

# **Electronic Portfolios: For Assessment and Job Search**

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## **Introduction**

Electronic portfolios (eportfolios) have slipped silently into colleges and universities as effective assessment tools of student work. While originally conceived as methods for demonstrating student competencies and department as well as university commitment to learning, eportfolios are beginning to find their way into the world of work. This phenomenon poses interesting questions for business communication scholars and practitioners.

In the spring of 2005, my department initiated the first senior eportfolio program with three aims in mind: (1) to help students reflect on their experiences and areas of growth while at the university, in general, and in the Department of Communication Studies, specifically, (2) to assist members of the department in assessing program strengths while identifying areas for improvement, and (3) to provide qualitative measurements of student competency in four key areas defined by the university: oral communication, writing, information literacy, and quantitative literacy. The assessment aspects were well researched and planned. Students worked hard to create eportfolios that explicitly demonstrated oral and written communication skills as well as quantitative and information literacy. In designing the eportfolio assignment, I did not anticipate that students would take their eportfolios with them into the workplace, and I did not imagine employers would respond so favorably to the assessment-driven eportfolios. Most (29/56, or over 50%) students who shared their eportfolios with potential employers were offered a job (many on the spot), and many (10 students, approximately 35%) were either offered better jobs than what they applied for or were given jobs with expanded responsibilities.

Perhaps J.R. Young (2002) captures this professional notion of eportfolios, noting “an e-portfolio is an extensive resume that links to an electronic repository of a student’s papers, problem sets, pictures from study abroad stints, and anything else that demonstrates the student’s accomplishments and activities.” Young quotes students who believe eportfolios have promise for job searches and administrators and faculty who explicitly state that eportfolios are not intended “to be just souped-up resume[s]” but rather to “breathe life into the academic-advising process and help students reflect on how their disparate activities become a well-rounded education.”

In this paper, I will address briefly some of the history and theory of portfolios, describe my experiences with students, eportfolios, and employers, and then posit why eportfolios hold currency for today’s business environment. I will ground my discussion in practice and share some observations gleaned from interviews with students and employers. My comments here,

however, are preliminary. The novelty of eportfolios has not worn thin yet, and little research in this area has been completed.

## **Types of Portfolios**

Portfolios, particularly electronic ones, are generally categorized by purpose. Greenberg (2004) identifies three categories of eportfolios: showcase, structured, and learning. As the name implies, showcase eportfolios display their creators' best work: "Students' eportfolios are intended to personalize their learning experiences, share authentic examples of work that goes beyond the grades on transcripts, help students consider career goals, and demonstrate learning from non-classroom experiences" (p. 31). Structured eportfolios seem similar to showcase eportfolios; however, they are geared toward demonstrating compliance with established requirements, such as teacher education (for example, see <http://www.nbpts.org> as well as individual state board requirements) or individual school or classroom expectations. Learning eportfolios are "dynamic" because they reflect change and growth as students grapple with assignments, learning objectives, and experiences both in and out of the classroom. Learning eportfolios are highly personal. All three categories that Greenberg identifies are used within higher ed to evaluate student learning and achievement.

Showcase eportfolios are similar to professional portfolios that have a long history in some fields, notably art, graphic design, interior design, and advertising, among others. Generally, fields that require visual elements beyond what can be presented in a resume encourage and tacitly require portfolios from competitive candidates. Professionals in fields that expect portfolios learned to collect examples of their work for professional "show and tells," both for professional advancement as well as for company marketing. Prospective clients want to see examples of what designers can do before hiring firms to represent their interests.

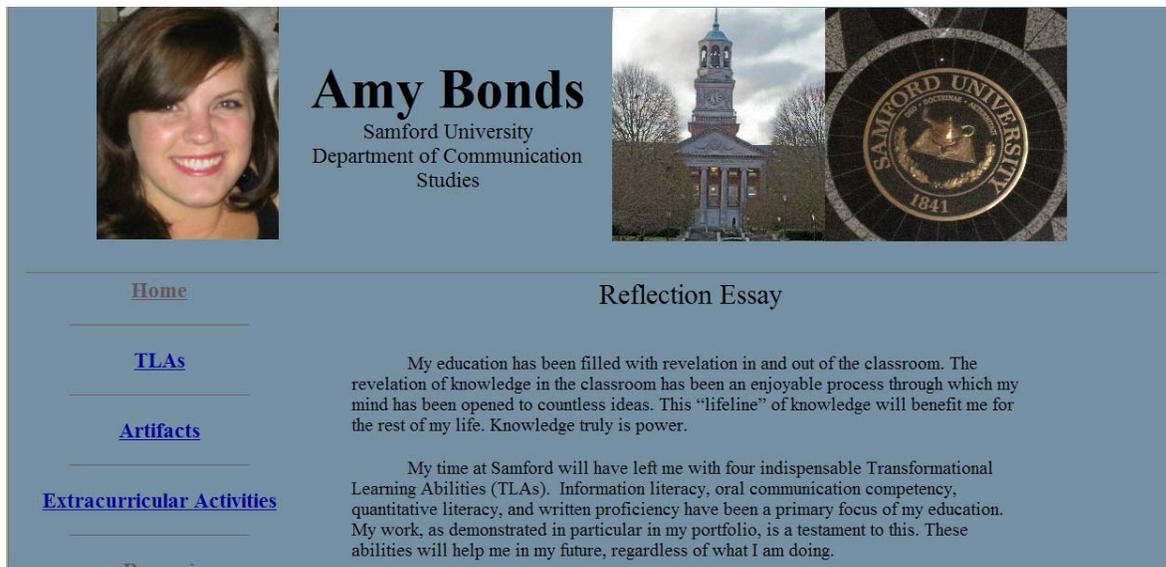
The value of portfolios is not lost on schools seeking to hire new teachers. Teaching portfolios are expected to contain sample lesson plans, including activities and assessment instruments for students, reflections of how and why the lesson plans are effective, statements of teaching philosophy that include plans for classroom discipline, and evidence of skill in using technology. Teaching portfolios are also important for promotion and tenure at the secondary level and are becoming more popular within higher ed. Community colleges routinely require comprehensive teaching portfolios that include all of the above plus syllabi and sample assignments from courses taught, and more universities are moving in this direction as a way of measuring and emphasizing commitment to teaching. Such eportfolios must "showcase" professional achievement and meet structured requirements.

Learning portfolios developed separately from professional portfolios and found strong advocates in composition studies, particularly as a way for students to practice writing process and to demonstrate improvement in writing skill. Reflection is critical to all portfolios, but especially learning portfolios. As Greenberg writes, "By exposing interactions among teachers, peers, mentors, and friends and by encouraging students to reflect on their changing understanding of what they are doing, learning eportfolios also provide opportunities for gaining a better understanding of how students think" (2004, p. 34). In building from Schon's (1983) earlier work, Yancey explains that through various types of reflection "we learn what we know

now, and we begin to understand what we need to learn next” (p. 143). Through reflection, students take ownership for their learning and develop cognitive self-portraits that can be refined and enhanced.

Over the last three years, I have directed the eportfolio project for the department, and during that time, I have retained emails and other correspondence from graduates. Because we are a small department (56 graduates over the last three years), we are able to maintain contact with most of our alumni (approximately 95% for the last three years). In addition to gathering information from such correspondence, I have interviewed four management-type individuals: two human resources managers (one from a large international corporation, one from a smaller regional organization) and two small business owners. Interviews were informal. None of the managers had hired students from my department, but all viewed at least one eportfolio prior to our discussion. Three noted they had hired other individuals based at least in part on an eportfolio.

This is a first effort at understanding the value of eportfolios for professional communication, specifically for employment, and I am interested largely in beginning conversations on this new genre of professional communication in order to assist students in preparing eportfolios that are more appropriate and purposeful for job hunting.



**Figure 1. Amy Bond's eportfolio homepage. Note the list of links to artifacts and "TLAs" or assessment criteria on the left side of the screen shot.**

## Description of Student Eportfolios

Students in the department of communication studies create eportfolios to showcase their learning in accordance with departmental and university requirements. The typical eportfolio contains one or two speeches, two or three papers, and detailed reflective components that provide context for each piece and communicate a theme that connects the disparate elements. Figure 1 contains an example of one student's homepage. Students are given flexibility in organizing the eportfolios, but each portfolio is required to have a minimum of four polished

artifacts in order to demonstrate competence in oral and written communication as well as information literacy and quantitative literacy. Amy Bonds, the student who created the homepage shown in Figure 1, selected the theme of knowledge as a powerful lifeline, and this theme is represented in the contexts she wrote to introduce each paper, speech, and extracurricular activity she included in her eportfolio. Although not shown on the screen capture of Amy's homepage, eportfolios must also include current resumes and artifacts that represent students' achievements beyond the classroom. Amy selected artifacts that showed her efforts as a math tutor and experience studying abroad. For the first two years, the eportfolios were burned on cds and were not available online. Beginning spring 2007, students used LiveText, an online eportfolio system, to create eportfolios that are viewed online and can be downloaded to cds. Importantly, these eportfolios are created primarily for student and departmental assessment; thus, students must include links to assessment criteria, as Amy does via the "TLAs" link on the left side of the screen shot.

While the eportfolios seem very structured, they reflect each student's unique talents and interests, and students who are uncertain as to what to do beyond graduation often find that the self-reflection that is crucial for creating an effective eportfolio can help them make explicit connections among their experiences within the classroom, their activities in student organizations (often as leaders of such organizations), and their roles as citizens outside the campus gates, thereby leading to vocational paths not previously considered. For example, Olivia Keaggy, a student who was unsure as to what she would do following graduation, recognized that over the four years she spent at the university, she had traveled at every opportunity and, importantly, was happiest when she was traveling. Furthermore, she recognized how frequent intercultural communication was a topic for her coursework. For example, the quantitative literacy page from her eportfolio, shown in Figure 2, explains her interest in examining culture shock she learned of as a leader for in the International Club and through her own personal travel. Olivia explored culture shock as a phenomenon in an empirical research project for her intercultural communication course, as indicated on the screen shot in Figure 2. As a consequence of her deep reflection, she began looking into careers that would allow her to travel internationally and is now leading tour groups to Africa.

Her eportfolio not only helped her to decide what she wanted to do, but it also helped her land the job: "I brought in my E-Portfolio and the COO of the company was blown away! She even brought the president of the company into my interview to show him. He was very impressed. I was shocked and proud! After she looked all through the portfolio, she told me that she thought I was qualified to take this position, rather than the one I was originally shooting for." Like Olivia, Amy was also offered a job with greater responsibility (and pay) based on the experience and skills she demonstrated through her eportfolio.

Both Amy and Olivia's experiences described above would be easy to dismiss as an exception rather than the norm, but half of our students report getting jobs or getting better jobs based in part on their eportfolios. Importantly, all of the students who mentioned eportfolios as contributing to their getting hired presented eportfolios that were designed specifically for assessment purposes. The question is why? What value do eportfolios created for assessment purposes have for businesses?

# Olivia Keaggy

*"We have a hunger of the mind which asks for knowledge of all around us, and the more we gain, the more is our desire; the more we see, the more we are capable of seeing." -Maria Mitchell*

<a href="#">Resumé</a>	<h2>Quantitative Literacy</h2> <p>Within the course, Research Methods for Communication Studies, I learned how to competently utilize quantitative information gained from the research project I conducted. Quantitative Literacy is competence in the skills involved in the effective production and utilization of quantitative information. It is used to describe, analyze, evaluate, discover, reason, persuade, make decisions, and solve problems. The artifact entitled "Love's Styles and Languages in Romantic Relationships" is a perfect example of this TLA. In this study, Gary Chapman's theory was investigated to find out whether the five love languages are conceptually distinct, and if there are any correlations between Chapman's love languages and Lee's love styles. Through this project, I learned how to effectively utilize information to teach and apply it to my own life. The other artifact used to show Quantitative Literacy is a paper I wrote while taking the course, Intercultural Communications. Throughout the course of the semester, our class was involved in a service learning project. I was involved with the International Club, also known as the "I-Club". After spending many hours with the international students on Samford's campus, I reflected on my experience which is displayed in the paper, "Stress and Culture Shock within International Students". This artifact discusses the struggles in which the international students may experience when entering into a culture other than their own. I also reflect on my time spent with the I-Club as well as discuss the importance of service learning to a student's education.</p> <p><a href="#">Love Styles and Languages in Romantic Relationships</a></p> <p><a href="#">Stress and Culture Shock within International Students</a></p>
<a href="#">TLAs</a>	
<a href="#">Written Communication</a>	
<a href="#">Oral Communication</a>	
<a href="#">Information Literacy</a>	
<a href="#">Quantitative Literacy</a>	
<a href="#">Home</a>	

Figure 2. Screen capture of one page from Keaggy's eportfolio.

## Eportfolios Versus Resumes

There is little argument that eportfolios are richer media than regular resumes—think outline versus visually rich, interactive website. While a resume provides information about degrees and dates as well as employment history and possibly a goal or impact statement, an eportfolio can provide links to the university that awarded the degree, possibly a transcript, descriptions of programs and courses, and in our students' cases, samples of course work.

When asked what employers found interesting in students' eportfolios, all four hiring managers responded with comments along the lines of "I get a better feel for who the person is" and "I can see real evidence of what this person has done and can do." The managers liked having evidence of oral and written communication skills as well as critical thinking ability.

It's no secret that employers value both oral and written communication skills, and eportfolios allow employers to see examples of both. Potential employers can see and hear students presenting material to a class or to a live audience. Most of our students accumulate impressive speaking experience beyond the classroom, usually with community organizations and nonprofit organizations, and all of our students create and present workshops for external audiences as part of their senior experience. In addition to seeing these presentations, potential employers can read examples of student writing, in a variety of styles. Every eportfolio opens to a reflective essay or letter that is somewhat informal and personal as well as personable. Voice is an important part of the reflection. From the reflection essay, viewers can access more formal papers that demonstrate critical thinking and research abilities. Most students also include artifacts from an internship

that demonstrate professional communication skills. For example, a student may include a fundraising letter or report written for a nonprofit group.

Interpersonal communication skill and the ability to work in teams are also desirable for most employers. These skills were stressed by three of the four managers interviewed. Through the reflective components and various artifacts, students can show the results of their collaborative efforts. Photographs or even recorded group presentations and meetings suggest effective interpersonal communication. The managers in this brief study noted that they could “tell a lot about someone by the way they come across in photos.” If the person in the middle is smiling and is surrounded by others, then the implication is “friendly, people-person.” In contrast, someone who is photographed on the fringe and who looks anxious, exhibits either no smile or only a feeble smile, communicates less extroversion and more introversion. These impressions are important for each of the managers interviewed. Usually such impressions are drawn from interviews only. In short, eportfolios that students create to satisfy departmental requirements, primarily for departmental assessment purposes, help potential employers see a richer, multi-dimensional version of student qualifications than can be conveyed through a resume, regardless of page numbers.

Employers are curious about prospective employees. Many companies admit to using Google to learn about prospective employees, and now many are searching social internet sites for information about individuals they are considering for interviews. Searching FaceBook, MySpace, Xanga, etc, has become somewhat the norm, and career counseling centers frequently caution students to think before posting pictures and comments that could negatively impact their post-graduate prospects. Some companies are also using such sites to identify and recruit strong candidates (Finder, 2006). All four of the managers interviewed for this exploratory project admitted to using such searches as part of the selection process.

Employers have access to more information and are interested in reducing the costs of hiring and retaining productive employees, and part of that equation is hiring the “right” people, ones who seem to “fit” the organization. Schneider (1987) posits that individuals within organizations, more specifically the behavior of those individuals, affect and even determine organizational culture through the process of “attraction-selection-attrition.” Specifically, “Over time, persons attracted to, selected by, staying with, and behaving in organizations cause them to be what they are” (p. 446). Individuals are attracted to organizations which they perceive will allow them to meet personal goals; similarly, organizations tend to select new employees who share attributes of other employees. New employees who do not share attributes (common beliefs, likes/dislikes, experiences) usually leave after a period of time. Saks and Ashforth (2001) found that it is important for organizations to find individuals whose personalities and values or ethics harmonize with those of the organization. In other words, organizations act to maintain cultural norms. Each of the managers interviewed for this study corroborated this finding. Each was interested in hiring only those who “fit the organization.” Friendliness and “people skills” were very important to all of the managers interviewed for this small study.

Organizational fit may be particularly important in small firms. In 2004, the Small Business Advocacy group estimated that 99.7% of the 23,974,500 businesses in the United States are small businesses, and more importantly, job growth seems to be concentrated in the small

business sector rather than in large corporations (Office of Advocacy, <http://www.sba.gov/advo/stats/profiles/05us.txt>). Many of these businesses employ fewer than 20, and the small group environment likely enhances the importance of group identity in order for employees to experience job satisfaction. As one of the small business owners stated, “I can’t afford to have someone here who doesn’t fit well and get along with the rest of us. We have to work as a team or we just can’t get everything done.”

In addition to finding individuals who fit the organization, recruiters also must find ones who fit the job opening. Cole et al. (2004) note that recruiters infer personality traits, such as conscientiousness or extraversion, from information gleaned from resumes, and used their inferences to determine whether individuals were not only qualified but also employable for certain job types: “applicants who were judged from their resume information to have high conscientiousness levels and who were interested in Conventional job openings (e.g., accounting, finance) received higher overall employability judgments than high-conscientious applicants interested in Enterprising jobs (e.g., marketing, human resources management)” (p. 366). Finding and identifying individuals who meet job requirements was particularly important to the two managers from larger organizations. Both organizations make substantial investments in training new employees, and both expressed the need to find prospective employees who would be able to complete the training successfully and who would have the personality types that would be satisfied with the positions: “People-people need jobs where they interact with others, but some people are happier when they have tasks that keep them in their office more. We have jobs for both. My job is to match people to jobs.”

In brief, eportfolios provide richer contexts for deriving information to help recruiters decide whether to interview applicants, but such ease and richness comes with risks. Given the media-richness of eportfolios, prospective employers are likely to make more inferences about individuals—instead of relying on activities listed on a resume (e.g., fraternity/sorority social activity organizer) to indicate whether the individual is extroverted or introverted, hiring managers can “see” how the individual behaves when giving a speech before an audience. The perception may be that the individual is more (or less) extroverted than he/she actually is. From the verbal as well as nonverbal cues, managers may gain greater confidence that their perception is accurate and thereby exclude certain individuals (whom they perceive to be too “different”) from interviews. In other words, eportfolios could be used to limit diversity within organizations, thereby affecting organizational viability. The social and professional risks and implications are substantial.

## **Implications**

Employers want to know as much as possible about prospective employees, and some, at least, favor eportfolios as a way to access valuable information. Individuals on the job market must discover what skills employers desire and, importantly, what counts as evidence of this skill. One value of the eportfolio is the opportunity to provide evidence of proficiency in a variety of areas. Thus, if an employer is searching for someone with strong public speaking skills, then an astute applicant will submit an eportfolio that contains examples that demonstrate excellence in public speaking. In other words, applicants may benefit from strong knowledge of company standards in order to understand better the specific rhetorical situation and to use that information to shape

the eportfolio, establishing criteria for what to include and what to exclude from the collection of artifacts.

Applicants are encouraged currently to research organizations in order to anticipate interview questions and to express interest in the organization. They are advised often by placement experts to display their knowledge of corporate leaders and corporate policy and culture in order to convey organizational fit. Eportfolios provide another venue for the expression of such interest. While prospective employees are advised to customize statements of purpose or goal statements on resumes, they will have more flexibility in customizing evidence on eportfolios. For example, if a candidate is applying for a marketing position at a tobacco company, the candidate would not use a speech from social policy class informing how tobacco companies misled the public in the 1960s. If the candidate also applies for a position with a health insurance organization, however, the speech could be helpful. This is a unique feature of eportfolios: evidence of skill can be tailored for each position applied for. Evidence does not equal employment history.

Current news reports frequently express concern over grade inflation and the variability in quality of institutions of higher education. Eportfolios are one way that some colleges and universities are working to verify academic integrity, and employers can use eportfolios to delve more deeply into applicant qualifications than is possible to do through resumes and transcripts. Rather than assuming a college graduate has strong writing skills, managers looking to hire new employees can request evidence. Such evidence may not provide absolute proof, but it offers employers more than they currently see.

Currently, most college graduates do not enter the job market with eportfolios, and thus, those who do stand out. One open question is whether this condition will continue. Given the curiosity of prospective employers, the growing attraction of social internet sites, and the assessment trend in higher education that is driving much of the eportfolio use in colleges and universities, I suspect that eportfolios will become more common in the hiring process. Just as my students use eportfolios to set themselves apart from others, as more institutions develop eportfolios, their graduates will also use them in job searches.

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#### Biography

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