of . . . ethics" (p. 158).

For my conversation partners, ethical awareness became apparent as they established their identity in the text. In the ePortfolio, students made their stories sharable and their identity representable. Some found that the ePortfolio was a space to express affirmatively who they were. A junior who created an extensive ePortfolio for an engineering research project pointed to her ePortfolio on the computer and said, "Here's really all my life!" Ricoeur (1988) noted the connection of narrative to ethical action:

Impetus is transformed into action only through a decision whereby a person says: Here I stand! So narrative identity is not equivalent to true self-constancy except through this decisive moment, which makes ethical responsibility the highest factor in self-constancy. (p. 249)

A freshman engineering major, who created an ePortfolio for the Chicano/a Latino/a Center advising program, firmly felt that the ePortfolio "really conveys the person that you really are." Another freshman mechanical engineering major noted, "It's very clearly me." A first-year student explained the ePortfolio process as "finding your center point. Grounding yourself in who you really are and who you are with other people." These comments all point to how the ePortfolio presents an authentic identity that students

may then present to others. Ricoeur (1992) contended that this self-constancy means “faithfulness to oneself in keeping one’s word” (p. 118), or making a promise to oneself. This promise occurs in the ePortfolio as students show that “this is me; here I stand.” With that declaration, ethical intention emerges.

Ethics involves reciprocity between self and others—the ability to care for, and be cared for. One biology student, pensive at the end of her first year, highlighted her new understanding of reciprocity in the ePortfolio, through which she came to realize she can both give and receive help. She told me that during her freshman year, one of her greatest learning experiences was seeing that “you don’t have to be on your own. You can be a part of something bigger than yourself. You can both receive and give help. . . . That was a big realization. The ePortfolio extends that even more.” Reagan (2002) explained Ricoeur’s philosophy that “self esteem is the reflexive moment of the goal of the good life, while the relation between the self and the other is characterized by solicitude, which is based on the exchange of giving and receiving” (p. 18). Before college, the student viewed herself as a solo person, but changed was able to see herself as one person interconnected with others. With this recognition, she shows solicitude for others. Most often, such student realizations came about through conversations with others about the author’s online self-representation in the electronic portfolio.

The personal connections that supplemented the reflective practice of the ePortfolio provided a meaningful way for students to learn and understand in new ways. Numerous students addressed the importance of conversation to their ePortfolio experience. For four of the students, the role of ePortfolios in mentoring relationships was a topic of discussion. For example, one graduate student I spoke to, who created her own ePortfolio and served also as a mentor to freshmen advisees, told me that the ePortfolios “can facilitate deep conversations with individuals, particularly strengthening mentoring relationships.” With the ePortfolio, she could see more clearly the struggles undergraduates faced, which helped direct her mentoring conversations. For the students I spoke to, learning came about initially from creating the online profile, but then expanded significantly through conversations. In dialogue, self and others engage to create new interpretations that provide students with a deeper understanding of identity. Like narrative identity, the ePortfolio relies on a dialectical exchange between self and other, not on self alone.

The Fusion of Horizons

Understandings come about as one merges past horizons with new ones (Gadamer, 1988/1975). Gadamer (1988/1975) explained, “Understanding is the interplay

of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter” (p. 293). When encountering different situations, one’s historical point of view has the chance to expand, which Gadamer referred to as a fusion of horizons. Gadamer (1988/1975) reminded us that

history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. . . . That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being. (p. 277)

This notion of historicity applies to the unique experience of college students. The university is an environment that brings together people from disparate backgrounds. It is a temporary home for undergraduate and graduate students who pass through in a continuous cycle, changing the college and being changed by it. A common experience that emerged in my conversations was bridging past horizons with the present college environment. For some students, the ePortfolio provides a point of reflection on this transition in life. Herda (1999) wrote, “Although we belong to history, we also can distance ourselves from it when it is in narrative form. We can read and reflect” (p. 77). Students’ engagement with ePortfolios changed their relationship to the institution and to other people.

Several of the freshmen expressed an enhanced sense of belonging at the university. For example, one freshman told me there were times he was not sure of his place in the college. In the process of making his ePortfolio, he reoriented his view of his own contributions and those of others. He explained, “You think, I don’t measure up to anyone. . . . To put it down in a narrative form, and see it in the context of where you were at the time, it helps reassure you [that you] did accomplish quite a lot of things.” A junior directly addressed the issue of belonging, telling me that he wondered, “Am I good enough? Do I belong here?” He said that his experience sharing his ePortfolio with alumni guided him to see his place at the university with more confidence. He stated that the ePortfolio “made me realize that if I’m in a class, and I’m struggling with the material, I’m not the only one struggling. Now I’m more confident raising my hand in class and asking questions.” Through the ePortfolio and the conversations that ensued, students broadened their views to see themselves differently in the world. The process of making the ePortfolio helped him realize that he should speak up in class and that he belongs at the college. He reframed his prior horizons with the new experiences in college.

Many participants indicated that the presentation of themselves in the ePortfolio gave them a different

perspective on self-assessment. Through a robust online image in the electronic portfolio, one is represented in an in-depth way. Several students addressed a shift from their prior views of evaluation as grades to a new interpretation of assessment as living authentically, or what Ricoeur (1992) referred to as ethical aim. The very nature of the ePortfolio is to construct an image of oneself online with examples of coursework and reflections of experiences. In my conversations with research participants, the fundamental quality of putting one's narrative online gave students new perspectives on how they assessed themselves. A junior mechanical engineering major, for instance, observed that engaging in things she cared about was more important than the final grades in her classes. She explained this to me in connection with the ePortfolio:

The reflection aspect I think is very important. I'm not necessarily the best student all the time. . . . Reflecting made me feel okay that maybe I'm not getting as good of grades as my friends, but I love what I'm doing, and that's enough.

This student realized that her focus was on learning rather than grades.

A junior's notion of self-evaluation expanded to incorporate pursuing his interests, putting forth his best efforts, and applying himself to doing good work in the world. He explained further that

Just expressing my profile, my bio in words, expressing it in this public forum, it's a reminder to me about why I'm here. Why I am doing this. It's not just to get an A in a class or to get in touch with people. It's doing something with my degree. I shouldn't be defined by my grades here. I should be defined by what my experience leads me to end up doing in the future.

Through the ePortfolio, he experienced a different kind of self-assessment that deemphasized grades and focused on learning. Assessment shifted to an ontological, internal guide to living authentically. By remaining open to the ePortfolio as a text and cornerstone of conversation, students expanded their personal view of assessment.

Mimesis

The ePortfolio allows for a configuration of life. It is a place to make sense of disparate elements of one's educational or personal experiences. This process lends itself to reflecting on the past and imagining the future. Ricoeur's (1984) theory of mimesis provides a context for analyzing how past, present, and future are plotted for meaning. Ricoeur (1984) referred to the

stages of mimesis as the mediation of time and narrative. Kearney (2002) further explained that mimesis "involves a circular movement from action to text and back again—passing from prefigured experience through narrative recounting back to a refigured life-world" (p. 133). The majority of my conversation participants viewed their past in new ways and expanded on the imagined future through the activity of creating an ePortfolio. These students configured their stories differently, creating new possibilities for future actions. One of the themes that emerged was the achievement of an examined life which was constructed in terms of past experiences and future possibilities. This continuity brought concordance in life to concordance in narrative, as represented in the ePortfolio itself.

Many students expressed how the ePortfolio served as a medium to tell the tale of their academic life, including the mimetic aspect of connecting past, present, and future. The freshman engineering major, who created the ePortfolio for an expanded advising program, shared that in the ePortfolio, "you can reflect on who you are, where you've been, who you want to be. Shaping that path." Another freshman, explaining that the ePortfolio made her stop and reflect, said that it served "to think about what you learned and what you did and what it meant." She explained the new insights expanded her self-understanding, which she could use to express herself more clearly in professional interviews. The ePortfolio was a place for examining the past, leading to new recognitions about the self.

Throughout the conversations, students noted an awareness of their qualities and experiences that they had not noticed before. Six of the eight students shared how they looked back at disparate parts of their life and recognized cohesion in their story. The reinterpretation of their past often led to a different action, such as new academic or personal pursuits. Several students explained how separate parts of their life became coherent as they constructed the ePortfolio. For example, one student said the ePortfolio "allowed me to verbalize this idea of myself as a mentor." Before the ePortfolio, she did not view personal qualities about herself as unique to her. Themes in her life that were previously latent came to the forefront. I asked her to tell me what it was like to discover this quality about herself. She replied:

I never really thought of it as me giving help. I've always seen it as the activity that I do. The ePortfolio got me to think about it as something that is a really big part of my life, because before I wouldn't think it is volunteer work. I assumed people do that in general. It's actually a really big part of who I am. It defines my interests and the things I like to do. The ePortfolio got me to realize that it's a big defining part of my life.

Her inclination to guide others was second nature to this student, but it was when she designed the ePortfolio that she started to see mentoring as a quality that was a distinct part of her identity.

Another student explained that she never saw how her diverse interests were connected until she crafted her profile. Discussing her ePortfolio with an advisor led her to a “mind-blowing moment” when the advisor observed that a theme of intellectual curiosity pervaded her experiences. She recounted this experience during our conversation:

She said I really see a theme of intellectual curiosity here that is clearly carrying through a lot of different things. That is something I’d never thought about before. I was writing about it, but I never thought about it as an aspect of me. I had never thought that about me, as one of my strengths being a person who is very intellectually curious. The more I looked back, the more I realized that [this theme] popped up there, and there, and there. It was nice to have a place to put this stuff down and have someone else read it and show me this is clearly a big theme in your life.

The student commented further that once she had realized the themes in her life, she could talk about herself more easily with others. She observed the mimetic quality of ePortfolios, noting that it “got me thinking about my past and my future and where I am now.” Through conversations about the content of her ePortfolio, she brought coherence to her diverse interests with the theme of intellectual curiosity.

In addition to making sense of the past, students also discussed how they viewed their future. Imagining a desired future creates the possibility for inhabiting an ideal world. Kearney (2002) explained this central concept of mimesis: “Our exposure to the new possibilities of being refigures our everyday being-in-the-world. So that when we return from the story-world to the real world, our sensibility is enriched and amplified in important respects” (p. 133). When the future is envisioned through narrative, real-world action in the present is altered in pursuit of the vision.

The student narratives integrate mimesis into how they remember their past and connect it to a desired future. This process is cyclical, as in the present they constantly reflect upon past experiences and future dreams. Ricoeur (1988) wrote that there is an “endless rectification of a previous narrative by a subsequent one, and from the chain of refigurations that results from this” (p. 248). By contemplating their histories and hopes, documenting them in the ePortfolio, and talking with others, the students’ forthcoming path became clearer as their personal notions of authentic living expand. As one student summarized, “I have

learned that when I have reflected, and once I think about things I’ve done and experiences that I’ve had, I’m much clearer about where I want to go.” For most students, imaging the future was a continuous cycle of interpretation about their lives.

Many students looked to a future beyond the university to consider how they themselves and others might live well in the world. As some students noted, the ePortfolio has the potential to provide a much-needed space for them to reflect on their own life stories. One student addressed this point directly in her reflection, showing how she took the time to consider her goals in terms of an ethical aim. She maintained:

When I was doing this for the ePortfolio, I thought it sounded nice, but I realized this is actually true. I’m not just doing this assignment. I’m actually thinking about what my goals are here. I guess everyone wants to be happy. What would make me happy would be to have a fulfilling life. To have a career where I can help other people. Where I can make a name of myself as well. And be at peace with the world. Have a fulfilling life. To get up every day and say I’m living the life I want to be living. I’m the person I want to be. There’s always room for improvement. I might get up and say, “I’m not there yet.” That could go on forever. Being in the process of improving yourself every day. Talking those small steps to being a better person in every aspect of life. It’s a big goal. It’s the final goal.

This student and others expressed a narrative that reflected Ricoeur’s (1992) notion of the good life. The reflective and interactive process of the ePortfolio often leads to an awareness of ethical living. This came across in many student conversations that addressed envisioning a future that related to one’s authentic self.

As Kearney (2002) explained, “The recounted life pries open perspectives inaccessible to ordinary perception. It marks a poetic extrapolation of possible worlds that supplement and refashion our referential relations to the life-world existing prior to the act of recounting” (p. 132). In other words, a life examined through narrative leads to new ways of acting in the present. This self-understanding comes about as the students take the time to reflect and articulate new meanings as part of the ePortfolio process.

Through narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis, an ontological view of the ePortfolio as a medium for learning about self in the world emerges. The ePortfolio provides a means for sharing one’s identity with others, which is complemented by meaningful conversation. Many participants experienced new understandings about their lives, including an expanded view of self-assessment. With the ePortfolio, a

creative potential exists for students to refigure their narratives and imagine their lives differently.

Discussion

The findings and implications from my research emerged through a literature review, conversations with participants, and data analysis. Table 1 demonstrates the findings and implications by research category, with examples from student conversations. By analyzing the data through critical hermeneutic theory, I extend this narrative to create a text that may open up new opportunities for educators utilizing ePortfolios. Herda (1999) contended, “The fusion of horizons is the aim of hermeneutic research, which opens possibilities for our new understandings with concomitant actions” (p. 109). The implications may guide faculty, academic advisors, and student affairs staff in implementing ePortfolio programs and engaging with students about their ePortfolios.

Narrative Identity

Narrative identity is integral for analyzing ePortfolios in a critical hermeneutic tradition. Herda

(2010) explained Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity as “an identity that sustains both a tension and harmony in each of our selves and in relation to each other” (p. 141). The stories that we tell reflect our sameness and also changes in our identities and relationships. I asked students to tell me about the experience of presenting their story to others through the ePortfolio, which led to my first finding.

Finding 1: The ePortfolio serves as a living portal, whereby identity is shared with others and reimagined in narrative and conversation. Through both conversation and text, the ePortfolio becomes a living portal. This concept extends Carey’s (2007) notion of a *living text*, which is based on Herda’s (1999) critical hermeneutic participatory research. The ePortfolio serves as a living text, whereby the student and the viewer continually reimagine it for new meaning. This concept of text is a broad one that incorporates all of the reflections, learning artifacts, images, and personal and academic information that is contained in a student’s ePortfolio. The online text lives through conversation: “This living text is open to appropriation because it continues to evolve and change as the text moves from the interpretation of one moment to setting the venue of continued conversation

Table 1
Data, Findings and Implications by Research Category

| Research Categories | Conversation Excerpts | Findings | Implications |
|---|--|--|--|
| Narrative Identity: “It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 148). | “The process of presenting myself to other people, that’s what the ePortfolio is really about. It’s allowed me to reflect on who I am, and my relationship to other people.” | The ePortfolio serves as a “living portal” whereby identity is shared with others and reimagined in text, narrative, and conversation. | Integrate narrative and conversation into ePortfolio programs. |
| Fusion of Horizons: “To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it, but to see it better within a larger whole and in truer proportion.” (Gadamer, 1988, p. 272) | “Reflecting made me feel okay that maybe I’m not getting as good grades as my friends, but I love what I’m doing, and that’s enough.” | ePortfolios encourage new understandings of past traditions and current experiences, which enhances belonging and enriches assessment. | Utilize ePortfolios for new understandings of self and others, and for narrative assessment. |
| Mimesis: “We [follow] the destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 54). | “It reminds me of who I used to be and it also reminds me who I want to be.” | Students reconfigured their past in the ePortfolio, and integrated their imagined future through an ongoing process. | Encourage reflections of past, present, and future in ePortfolio programs. |

of the next” (Carey, 2007, p. 28). Each time the ePortfolio serves as a medium, or portal, for new ways of seeing self and other. This experience expands through conversation, where the topic at hand is the student content in the ePortfolio.

Beyond the notion of a living text, I found that the ePortfolio functioned as a *living portal* (see Figure 1). “Living” refers to a dynamic representation that is continually reinterpreted by both the student and the viewer. “Portal” captures the idea of the ePortfolio as a medium for understanding, as opposed to a technological tool. The ePortfolio as a living portal was most meaningful to students when coupled with conversation.

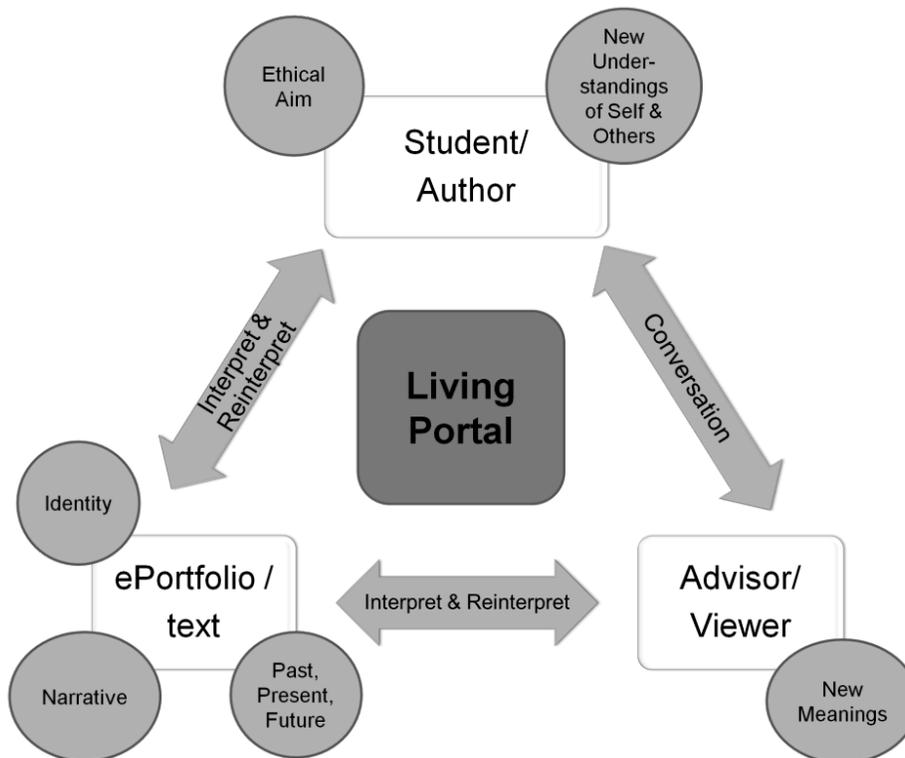
ePortfolios encourage students to put a narrative of themselves online for others. In some cases, these are personal portrayals of life, including obstacles, while at other times students highlight their achievements. The reasons vary, but in any case the students present personal narratives online in a shareable format. Students showed an honest view of themselves that was rarely displayed in other venues. As a freshman mechanical engineering major explained, “I put my heart into it. . . . It gives another view into my life and

priorities.” By establishing an authentic version of their personal narrative, these students expressed a greater sense of ethical living. For example, the first year biology student shared in her ePortfolio that “I’ve come here to further develop my knowledge, establish lifelong bonds, realize my career plans, attain wisdom, and achieve these factors of life to become a better me.”

The students who spoke of ePortfolios in the most powerful way described them as meaningful expressions of self when coupled with deep conversations. Crafting the ePortfolio encourages reflection. Presenting it to others and discussing the content leads to a reconfiguration of one’s narrative. This finding about the ePortfolio as a living portal for sharing identity with others suggests the following implications for practice.

Implication 1: Integrate narrative and conversation into ePortfolio programs. There are a variety of uses for ePortfolios, but the experience that resonated the most with my research participants incorporated a personal narrative and conversation with another. Conversations are integral to the meaning of an ePortfolio experience. This implies that practitioners utilize the ePortfolio not as a static text, but as a living

Figure 1
ePortfolios as Living Portals



Note. The ePortfolio serves as a living portal, whereby the ePortfolio is continually reinterpreted by the student and viewer through text and conversation. Adapted from Nguyen (2013).

portal. As ePortfolio programs are created, student narrative and conversation with others ought to be cornerstones of the design.

New Understandings

In the critical hermeneutic tradition, learning is conceptualized as a fusion of horizons. Linge (1977) explained Gadamer's theory that "understanding remains essentially a mediation or translation of past meaning into the present situation" (p. xii). In the context of an ePortfolio, this learning is often a new interpretation that arises through experience, text, and conversation. My questions to students addressed new understandings in the ePortfolio context. The stories they shared led to my second finding.

Finding 2: ePortfolios encourage new understandings of past traditions and current experiences, which enhances belonging and enriches assessment. New understandings come about when one encounters a situation that challenges personal pre-judgments based on one's history. In college, this encounter begins with the transition from home to a university setting, and it continues as one engages with different experiences and people. The ePortfolio encouraged reflection on this process by allowing students to recognize that they had gained a new understanding of a previously held notion. This process, in turn, often led to a greater sense of belonging at the institution. Additionally, the robust expression of self in the ePortfolio provided new ways of self-assessment, as compared to traditional measures, in the college context.

Almost all of the students observed that in the ePortfolio, past interpretations were expanded in light of their present experiences. Many students experienced an enhanced sense of belonging at the university with the ePortfolio programs. For example, one junior described gaining confidence in class from talking to alumni mentors about the content of his ePortfolio. He said, "When I look at my reflections . . . it reminds me [of how] I used to get scared and intimidated. And how that conversation has actually transformed me to be this person who is not scared to go up to the professor." Students' relationships to the institution and people within it expanded with the new understandings about self that came about in the context of the ePortfolio. This deepens engagement with the college and may have further implications for students' sense of belonging and for retention.

Creating a text and talking to others gives students new ways to assess their education. Even though I never asked students about grades, many of them suggested that grades were less important than living authentically. One freshman spoke of a shift in attitude, from focusing solely on academics to being more

balanced in his relationships with people and his studies. A graduate student observed, "The electronic portfolio has given me this opportunity to look at me as a whole person." For most students, the ePortfolio served a narrative function for evaluation, allowing an interpretive, ontological approach to assessment. This finding leads to the following implication for practice.

Implication 2: Utilize ePortfolios for new understandings and narrative assessment. ePortfolios give students new ways to think about their educational lives based on prior understandings and new experiences. Electronic portfolio practices could incorporate student reflections on their prior views and new ways of understanding, or fusions of horizons, during college. Furthermore, viewing the ePortfolio as a text with narrative may provide an alternate assessment approach based on a student's own ethics. Presenting one's portfolio online can provide a different type of evaluation that shifts from grades to narrative and is guided by the learner's goals. It may allow students to assess their lives and learning beyond traditional measures, which may better prepare them for life after college.

Mimesis

The framework of mimesis offers an approach to viewing a student's ePortfolio experience through a lens of past understandings, present experiences, and future hopes. Herda (2010) summarized the relationship of Ricoeur's mimesis to time: "in order for us to understand human existence we must use a composite framework of time, which is only possible in a narrative whose expression relies on imagination" (p. 138). Inhabiting new possibilities in life entails both reconfiguring the remembered world and imagining an ideal world. The ePortfolio creates a space for past reflections, present observations, and future imaginings. Examining life for a new awareness about self was a prevalent theme in this research. Research conversations included topics about how one viewed the past and future differently in the present through the online portfolio, which suggests the third implication of this study.

Finding 3: Students reconfigured their past in the ePortfolio, and integrated their imagined future through an ongoing process. The majority of research participants discovered qualities about themselves through the ePortfolio process that they had never realized before. College is a time when students discover new things about themselves and the world. Students who participated in this study overwhelmingly described insights about themselves through the experience of crafting an ePortfolio and engaging with others about its content. A freshman involved in the ePortfolio initiative stated, "It helped

me tie together how everything wove together, all of my experiences.” A graduate student shared a similar sentiment that with the ePortfolio, she felt that “wow, it’s so interesting how this connects to this.” The ePortfolio provides a place to reflect on the qualities of students’ past experiences and express them in new ways to others.

Fewer students directly integrated their future into their ePortfolio narrative. Refiguring the past often emerged more explicitly than expressing the future. Students engaged in a continual process of refiguring their hopes and goals to represent in their online portfolio. For example, one student observed, “My goals have been more vague than concrete. How to get there is even more vague. It’s been evolving, and changing.” The students were working towards a vision that was in the process of being shaped. A junior said that in the ePortfolio he was “finding a way to make connections between my classes and what I want to do in the future.” For many students, representing the future was an ongoing process of discovery that started with the past and led to constructing an image of what was to come. These findings about refiguring the past and configuring the future in the present through the ePortfolio suggest the final implication.

Implication 3: Encourage reflections of past, present, and future in ePortfolio programs. As higher education faculty and staff utilize ePortfolios for student learning, it is important to incorporate the remembered world, present existence, and future hopes in the design. The past is a starting place for students’ stories. Educators could encourage students to represent their present-day experiences alongside future hopes. Often, students do not have the time and space to consider their life and learning in the larger context of their personal journey. The ePortfolio may encourage the type of configuration of narrative described by Ricoeur’s mimesis, whereby past, present, and future are mediated through narrative.

Suggestions for Future Research

The place of ePortfolios in higher education is a growing reality on college campuses. This research provides an interpretive look at the experience of students crafting ePortfolios at one institution. Further research into a critical hermeneutic tradition will provide deeper understanding of some of the concepts that emerged in this research. The first suggestion is to explore the faculty or advisor’s perspective on ePortfolios for identity and conversation. Educators may benefit from a deeper understanding of the faculty or staff’s view of an ePortfolio in terms of viewing a student’s identity, and the experiences of engaging in dialogue about the student’s personal ePortfolio.

Second, ePortfolios should be investigated for belonging and assessment. Students in this research specifically addressed how they came to feel more connected with the college through participation in the ePortfolio program. This could be examined further to understand the implications for their sense of belonging and for retention. Additionally, narrative assessment practices, as designed by the student through the ePortfolio, could be studied as an alternative to widely used assessment methods, such as learning outcomes or grades. Assessment in a critical hermeneutic tradition offers a rich and complex approach to understanding a program’s influence or a student’s learning.

Finally, how students apply new understandings of their past and future should be researched. This study found that students articulated their unique qualities and histories differently after engaging with the ePortfolio. For future research, this observation can be taken a step further to explore how students translate these new understandings about self to actions in their lives. Research participants often mentioned that they articulated themselves in new ways to faculty, advisors, and employers. Investigating this topic further might provide student affairs professionals with a deeper understanding of how to better utilize ePortfolios in specific areas, such as academic advising or career planning.

Conclusion

As universities increasingly utilize ePortfolios, college students are asked more frequently than ever to create ePortfolios for academics, assessment, or advising. The purposes are as varied as the people and programs that employ ePortfolios. The online presentation is sometimes public to present an overview of one’s life, education, and professional goals. Others, shared selectively with trusted advisors, and recount learning experiences, challenges, and personal dreams. In this study, analysis shifted from prior epistemological methods based on linear processes to an ontological approach based on ways of being. Kearney (2002) contended, “Every human existence is a life in search of a narrative” (p. 129). The ePortfolio provided a space for many students to reflect upon their identity and create an online representation of their narrative. The emerging insights about self occur in relation to, and through conversation, with others. Herda (1999) observed, “The interpretation of the text is complete when the reading of it releases an event in our lives whereby we understand each other anew” (p. 128). A critical hermeneutic approach may provide new opportunities for understanding and action in higher education, where the ePortfolio serves as a living portal to create narratives and examine lives.

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