Self-Representation and Student Identity: A Case Study of International Student Users of Sakai

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This case study of two international students, coupled with artifact analysis of 22 eportfolios and observations of the authors as participant researchers, closely explores the ways in which students attempt to self-represent within one particular system (Sakai) and institutional context (Virginia Tech). Using artifacts (the participants' eportfolios) and qualitative interviews with the participants, the study calls attention to challenges international students face when required to craft online identities for themselves with the English ePortfolio. Participant data is discussed in terms of aesthetics, functionality, flexibility, and self-representation. The rigidity of the system denied participants the flexibility to craft identities with which they felt much connection, resulting in eportfolio creation being reduced to a class project rather than a personally and professionally meaningful process and product. Greater flexibility in design and function would make the eportfolio system more useful to student users in this particular context.

The acclimatization process for international undergraduate students at major American universities certainly varies, but it is rarely a quick or easy period of time. These students often find themselves at large and alienating universities with more than 90% traditional students. In both their curricular and extracurricular lives, international students have to deal with both new logistics (e.g., schedules, coursework, etc.) and broader cultural norms (e.g., interpersonal relationships, approaches to time, etc.). How, then, do international undergraduates tackle an assignment that asks them to synthesize the work they have done in courses with personal development, job experience, and extracurricular activities?

ePortfolios present a way for students to synthesize these aspects into continuous narratives, usually in the hopes that they will "develop the self-awareness necessary to transition from a student to an emerging professional" (Graves & Epstein, 2011, p. 343). More and more, educators appreciate eportfolios over traditional portfolios as embodying and supporting the sequential nature of the goals behind them. ePortfolios also respond to the growing movements in higher education of student-centered and integrated learning (Clark & Eynon, 2009). What's more, with the rise of digital communication technologies and "multimedia self-authoring," students are increasingly interested in "creating rich digital self-portraits" (Clark & Eynon, 2009, p. 18). Even as eportfolio development conveys a departure from the static, assessment-centered learning, students face a new kind of challenge in attempting to craft an identity that fulfills the many and multifaceted goals of eportfolios. Concurrently, the eportfolio builder must reconcile notions of development and dynamism with the fact that what appears on the screen to the viewer is still a published web document displaying and representing the individual's work and identity.

This forces students of all kinds to confront challenging questions. How do you approach an assignment that asks you to synthesize as much as four years of work, especially one with open-ended requirements? What do you make of the affordances and limitations of the eportfolio software? How do you want to portray and represent yourself on your eportfolio, given its multiple audiences – your teacher, administrators, potential employers, and even your own friends and family? What even constitutes "you" – personally and professionally – on an eportfolio that bears your name?

These notions – of self-representation, reflection, and identity construction; about technological affordances, limitations, and design – underlie questions facing any student asked to complete an eportfolio. These questions, though, become even more challenging for students coming from cultures that may not have been considered during the conception and development of the existing eportfolio system. International students bring with them cultural assumptions about self-representation and identity construction online that the developers of eportfolios may or may not have taken into consideration. ePortfolio systems may not be meeting international students' needs, and the forms of self-representation that students are encouraged to complete may not overlap with these students' cultural norms.

With these possibilities and questions in mind, this case study considers the perspectives of two international students at Virginia Tech, a major state university located in Southwest Virginia, on their eportfolios. The data we present in this article consists of both artifacts – our case study participants' eportfolios – and qualitative interviews conducted with those students. In the interviews, we asked our participants to reflect on the process of creating an eportfolio; to tell us about their other online personae

(e.g., blogs, MySpace, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter); to explain how they have used or plan to use their eportfolios; and to articulate how well their portfolio reflects their own perceived personality.

Our collection and interpretation of this data set is informed by our own roles as participant researchers: one researcher has been involved in development and documentation, and one has been involved in teaching and implementation. Additionally, one of the researchers was an undergraduate English major at Virginia Tech, creating one of the early English ePortfolios still used in the university's online sample gallery today. Our case study data set and our experience as participant researchers were supplemented by artifact analysis of 22 eportfolios on the Virginia Tech English ePortfolio Gallery. We analyzed these artifacts qualitatively, triangulating our findings with our own experiences and our participants' comments.

This study is meant to call attention to a unique institutional context, as well make observations about how our case study participants fit into that context. In the process of highlighting these students' work and reflections, we hope to illustrate the many challenges facing users of Sakai, as well as begin to sketch out possible ways the eportfolio system in this institutional context could have better served the needs of our study participants.

The institutional context for this case study is a rich and complicated one with a long history. The university-wide Virginia Tech (VT) ePortfolio (eP) system runs on Scholar, a customization of the open-source course management and collaboration platform Sakai that can be accessed by anyone with a valid Virginia Tech personal identifier. The VT eP (referred to internally as eP@VT) is a particularly rigid system; users are presented with an interface that allows them to create pages and add content to those pages through a rich-text editor and attachments. Users have minimal control over the visual design of their eportfolios, with only a selection of several dozen visual themes or templates. This rigidity of form is particularly interesting for this study, since it both provides an ease and simplicity and limits student options.

The eP@VT is a large-scale project operated by Learning Technologies. ePortfolios have been adopted at Virginia Tech by a variety of departments and colleges, including the natural sciences, the social sciences, the arts, and the humanities. Our participants come from the English department at Virginia Tech. While this population is not generalizable in the scientific sense, it does provide an interesting case study, especially for an exploratory study such as this. The English department is one of the largest departments at Virginia Tech to fully adopt the eportfolio as a requirement for graduation. The English

department ePortfolio (herein referred to as the English ePortfolio) template is a customized and constrained variation of the eP@VT (e.g., English ePortfolio users have a selection of only four visual themes and do not have direct control over the formatting of content on several pages). All English majors (including Creative Writing; Professional Writing; and Literature, Language, and Culture specializations) take English 2614, a two-credit hour introduction to the eportfolio. Students begin to create their eportfolios in this course – drafting a welcome page, resume, digital narrative, and course of study planner – then are expected to continue to work on them throughout the rest of their studies, completing them just prior to graduation. While the page creator for the English ePortfolio has changed slightly over the years, it still contains categories for academic achievement, showcase on growth, engagement, direction, and synthesis. A gallery of sample English ePortfolios is available online (http://eportfolio.vt.edu/gallery/DeptsProgs/english.html).

In the next section, we situate this study within the existing literature, paying particular attention to the literature on intercultural communication, which informs our thinking about our case study participants, self-representation, and identity. We then present our data, connecting our case study participants' own words with their eportfolios. We explore several major themes, including aesthetics, functionality, flexibility, and self-representation. Further, we examine the ways in which the English ePortfolio system at Virginia Tech calls for a particular, culturally specific type of self-representation. We conclude by exploring tentative implications for different audiences, including researchers, teachers, and developers.

Literature Review

The study of eportfolios is, by nature, interdisciplinary, drawing in scholars from English studies, education, learning technologies, and technology and design. Questions of intercultural communication and identity construction in online environments also receive attention from a range of disciplines, among them cultural studies, communication, and psychology. Though existing literature does not directly address how users of different cultures represent themselves with eportfolios, it does contain research relevant to this study that should be approached with cautious flexibility.

Much of the existing literature on eportfolios pertains to their development, implementation, and best practices as tools for learning, engagement, and reflective practice. While we could speak to this literature, it is only tangentially related to our concerns, and few studies pertain to patterns of use in general,

much less for international student users. One of the few edited collections on eportfolios, by Cambridge, Cambridge, and Yancey (2009), has an entire section dedicated to identity, but that section does not address cultural differences, instead focusing on reflective and professional identities. Tosh and Werdmuller (2004) briefly address identity when they link eportfolios to personal weblogs and the practice of diary writing; their notion of identity, though, is still informed by reflective identity and the reflective practitioner. Oubenaissa-Giardina, Hensler, and Lacourse (2007), however, take reflective practice into the realm of culture by exploring the use of the life story metaphor in developing a model for an intercultural eportfolio. Their project aims to discover how eportfolios can "exploit the mosaic of cultures that characterizes the current learning environment to favor a constructive and proficient intercultural interaction among peers and teachers from diverse cultures and backgrounds" (Oubenaissa-Giardina et al., 2007, p. 1-2). This is where their focus drifts from identity, however, reflecting a prevalent interest in addressing student diversity with flexible online education environments (Dimitrova, Sadler, Hatzipanagos, & Murphy, 2003). An example of such interest is found in Ramirez (2011), where with eportfolios are engaged as an elastic medium for the performance of multiple selves.

At the intersection of culture and identity, Boekestijn (1988) in psychology addresses the dilemma between identity maintenance and cultural adaptation that migrants face and how the choice in such a dilemma has significant influence on identity development. This is an important dilemma to consider in the context of international students' attempts to self-represent on eportfolios: where the affordances of the platform differ from the user's cultural tendencies, the user must choose whether to adopt the new cultural tendency at the expense of some aspect his or her cultural identity.

While not always linked directly to cultural identity, there is an ongoing interest in the affordances of eportfolios for international students. One possible affordance is international students being able to share their learning experiences and accomplishments with family members and friends abroad (Headden, 2011). There is also acknowledgement of a need for eportfolios to take different forms between different cultures, "suggesting new approaches, challenges, and opportunities . . . [that] facilitate global examination of the nature of learning and thoughtful exchange and the future of education" (Clark & Eynon, 2009, p. 23). Hiradhar and Gray's study (2008) showed how an eportfolio system introduced to language enhancement courses at a Hong Kong university enabled students to create an English-specific academic digital identity based on their predominant social digital culture. While

there exists an awareness of the influence of culture on eportfolio development and use, Raven and O'Donnell (2010) show the possibility of eportfolios being used to enhance feelings of national identity through the construction of (and viewing of others') digital stories in a controlled endeavor such as a competition. In this paper, we are focusing on the former and reverse: the influence of culture on eportfolio use.

In intercultural communication, Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov's (2010) ever-popular cultural dimensions serve as a natural starting point for examining cultural difference. Individualism versus collectivism, or the degree to which the interest of an individual prevails over the interest of the group or vice versa, is a cultural dimension that is particularly relevant to self-representation on the Internet. Does the individual prefer to use affiliations rather than personal details to convey an online identity? Does the individual try to stand out from other members of her online community or blend in? Also, individualist societies are found to use the Internet more than collectivist societies (Hofstede et al., 2010). Another relevant dimension from Hofstede is uncertainty avoidance, or the extent to which a culture feels comfortable or uncomfortable with uncertain or unstructured situations. For instance, someone from a culture with greater uncertainty avoidance may be more anxious at the prospect of having to design an eportfolios with open-ended requirements.

While dimensions such as individualism and uncertainty avoidance in terms of users' portrayals of themselves through eportfolios may be useful to consider, a problem with using Hofstede et al.'s (2010) cultural dimensions as a lens for examining manifestations of cultural difference is their basis on national culture (McSweeney, 2002; Williamson, 2002). Instead of using essentialist notions of national culture, we should "engage with and use theories of action which can cope with change, power, variety, and multiple influences – including the non-national – and the complexity and situational variability of the individual subject" (McSweeney, 2002, p. 113). Other scholars have challenged the idea of cultural models altogether. Hunsinger (2006) challenges static definitions of culture and the idea that people behave like the groups of which they are part. Although cultural models are practical for understanding cultural difference, static cultural representations should be supplemented "to interrogate the ways cultural practices are intertextually constructed and mobilized for certain purposes" (Hunsinger, 2006, p. 46). This case study sets out to supplement our understanding of cultural models by looking at the ways two international students intertextually construct and mobilize their cultural practices in the form of English ePortfolios.

As with any eportfolio system, the English ePortfolio in this study functions both practically and visually to permit particular kinds of identity formation. The practical and visual are often at odds, as "the price of ease of use in many cases is an increasingly standardized look and feel" (Clark & Eynon, 2009, p. 21). When students are made to drop in text, photos, and video onto a web page that cannot otherwise be customized, "the loss of visual richness is potentially significant" (Clark & Eynon, 2009, p. 21) and the student is kept from enthusiastic experimentation with aesthetics and multimodal authoring. While ease of use is important to student eportfolio adoption, so is ownership (Garrett, 2009). In Garrett's (2009) study, students' feelings of control over the visual aspects of their portfolios correlated positively with their feelings of ownership over their portfolio. Further, Garrett (2009) underscores the significance of this result: that eportfolio systems should allow greater flexibility in students' ability to modify the look and feel of their portfolios.

Digital identity and cultural difference are crucial considerations in any attempt to explore how eportfolio users of varying cultures self-represent in this context. A final important consideration with regards to the affordances of eportfolio is what Yancey (2004) calls "textured literacy" (p. 750-751) – the ability of an eportfolio to evoke deeper thought with a more multiple and elaborate arrangement of narratives and connections than, say, a print portfolio possibly can. Indeed, this format would even allow for international students to speak more than one culture with their eportfolios, as is the case with the LaGuardia model, which invites students to represent both their home culture and their school culture (Yancey, 2004). Given the literature, we expected, and found, our case study participants facing the dilemma of identity maintenance versus cultural adaptation, primarily due to the system's relative inflexibility and the little attention paid to cultural variance in its implementation. The choices students make in the face of this dilemma cause them to reconfigure their cultural identities to suit the eportfolio.

Aesthetics

ePortfolios are published web artifacts, designed to look and function a particular way. How an eportfolio looks is just as important as how it functions. This is especially true of professional eportfolios, where *ethos* can undermine an otherwise effective website. In this section, we discuss how the visual affordances and limitations of the English ePortfolio template affect the users in this study.

The Virginia Tech English ePortfolio is a fairly rigid system in terms of visual design. Users have a significant amount of control over the content area, including layout (one- or two-columns), typographic elements (typeface, size, color, margins, etc.), and background color. Users also have the option to link to web content and files stored in their own personal folders in Scholar (Sakai). Visual changes to the content area are made using a rich-text editor akin to those used in many e-mail clients (Figure 1).

Additionally, users with knowledge of HTML can access and manipulate the source code that structures the content area, though few students have the coding skills necessary to do so.

Outside the content area, however, users have little control over visual design. Users select from a small selection of themes – when our participants completed their eportfolios, there was only one theme, but that number has since grown for the English ePortfolio to four – which structure the header, footer, and background of the site. Users of Virginia Tech's broader ePortfolio system, eP@VT, can upload their own banner image, add pages in the navigation, and choose from several dozen themes. The English ePortfolio, though, is much more restricted. Students have only four themes – all of them almost identical – and have no control over those themes, including the fonts used in the header navigation, the background color, the size of the content area and header, the footer text, and so on.

We found that this schism in control – almost complete control over some parts of the eportfolio and almost no control over others – resulted in visual inconsistencies that frustrated our participants, who noted dissatisfaction with the aesthetics of their eportfolios. Both cases reported that their dissatisfaction primarily resulted from these visual inconsistencies, especially the fact that content appears to be "dropped in." In other words, it is clear from the final product that content is mostly copied and pasted from a word processor, and that may reflect poorly on the student (and her abilities). For instance, one of our participants, a recent graduate, noted that the content area of her site looked so dramatically different from the rest of it that she did not feel it looked professional enough to use (Figure 2).

Granted, some of this inconsistency could be fixed if the user were taught how to change the background color in the rich text editor to fit the theme background color. We found this schism, however, in all of the participant portfolios we viewed, which makes it clear that the technical design skills necessary to overcome the aesthetic limitations of the template are not being taught. Our other case study participant expressed dissatisfaction with the less than professional aspects of her eportfolio, noting, "If I cleaned [it] up, I would use it." "I don't think it looked very neat," she later said. This messy feel stems primarily from visual

Figure 1
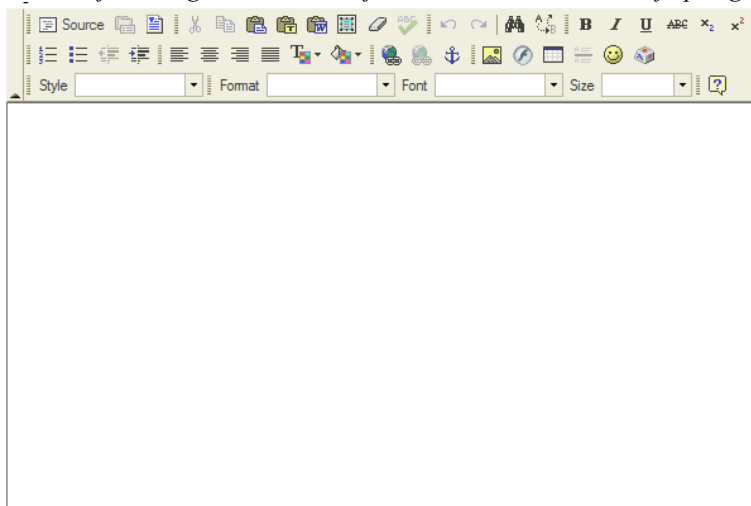*Screenshot of the Virginia Tech ePortfolio Rich-Text Editor, as of Spring 2011*

Figure 2
Screenshot of a Portfolio with a Strong Break Between Theme and Content Area

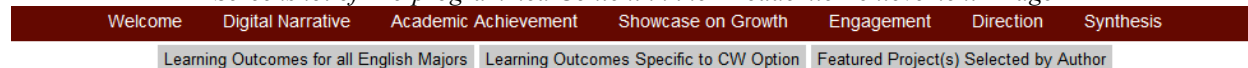inconsistencies such as those between the content area and theme.

Other visual inconsistencies plagued our participants' portfolios and threatened to undermine their *ethos*. Some of those were under user control – such as different font sizes across different pages – but others were not. The English ePortfolio utilizes some pre-programmed content, especially on the "Academic Achievement" page, which asks users to reflect on outcomes specific to their major. The text users enter (using the rich-text editor) is then rendered as expandable (by clicking "hide/show"). Users do not, however, have any control over how any pre-programmed text is displayed. These kinds of pre-programmed content then limit users to a small subset of font choices if they want to mirror those used in the pre-programmed content areas (Figure 3).

Such inconsistencies are what our participants found to be the primary problem with their eportfolios and the primary reasons they did not use them. In many

Figure 3
Screenshot of Pre-programmed Content in the "Academic Achievement" Page

Welcome	Digital Narrative	Academic Achievement	Showcase on Growth	Engagement	Direction	Synthesis

Learning Outcomes for all English Majors	Learning Outcomes Specific to CW Option	Featured Project(s) Selected by Author

Learning Outcomes for all English Majors

1. Awareness of a global and multi-cultural context for the study of English. Appreciation of diversity in authors, texts, and viewpoints (hide/show)
    - View a formal project. If possible, submissions should come from English courses at the 1000-2000 level.
    - View my reflection on this project.
2. Ability to read critically and compose an effective analysis of a literary text (hide/show)
    - View a critical analysis from English 2604: Introduction to Critical Reading. Submissions must come from English courses at the 1000-2000 level.
    - View my reflection on this project.
3. Ability to search for, select, and analyze information from electronic databases and other research sources; ability to compose an essay about a text(s) that integrates outside sources in an ethical, accurate, readable, and effective way (hide/show)
    - View an example of a textual analysis with a research component composed in a 1000-2000 level course.
    - View my reflection on this project.

(though not all) cases, users had ways of overcoming these inconsistencies, but those ways were either not intuitive enough, too difficult to access, or simply not taught.

Ultimately, then, we found that our case study participants struggled with the visual design components of the English ePortfolio. (One noted that the visual *ethos* of Virginia Tech and the English department was a benefit to the eportfolio; despite wanting more control over visual design, she would rather use a portfolio with that *ethos* and less control over design.) We set out to find the fracture points, the places where users give up the creation of their eportfolios and the artifact shifts from personally meaningful to a "class project." Visual design is one of those fracture points, perhaps the most significant. When we asked our recent graduate (whose home page is displayed in Figure 1) whether she started out engaged in her eportfolio, she responded,

> Yeah, definitely, I thought it was actually pretty cool, and I actually did spend a lot of time on it. I wanted to see what I could do with it, show it to my friends and family, and maybe, if I liked it enough, grad school and employers. But then, I guess, while I'm doing it and clicking the preview button and seeing how it turned out, it didn't seem that professional, so I just – to me – so I just said, oh, let's get an A and get over it.

Once this user did everything she could to adjust the site's visual design to her liking, clicked "Preview," and was unhappy with the results, she did not maintain the level of engagement necessary to treat the eportfolio as a meaningful artifact. We later argue that flexibility in terms of visual design can help solve these issues. First,

though, we examine users' experiences with eportfolio functionality, including structure and content types, and explore how function, like form, affects how our case study participants interact with their eportfolios.

Functionality

When incorporating technology into the classroom, a great deal of energy is focused on teaching students how to use the technology. This is to be expected, as how a tool functions affects the ways in which its users can and choose to use it, and thereby what they take away from the experience. Indeed, if an eportfolio is difficult to use or has limited functionality, while it affords students the possibility of having a portfolio that can be shared across the web and present different types of content than a paper portfolio can, it also limits how students can and choose to express their skills, experiences, and broader identities. What's more, struggles with functionality are likely amplified by challenges associated with cultural adaptation, especially when particularly strong questions of cultural identity and cultural difference characterize every step of the process, as with international students.

Our participants reported that they received a great deal of technical help outside of the classroom when building their eportfolios. One participant said that the digital narrative component – a required digital video consisting of images, text, and videos that tells a story or represents some aspect of the author's identity – of the English ePortfolio requirements was the primary technical challenge of creating an eportfolio and consumed the greatest amount of time and resources, especially outside of the classroom. For both participants, time was a major issue, particularly given the learning curve of the associated tools. Although

strides have been made in the past several years to make the system for building eportfolios more intuitive, the participants' relative unfamiliarity with the Scholar (Sakai) software (as well as audio recording and video-editing software) combined with the time constraints of producing their eportfolios made them unable to do more than meet the basic requirements that their introductory English courses outlined for the project. One participant reported wanting to be able to customize her site more, but she felt her only option in doing this was to add more pictures because she "didn't know how to properly use the [rich-text editor]."

Further hindering our participants' ability to conceive of and use their eportfolios as more than class projects were technical malfunctions, namely with creating and uploading their digital narratives. After spending many hours receiving technical assistance in the InnovationSpace – an on-campus technology lab with dedicated assistants – one participant's video had no audio when she first attempted to upload it to the Scholar ePortfolio system. When combined with larger usability issues, technical issues like this inhibited our participants' ability and desire to consider their eportfolios as something they could use to generate an online identity, both during the project's initial development and continuously. Now, three years later, one participant's personal reflection page does not display the video that was her digital narrative. Our other participant's digital narrative video also fails to display, and her eportfolio is only one year old.

Difficulties with learning how to create an eportfolio and digital narrative and technical issues with producing and maintaining them were only part of the problem. Participants also reported that functional limitations of the Scholar ePortfolio system and English ePortfolio template contributed to their consideration of eportfolio as merely a requirement and their eventual abandonment of the project. While they considered the existing structure of the English ePortfolio page – which includes a pre-made header, horizontal navigation, and large content area for text, images, and video – useful, they expressed interest in being able to personalize the site with more layout and formatting options. For example, one participant described a desire to be able to have certain general content fixed on a left-hand bar. Currently, students can modify only: (1) the eportfolio's theme (i.e., which pre-defined header appears across the top of the page paired with a certain appearance for the navigation), (2) the designated content area (using a rich-text editor), (3) the layout of the content area (by selecting from preset layouts), and (4) the creation, order, and names of certain pages (but not where the navigation to those pages is located). Some English students have also created sample eportfolios using the eP@VT university-wide system, which provides more themes and the option of right-hand navigation.

While the selection of eportfolio themes has expanded within the past several years, students are still limited in the content they can modify as well as in the way much of the content is presented. Students have access to the source code of their content through the rich-text editor, but this is not useful for them unless they either already know how to use website markup or have enough time to teach themselves, which is uncommon. The participants reported that they only had time to make use of the rich-text editor's most basic functionality for text: changing font, size, color, and style. With every other aspect of eportfolio design being pre-defined in some regard, images and basic text formatting – confined to the designated content area – become the only ways in which students can truly customize the look of their eportfolios.

A further functional limitation is a lack of available content types. The case study participants did not seem to have considered other ways in which content could be presented, such as through slideshows, feeds from other sites, comment tools, etc. One participant said that she would consider an integrated private messaging system useful, however. A lack of diverse content types, technical issues, interface struggles, and layout and formatting limitations are the main problems with Scholar's ePortfolio functionality. These problems are intensified for students also struggling with cultural adaptation as they attempt to articulate an identity for themselves, increasing their tendency to feel overwhelmed by the project or "give up" on initial plans they had for their eportfolios.

Flexibility

Flexibility is an important characteristic of any technology. Flexible technologies allow for more diverse uses and accommodate the needs of more users. Most social media sites are flexible enough to accommodate different types of users. Twitter, for example, has been used for academic research, communication and social networking, conveying news, organizing groups of people, and much more. It accommodates these different uses not because it has a wide array of features (it does not), but because it is flexible and its affordances (retweeting, hashtags, PMing, etc.) do not funnel users into a particular form of use. Rigid systems, on the other hand, may have a significant number of affordances, but those affordances are more likely to direct usage in a certain way. We found the Scholar (Sakai) ePortfolio to be a particularly rigid system that does not readily accommodate different users and uses.

There are distinct advantages and disadvantages to an inflexible system. A rigid system, for example, can

make it easier for beginning users to create content without worrying about the wide array of options available to them. It can also, however, frustrate users of all kinds who want to do something that they find they cannot. Our participants expressed this frustration; they felt limited by the eportfolio system, though in different ways. It is precisely when the users became frustrated that they disengaged. As one participant told us, the rigid structure of the pages made her stop looking at each page individually and start simply filling in missing information: "At some point, it just became a fill-in-the-blank thing . . . just put something there because there was a blank page."

As English majors trained in understanding context and the rhetorical situation, our participants displayed a particular sharp eye for the value of flexibility. One participant, for example, noted that she would have liked more control over structure and navigation so that she could change her eportfolio for different purposes, including creating an online resume of sorts. Instead, she ended up simply linking to her resume on her Welcome page (Figure 4).

The lack of flexibility – or, in this case, the *perceived* lack of flexibility – prevented her from doing what she wanted to with her eportfolio. The result is that she began to disengage from her eportfolio as a meaningful artifact.

Flexibility is important both in terms of aesthetics and functionality. Our participants found the fixed navigation layout and site structure to be mostly positive. Rather, their biggest complaint about the functionality of the site was the lack of tools. They would have liked to have more content types and tools available to them. Our participants found uploading video to be time-intensive and glitch-prone, which left them with only images and text to convey their content. One participant noted a desire for private messaging/commenting, while the other suggested slideshows and other content types (which have since been added to eP@VT, though not to the English ePortfolio). Of course, users can turn to other sites,

such as social media sites, for these tools, but they are more likely to be invested in their eportfolios if these tools are available to them within the system. From their answers to questions pertaining to functionality, it is clear that our participants had not fully considered the possibility of having other content types and site structuring options available. But upon a moment's reflection, both participants were able to articulate a feature that they would have found helpful or desirable. These responses suggest that with more options for determining layout and content types, users will find more uses for and gratifications from their eportfolios and be likely to engage with them more fully.

Aesthetic flexibility likely means both a wider diversity of themes and more control over those themes. One participant expressed dissatisfaction with the selection of themes, noting that their homogenous look meant that "it's gonna be the same thing, with a different name on the top." "I would want it to represent my sense of design, my sense of style, of presentation," she went on to say. When asked how she could do that, she said that more control over the design of the theme – including the size of the content area, the background, the header banner, and so on – would allow her to customize her page. One participant also wanted the ability to change her portfolio for different audiences: "I might want to make it a little louder or a little simpler, [depending on] whoever the audience is."

This flexibility in design could be achieved with a WYSIWYG editor for themes. Blogger's "Template Designer" – which allows users to customize templates by changing background colors, layout, page elements, column size, and so on – could provide a model (Figure 5).

It is intuitive and easy to use, yet flexible. It allows users to choose from a wide array of templates, and then apply their own design ideas to the template. In other words, it circumvents the problems and frustrations our participants expressed: visual

Figure 4
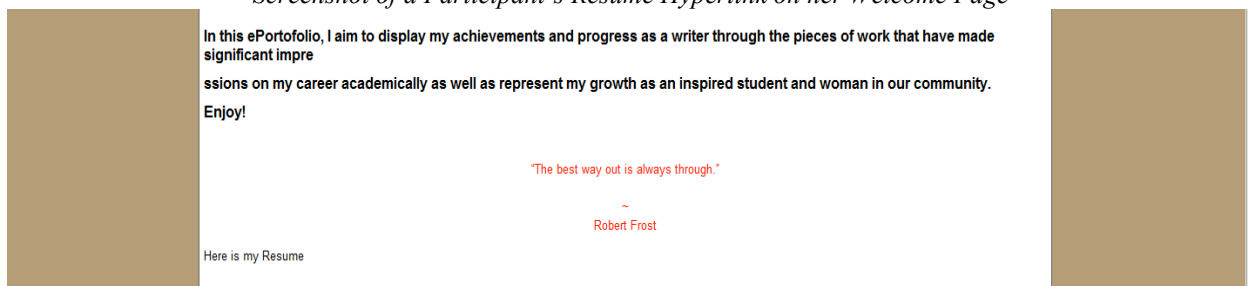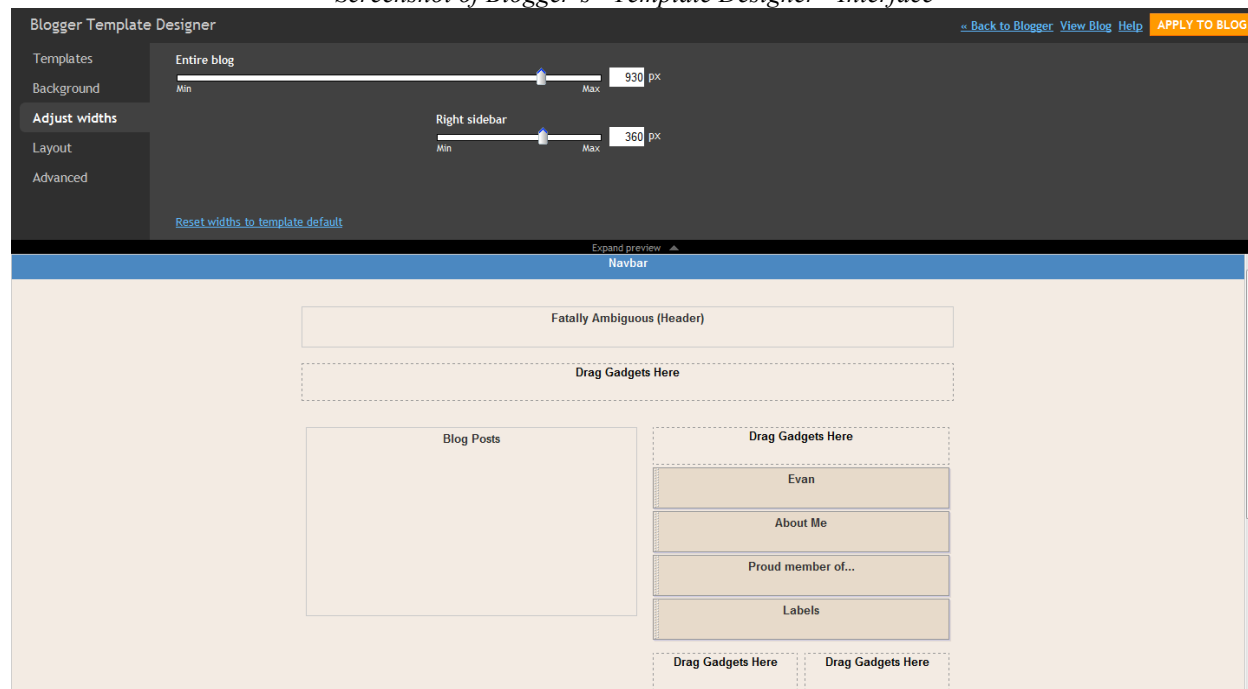*Screenshot of a Participant's Resume Hyperlink on her Welcome Page*

In this ePortofolio, I aim to display my achievements and progress as a writer through the pieces of work that have made significant impre

ssions on my career academically as well as represent my growth as an inspired student and woman in our community.

Enjoy!

"The best way out is always through."

~
Robert Frost

Here is my Resume

Figure 5
Screenshot of Blogger's "Template Designer" Interface

inconsistencies and an inability to customize themes for different audiences and purposes.

Our research suggests that the desire for flexibility is not culturally specific: other populations of users would benefit from a more flexible theme system and more tools. Rather, the rigidity of the Scholar ePortfolio system funnels users into particular forms of self-representation and communication that *are* culturally specific. In the next section, we explore what that form of self-representation looks like and how it functions for international student users.

Self-Representation

A final point of consideration in examining how international students use their eportfolios is the ways in which they self-represent through them. How students choose, craft, and manage their online identities is significant to approaching whether the tool they are using – in this case, eportfolio – is serving their needs. In turn, as students try to shape themselves with the eportfolio, the aesthetic and structural affordances and limitations shape them. Thus, there are two sides to the question of self-representation: what users are able to put into their eportfolios and what they are able to get out of them. International students – who may be grappling with questions and conflicts of cultural identity on a larger scale than are the majority of undergraduates – illustrate in a clear manner how the

eportfolio calls for a particular, culturally specific type of self-representation.

The first way in which we examined self-representation was in terms of how personal versus professional our participants' content was and which they reported emphasizing. While the requirements of the eportfolio assignment suggest that students use the platform for professional development, the degree to which they can share personal insights as opposed to exclusively professional attributes and connections is quite flexible. While different instructors may emphasize different characteristics that can sway students in one direction or another, their inclinations toward crafting a personal rather than a more professional eportfolio identity are also characterized by culture or struggles between cultures (among other influences that are beyond the scope of this paper).

Consider one participant's case: Michelle is a recently graduated English and Political Science double major from Korea. Michelle's content reflects her reported emphasis: personal. On her welcome page, she opens with an admission that she is questioned for her choice of major, incorporating questions, mentions of friends, and an awareness of self that gives her portfolio an immediately personal flair. Her description of her grandfather, her past, and her self paired with an apparently candid photo further the personal feel of her homepage – and thereby her entire eportfolio (since the homepage is the first page a viewer sees and forms the

initial impression of the site and its user). She incorporates a few details that can be seen as professionally oriented (and part of the eportfolio requirements), including why she chose to become an English major and some organizations in which she participates, but they are couched in a personal narrative. The personal emphasis is carried throughout her eportfolio, with the academic achievement page revealing her own feelings about the projects and disclosing insecurities in her showcase on growth. Both her academic achievement and showcase on growth pages share her discomfort with English grammar.

Michelle said that she approached the crafting of the content for her eportfolio from a personal perspective, but that this was because she was basing it on the models she saw. She said that the personal emphasis enhanced the clarity of her message – the identity she was trying to convey – and that she would consider incorporating it into her even more personal identity on Facebook in the form of a direct link if the page looked "prettier or more professional."

Our other case study participant reported emphasizing the professional in her eportfolio. Although her portfolio does reveal some personal details, they are situated within the overall projection of a professional identity (in contrast with Michelle's case). For example, when she expresses apprehension on her showcase on growth page, she follows with a narrative about having overcome that apprehension, thus turning the personal insight into a professional pitch. This participant reported an intention to keep her eportfolio professional given her discomfort in making her eportfolio more personal. As a major in the professional writing concentration and given the limitations she faced with time, the system, and aesthetics, she was most inclined to maintain an identity she was used to forming for the purposes of her coursework. Unlike Michelle, this participant felt that her eportfolio functioned as a different aspect of her online presence, one that was unlike her more personal presences, such as Facebook.

In both cases, though, our case study participants mark themselves as international students within the first few sentences of their introductions on their homepages, and much of their eportfolios are situated within the perspective of an international student. They are both candid about what makes their perspectives as international students unique, suggesting one way in which users at the crux of maintaining their original culture and adopting a new one may choose a middle ground, though how comfortable users are in this middle ground likely varies. Michelle seems quite comfortable with her situation between cultures. She reported not seeing the point of the direction page, but when one reads it, it seems to have come as easily as the rest of her eportfolio, indicating that she is able to maintain a cross-cultural identity even in situations of conflict.

Michelle has adopted an air of confidence in her identity in the midst of conflicting cultures; "I was just another international student who came to the States but I am quite different from everyone," she says on her synthesis page. Our other participant reveals insecurities with her cultural position in the past, and her personal reflection introduction describes her experiences having to establish and reestablish herself in the midst of cultural confusion. She admitted discomfort – especially with regards to her cultural position and eportfolio – by saying that she was relying on models because "as an international student, I was trying to fit in because I stood out so much already." She also admitted that she had hoped for more feedback on the content she had written before putting in on the page and "needed someone to tell me 'you're doing okay.'" Further, she reported that she was intimidated by the concept of the project and that fulfilling the requirements were enough of a goal for her.

Both participants said they relied heavily on models, but the results of their efforts to do so are quite different. Whereas Michelle relied on models to convey a persona that highlights her uniqueness and individualism, our other participant did so to convey a professional identity given a discomfort with the prospect of trying to self-represent with eportfolio. This latter participant indicated a particular tendency to rely on precedent, as she chose Blogger as her personal weblog because that was what her friends were using and Yahoo Photo as her photo sharing software because that is how she and her family share photos. When users are unsure about how to present themselves with eportfolio, they often will rely heavily on existing models. This is evident with our participants, but it can also be seen in the fact that most welcome pages of sample eportfolios listed on the English ePortfolio site contain a section about the user and a section about their eportfolio with an image or two and similar use of language. Almost every sample from 2010 has this home page format combined with an actual listing of each page and what it contains, a trend that goes back at least to two samples from 2008. Even the eportfolio models themselves reflect a strong tendency for students to imitate the ways in which other students have represented themselves with the system.

It should be noted, though, that these similarities between eportfolios emerge not only from models, but also from the affordances and limitations of the system. In particular, the rich-text editor funnels users into a particular form of self-representation. The blank space beneath the editor (see Figure 1) leads users to write a narrative, often about themselves and their academic progress. While that space can be used for different kinds of information (e.g., a profile, link list, etc.), text

(and, secondarily, image) are foregrounded, and the presentation of that text takes a backseat to the narrative. For instance, one of the researchers taught the English ePortfolio in a class, and of the 20 students to complete a portfolio, 19 wrote introductory narratives. Only one subverted the obvious affordances of the system to create a "profile" layout characteristic of a social networking site, with age and other personal information listed. We find the foregrounding of narrative to be problematic, considering our participants' experiences and struggles to self-represent as international students. Other, less narrative forms of self-representation may have given our participants, as well as other users, more flexibility to create different kinds of content.

Implications

To conclude, we'd like to make some tentative suggestions about how eportfolio systems can accommodate more diverse users' needs, including those facing similar dilemmas to our case study participants. While we imagine our primary audience is eportfolio developers—our interest is in the affordances and limitations of the technological system—our suggestions do have relevance for teachers and administrators, as well. In particular, we found the implementation of eportfolios to be just as important for our participants as the technological system itself. Many of the problems and limitations our participants reported had workarounds of which they were simply not aware. Of course, some of that responsibility falls on teachers, but some also falls on developers: if the workarounds are hidden, undocumented, and/or not intuitive, users (both students and teachers) are less likely to locate them or even be aware of their existence.

Our participants also suggested that the structure and content of eportfolio classes was crucial to whether or not they found the process (and product) useful. One said that the attached course, which she took her sophomore year, "came too early in my college career" to be useful. The other noted that the course would have been better attached to one on web writing and HTML. These observations are important for administrators and curriculum developers to take into consideration when developing eportfolio courses. Instructors, too, should consider carefully how much class time they dedicate to both technical and rhetorical aspects of the eportfolio. Both of our participants wanted more feedback and in-class opportunities for work, especially on video production, which was the most difficult for them to learn and gave them the most technical issues. One of the participants complained of a poor balance of teaching the technical skills associated with the English ePortfolio and teaching the content that would become a part of the eportfolio. This complaint played out in our participants' dissatisfaction with their resulting eportfolios: they were happy with the content they developed and wrote (often in other classes), but they were not happy with the final product—the synthesis of that content into an actual portfolio.

Given the issues addressed in this research, developers may wish to consider several expansions and modifications of the existing ePortfolio system at Virginia Tech and/or the larger Sakai initiative. The first is greater flexibility in users' ability to choose and modify colors and layouts, even with the ability to designate certain areas for their own background or header images. This level of flexibility would likely give users greater ownership over their eportfolio and increase the likelihood of them finding it to be a useful tool. Another suggestion is a greater availability of content types, examples of which may include feeds, widgets, wiki capabilities, an "ask" form, and ways of integrating their social media sites. In conjunction with flexibility of layout and design, these additions would help users personalize the look and functionality of their eportfolios, optimizing their usefulness. Further, if other sites students use are incorporated into their eportfolios, eportfolios become integrated into their online presence and can hold a more lasting and effective position in the development of their online identities. There are strong benefits to making the eportfolio a meaningful artifact from both pedagogical and professional development standpoints, particularly when you begin to hear from student users that they mostly abandon their eportfolios post-graduation.

What our case study participants were most dissatisfied with was the ineffective visual design of their eportfolios. There are two main ways to meet the visual design needs of more users: a wider variety of themes and more control over the presentation of those themes (such as through a robust WYSIWYG editor). The theme library of eP@VT is expanding (at the time of this writing, there were 22 themes available for any Scholar user), even as the themes for the English ePortfolio stay roughly the same. While some of those themes simply add small variety in the header banner, others provide different background colors and layouts. Importantly, several themes suggest elements of personal identity (e.g., a sports theme and a "green" theme), while others foreground the visual *ethos* of Virginia Tech (one looks identical to pages on the Virginia Tech homepage). This variety of personal and professional themes helps meet the needs of diverse users with diverse purposes. Our participants – whose needs ranged from creating a heavily professional portfolio to expressing a personal design sense and style – would have options to meet their needs. We see the expansion of the theme library as an encouraging step and hope that it continues to move in that direction.

That said, users have very little control over the presentation of their site beyond the content area. Everything that the theme structures (background, header, footer) is beyond the user's control. Our participant who wanted to express her own sense of design and style might become frustrated with this lack of control. Drawing from other WYSIWYG editors like Blogger's "Template Designer," we believe that an ability to control column width, layout of page elements, and so on, is an important affordance that would benefit more users. Some of these options (such as layout) are currently available, but they are not all located in the same place and are often extremely limited. Foregrounding and grouping these options together would help users who want to express themselves through the visual design of their eportfolios.

We should note that these suggestions are informed primarily by the authors' experiences interviewing to two international English majors at Virginia Tech. Our study would have benefited from more participants. It is recommended that future studies use a larger participant pool and experiment with different populations and methods. Our study is meant to be exploratory rather than definitive in nature, and much of our data comes from personal experience with English ePortfolio creation, development, and implementation. Additionally, ours is a unique institutional context, and Sakai as it is instituted at Virginia Tech (and particularly in the English department) is different from the myriad other eportfolio platforms currently in use. Our case study is not meant to make generalizable assertions about all eportfolio users, all Sakai users, or even all international student users of the English ePortfolio at Virginia Tech. Rather, it is meant to highlight issues of self-representation and student identity and how those issues intersect with one particular technological platform. That said, we believe the questions we pose and the revisions we suggest are valuable for anyone concerned with eportfolio development and practice to consider.

International student users face their own particular set of challenges representing themselves in a system when their particular cultural tendencies may not have been considered in its development. It is likely that the challenges facing international students – those struggling to represent themselves as they grapple with opposing cultural influences – are often magnified by the limitations of rigid eportfolio systems. While the recent expansion of themes and layout options is a useful first step, further changes like those we suggest above would likely benefit not only international student users, but any user: they would make the system more flexible to accommodate the needs of more diverse users.

It is important that we ask ourselves, as teachers and developers of eportfolios: what is our primary goal?

What would we consider a success in the development and implementation of eportfolios? Do we simply want students to go through the process and complete the assignment? Do we want students to learn the technology? Do we want them to produce something that we can use for assessment? While answers to this first question vary depending on institutional context and pedagogical approach, we think there's one answer all of us could embrace: we want students to *use* their eportfolios, to be *invested* in their eportfolios, to be *passionate* about their eportfolios. While there are a number of ways to achieve this, we believe our study indicates that the structure of an eportfolio system heavily influences how invested students are in their eportfolios – personally and professionally – and thus how they interact with them, as meaningful artifacts or simply as class projects. If we take the former as our goal, the burden is on us to make eportfolios as flexible, functional, feature-rich, and intuitive as we possibly can.

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