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University of San Francisco

ELECTRONIC PORTFOLIOS AS LIVING PORTALS:  
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO COLLEGE STUDENT LEARNING, IDENTITY,  
AND ASSESSMENT

A Dissertation Presented to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
Department of Leadership Studies  
Organization and Leadership Program

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

By  
Celeste Fowles Nguyen  
San Francisco  
May 2013

# THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

## Dissertation Abstract

### **An Examined Life through Electronic Portfolios: A Narrative Inquiry into College Student Learning, Identity, and Assessment**

#### **Research Topic**

As universities increasingly utilize electronic portfolios, college students are asked more than ever to create ePortfolios for academics, assessment, or advising. This study shifts an analysis of ePortfolios from prior epistemological approaches, where ePortfolios have been explored as a tool to measure student progress, onto an ontological perspective, where they are a medium for new understandings about self and others. This research examines the influence of college students' electronic portfolios on learning, identity, and assessment. The broader intention of this study is to create a narrative of students' experiences with ePortfolios that integrates critical hermeneutic theory.

#### **Research Theory and Protocol**

The research protocol of this study is critical hermeneutic participatory inquiry (Herda 1999). Through an interpretive approach, new understandings of the topic at hand emerge from conversations with participants. The conversations are transcribed and analyzed in light of critical hermeneutic theory (Ricoeur 1984, 1992). This framework guides this research on understanding how ePortfolios encourage students to examine their past and imagine new possible worlds.

#### **Research Categories**

This research is guided by the categories of narrative identity (Ricoeur 1992), fusion of horizons (Gadamer 1988), and *mimesis* (Ricoeur 1984). Viewing the ePortfolio through

narrative identity highlights that one's identity, through constancy and change, can be understood as a story that is recounted to others. Fusion of horizons provides a framework for student learning that arises through experience, text, and conversation. Mimesis offers an approach to viewing a student's ePortfolio experience through a lens of past understandings, present experiences, and future hopes.

### **Findings**

The findings relate to the diverse experiences of conversation partners with ePortfolios, which served purposes related to advising and mentoring, or to present an academic identity to employers or faculty. These findings address 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, ever-changing world.

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been blessed with a wonderful and wise circle of support in my life during this dissertation project. I would like to extend my deepest appreciation to all the people who supported me during the process.

First, I want to express my gratitude to the faculty, staff, and students at the University of San Francisco School of Education. Most notably, I want to thank my advisor Dr. Ellen Herda. She has guided me through this dissertation process, and has opened my eyes to new ways of seeing the world. I am deeply appreciative for my dissertation committee, including Dr. Dan McPherson, Dr. Shabnam Koirala-Azad, and Dr. Maria Palmo, for their thoughtful guidance on my dissertation project.

I am grateful to my Stanford colleagues and friends for their continual support for my doctoral education. They have encouraged me to pursue my advanced degree, and inspired me to think creatively about my dissertation. I am especially thankful to the students at Stanford who participated in this project and opened up to me about their educational experiences.

My family is the cornerstone of my life, and that has been especially true during this dissertation process. Thank you to my mother and father, Dr. Joy Fowles and Dr. Jib Fowles, for continuous encouragement and wisdom. Their pursuits in education are an inspiration and have shown me what is possible. I am also deeply grateful to my brother Nate, who has supported me with unconditional kindness and endless enthusiasm during this endeavor, as with all others. Finally, words cannot express my gratitude to my husband Viet, whose unwavering patience, understanding, and love supports all that I do.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE**

“The self of self-knowledge is the fruit of an examined life.”  
(Ricoeur 1988:247)

#### **Introduction**

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 test scores and graduation rates (Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) 2011). The trend is prompted in part by accreditation agencies requiring more comprehensive evidence of learning, and professional organizations encouraging institutions to document learning outcomes (AAC&U 2011). Additionally, new pedagogical approaches encourage colleges to guide students in authoring their own learning (Baxter Magolda 2004). These influences in higher education have fueled growth in student electronic portfolios, or ePortfolios. The ePortfolio is presently understood as an online space for a student to share and reflect upon learning artifacts and academic experiences. Institutions utilize ePortfolios in a variety of ways at the student, class, and school level, to assess and encourage student learning (Green 2010).

Current literature often examines ePortfolios in a scientific or developmental light. For example, ePortfolios have been explored as a tool for assessment and reflection (B. Cambridge 2009; Ring and Ramirez 2012). In this study, the interpretive approach of critical hermeneutics offers new insights on ePortfolios within an ontological tradition based on ways of being. This research, based on the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur (1984, 1992), views the ePortfolio as a medium for student learning about self and world. New

understandings expand one's horizon, bringing about new ways of living, which Hans-Georg Gadamer (1988) conceptualizes as a fusion of horizons. This approach to ePortfolios provides educators and students with enhanced ways of understanding learning, identity, and assessment in higher education.

### **Statement of the Issue**

Universities adopt electronic portfolios to encourage and assess reflective student learning (B. Cambridge 2009; Zubizarreta 2009). These online portfolios provide a means for students to develop an integrated online narrative about their educational lives inside and outside the classroom. Traditionally, universities employ ePortfolios as an “assessment tool that aims to gather evidence of student progress and development in learning outcomes identified at the individual course, program, or institutional level” (Penny Light et al. 2012:xi). Assessment in higher education now often incorporates established learning outcomes (AAC&U 2010). However, the new assessment methods do not challenge the received paradigm of linear student learning. Electronic portfolio practitioners and researchers have thus far been oriented in an epistemological tradition relating to ways of knowing. A further change beyond learning outcomes is needed to examine a college education through interpretive concepts, which extend into ethical living. Ellen Herda (1999:71) observes that the ontological approach of critical hermeneutics, rooted in concepts of interpretation, understanding, and narrative, serves as the “basis for developing and evaluating our policies, our forms of education, or our communities.”

In this study, I examine how ePortfolios may influence student learning, identity, and assessment from a critical hermeneutic perspective. Specifically, I have research

conversations with eight selected students who attend Stanford University and have created ePortfolios. This research employs the following categories as inquiry directives:

- a. Narrative Identity: each person's identity is manifested in relationship to others and portrayed in a narrative;
- b. Fusion of Horizons: new understandings and ways of being emerge through encounters with people and texts;
- c. *Mimesis*: time is expressed through narrative, as the present moment mediates past experiences and future possibilities.

These research categories provide a foundation for exploring ePortfolios through an interpretive paradigm. This perspective allows for new ways of understanding the role of ePortfolios in a student's education, especially as they become more commonplace in the nation's universities.

### **Background of Research Issue**

While ePortfolios differ among institutions and programs, they share common features. Traditionally, ePortfolios have been used as an online tool or pedagogical process to encourage reflection and document student learning (Yancey 2009). The ePortfolio takes the form of an expansive student website, which is created by the learner over time to showcase and reflect on intellectual endeavors. Electronic portfolios commonly include an introduction page with a brief narrative of a student's life. There is often a blog, or online journal, with student entries on academic and extracurricular experiences. Students incorporate expressions of learning, such as papers or presentations. Occasionally there is a section to respond to prompts from advisors or instructors. In some cases, learning outcomes, defined by the institution, are specifically addressed. The online portfolios may contain a resume, which is expanded upon with essays addressing career goals and work experience. A comprehensive web-based

ePortfolio may include creative artifacts such as photographs, art, multimedia presentations, and music, in addition to student writing. Students control who may view their ePortfolio, such as an advisor or instructor.

The number of higher education institutions utilizing ePortfolios has more than doubled over the last decade. In 2010, almost 50% of both private and public institutions employed some form of ePortfolios (Green 2010). That number increased from 2003, when only 15% of private institutions and 25% of public institutions sponsored ePortfolio programs (Green 2010). Further, in 2009, only 4% of 433 institutions surveyed by the AAC&U were not considering ePortfolio programs for their university (Hart Research Associates 2009).

As institutions dedicate more resources towards ePortfolios, researchers have begun to study ePortfolios for learning and assessment. Most studies reflect views of instruction from traditional qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Peet et al. 2011; Lowenthal et al. 2011). These viewpoints examine student learning and identity on an individual, developmental basis. An interpretive perspective considers understanding of self through narrative and in relationship to others, which provides a basis for responsible living.

This study moves beyond epistemological notions of learning outcomes, where the ePortfolios are viewed as an object or linear process, onto the ontological world of being, where learning is more than an outcome. Learning is about living life through a search that has meaning for oneself and others. Placed in Ricoeur's (1991:425) wording, it is argued that life here would refer to a "story in search of a narrator." This interpretive

context offers an enhanced approach to learning that may better serve institutions and students in preparing for an ever-changing world that lies beyond the college experience.

### **Significance of the Issue**

The study of ePortfolios from a critical hermeneutic perspective enriches prior understandings informed by scientific paradigms. Moving from epistemology to ontology is the task of the critical hermeneutic researcher, as research shifts from description and analysis onto interpretation and meaning. Herda (1999:62) observes, “An orientation, on the part of the researcher, toward understanding and community is far more felicitous for field-based hermeneutic research than is an orientation toward mere explanation and the analytic tradition.” In an interpretive approach, significance resides in the nature of the topic of what one studies. 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 time through the narrative mode. In a more applied sense, an ePortfolio serves as a “living portal,” whereby students continually re-articulate their ideas of self, bringing about new understandings and an ethical aim. This builds on Kelly Carey’s (2007) concept of a “living text,” in which the author and viewer continually engage with a text over time for new meanings.

Concomitantly, learning, identity, and assessment are considered from an ontological perspective. Learning, viewed from the theoretical construct of fusion of horizons (Gadamer 1988), occurs when prior understandings are challenged through text, conversations, and experiences. This leads to understanding differently and acting

ethically in the world. Critical hermeneutic theory on narrative identity (Ricoeur 1992) emphasizes that identity relies on relationships with the other. This notion expands upon traditional notions of self-knowledge, and engenders the call for ethical living. Ricoeur's (1984) concept of mimesis shapes the relationship of time and narrative as a prefigured world, configured narrative, and refigured action (Herda 1999). Finally, assessment is addressed through an ontological perspective, where it is considered a way of learning, communicated through language, that relates to an authentic life. The significance of this inquiry into assessment may provide a fuller, and perhaps a more realistic, picture of learning. An interpretive perspective shifts the framework of learning from limited linear models onto ontological meanings, whereby new understandings about self and world translate to responsible living.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on electronic portfolios by uncovering new understandings about the meaning of ePortfolios in higher education. The implications may guide administrators, faculty and staff in developing ePortfolio programs that encourage interpretive notions of student learning.

### **Summary**

While there has been a shift by educators to expand notions of learning from grades to outcomes, the underlying paradigm remains developmental. A critical hermeneutic orientation extends beyond pre-defined learning, and looks at new understandings about oneself and others. Understanding the learning experience through ePortfolios could better prepare students for addressing challenges in a highly complex world. In Chapter Two, I review the literature that provides a foundation for this

dissertation, including ePortfolio Literature, Critical Hermeneutic Theory, and Anthropological Theory.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

Prior research reveals the current view of ePortfolios and education in a received epistemological orientation. The perspectives often rely on assumptions that student learning is developmental and education is linear. An interpretive viewpoint expands notions of learning onto an ontological view of students. Ricoeur (1992:145) notes that in the critical hermeneutic tradition, he never forgets “to speak of humans as acting and suffering.” This approach of viewing people as beings who act and feel, instead of subjects to be acted upon, may better equip educators for preparing students for the challenges of a non-linear, ever-evolving global society. Herda (1999:135) explains the critical hermeneutic perspective:

Learning is more an ontological activity than an epistemological activity. We do change, and consequently how we act can change. Risking our prejudgments is different than learning a new behavior. The act of learning does not happen in isolation; it only happens in a relationship with another, yet remains one’s own responsibility.

This Chapter takes a critical approach to previous literature in order to reorient the discussion of ePortfolios and student learning in an interpretive light.

This Review of Literature is in three sections. The first section is a brief introduction to ePortfolio Literature related to learning, identity, and assessment. The second discussion is on Critical Hermeneutic Theory that pertains to the inquiry of this topic, including narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis. Finally, the third section is on Anthropological Theory that relates to this research, including the work of the anthropologists Edward Sapir, Leslie White, and Clifford Geertz. This previous

literature provides a background on this study of how electronic portfolios may influence college student learning and living.

### **ePortfolio Literature**

#### **Student Learning and Reflection**

With the rise in ePortfolios 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 maintains an epistemological focus. Reflective practice in the prior research refers to a student reviewing past assignments and intellectual experiences. A gap in the literature is that it addresses ePortfolios in the received epistemological tradition focused on knowledge and skills. Student learning is often focused solely on the student, not relationships with others. This study will contribute to the existing literature by offering an interpretive examination of the student learning experience with electronic portfolios.

A developmental theory supporting the use of ePortfolios is that of self-authored learning, conceptualized by Marcia Baxter Magolda (2004). Self-authorship is considered a “holistic meaning-making capability,” whereby one internally, rather than externally, determines values, beliefs, and loyalties (Boes et al. 2010). According to the self-authorship theory, colleges best prepare students for success in the modern world by guiding them towards independently defining their own identity and learning (Baxter Magolda 2004). The model has an epistemological focus on understanding students’ ways of knowing what they know. This is combined with intrapersonal knowledge of one’s identity, as well as the interpersonal dimension of how one relates to other people

and critically takes various viewpoints into account. Electronic portfolios, containing student learning artifacts and reflections, are a way for institutions to encourage student's self-authored learning. Baxter Magolda's (2004) developmental, epistemological model supports the usage of ePortfolios for knowledge. This dissertation, however, will offer a look at the ontological role an ePortfolio may play in a student's life.

In 2006, Ali Jafari and Catherine Kaufman edited one of the earliest reference guides dedicated to ePortfolios. Jafari and Kaufman (2006) sought to encourage the use of the ePortfolio, which was in its early stages, and to disseminate research on the topic. The handbook focuses on the ePortfolio as a means for "transformation of learning systems," and addresses a range of ePortfolio technical and pedagogical issues, including case studies on teaching and learning practices (Jafari and Kaufman 2006:xxxiv).

Another comprehensive volume on ePortfolios, compiled in 2009 by John Zubizarreta, focuses on learning portfolios in the classroom for reflection and assessment. The book includes numerous articles on ePortfolios for "deep learning," whereby students compile work and write reflections on the knowledge they gained, thus providing faculty with insights on student learning (Zubizarreta 2009:xx). Zubizarreta (2009:xxvii) describes the ePortfolio as "a rich, convincing, and adaptable method of recording of intellectual growth and involving students in a critically reflective, collaborative [learning] process." The compilation provides an overview of the many traditional uses of ePortfolios in higher education.

Subsequent literature often focuses on ePortfolios to make learning connections inside and outside of the classroom through reflective practice. Helen Chen (2009) coined "folio thinking" to describe how students create learning portfolios for "fostering

coherence and making meaning” of their disparate educational experiences (Chen 2009:31). According to Chen (2009:31), the ePortfolio creates opportunity for “lifelong and lifewide” integrative learning. The ePortfolio supports the folio thinking culture, whereupon reflective practice aims to foster connections and encourage ownership of learning, while developing an academic identity (Chen 2009). The folio thinking concept is central to electronic portfolio literature and practice, which emphasizes the process of connecting various learning contexts.

Reflection, as a process and a text, is further researched in regards to how it relates to learning. Kathleen Yancey (2009:5) explored the concept of reflection at various institutions, where students “make knowledge by articulating connections among portfolio exhibits, learning, and self” to develop techniques for self-assessment “that they carry into life outside of and beyond educational settings.” ePortfolio programs aim to support a student becoming a “reflective practitioner who can synthesize multiple sources of evidence and make contingent and ethical sense of them” (Yancey 2009:5). Reflection is valued for contributing to self-assessment, knowledge creation, and identity as a lifetime learner (Yancey 2009:9). Yancey (2009:16) concludes, “reflection is itself a site of invention, a place to make new knowledge, to shape new selves, and, in so doing, to reinvent the university.” This approach varies from reflection in a critical hermeneutic tradition, where it is understood in terms of remembering and re-remembering one’s story in the world among others.

Other research explores ePortfolios as a framework for a student’s integration of distinct learning experiences. For example, in one study by Peet et al. (2011), comprehensive student learning was measured through a quantitative analysis, including

surveys of ePortfolio usage. The results led to a model of integrative learning, which highlighted four areas: adapting to differences to create solutions, understanding and directing oneself as a learner, demonstrating knowledge and applying it to new situations, and developing a professional digital identity (Peet et al. 2011). At the crux of these elements is the ability for students to become “reflective, accountable, and relational” learners who identify their own and other’s perspectives (Peet et al. 2011:15). The model was developed to provide an ePortfolio pedagogy for instructors based on statistical data supporting ePortfolios for learning. The scientific approach suggests that changing some of the factors would alter the results for student learning. This dissertation will take a different approach, viewing the student experience from an interpretive perspective.

Researchers have examined how learning is encouraged through reflection and distanciation. In prior literature, distanciation refers to the process of reflecting on a text or performance for new meaning. Helen Barrett’s (2011) reflection cycle describes learning as a circular process with stages before, during, and after the creation of then ePortfolio text. The ePortfolio facilitates self-knowledge through the cycle of reflection. Kimberly Ramirez (2011) contends that reflection and distanciation contribute to integrative learning. She researches ePortfolio pedagogy at a community college where students create ePortfolios and then publically present them to an audience. Ramirez (2011:2) writes,

Using the ePortfolio allows students to perform while simultaneously reflecting upon that performance. This meta-reflective distanciation makes possible broad integrations, like the association of work from courses completed over time, as well as periodic self-reflections, as in the case of archiving and assessing one’s own in-class presentations.

Barrett (2011) and Ramirez (2011) contend that with ePortfolios, a reflective distance is required for learning. In the interpretive tradition, distanciation is necessary for a critical analysis of a text, which creates a foundation for appropriation of new meanings (Herda 1999:93).

Prior literature offers current understandings of ePortfolio and student learning in the received tradition, where learning and reflection are defined in epistemological terms. Alternatively, in this study, learning is viewed through an ontological lens, whereby prior understandings are challenged through texts and experiences with the other, thereby expanding one's worldview. Through reflection of self and others, the past is refigured in order to move towards a world of possibilities.

### **Student Identity**

Another area of exploration in ePortfolio literature that relates to this study is that of student identity. Previous research includes an analysis of ePortfolios in relation to cultural and academic identity (Eynon 2009). Additionally, student identity is examined theoretically in light of the ePortfolio process (D. Cambridge 2009, 2010).

One area of identity connected to ePortfolios is that of a student's home and school culture. Bret Eynon (2009) examines how ePortfolios relate to students understanding of their personal culture and the academic culture of the institution. LaGuardia Community College in New York City implemented a wide scale ePortfolio project for the student population, of which over two-thirds immigrated to the United States (Eynon 2009:59). The students navigate "intersecting boundaries of nationality, race, gender roles and expectations, language, religion, economic class, and educational background" (Eynon 2009:59). They are primarily the first generation in their family to

attend college, and from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The ePortfolio provides a forum for these students to view their cultural horizons along with new ones. Eynon (2009:59) portrays the ePortfolio as a way for students to “overcome fragmentation and build integrated new identities as learners, adults, and citizens.” The ePortfolio encourages students to bridge their home culture and academic culture.

Darren Cambridge (2009) contends that the online representation of a student in an ePortfolio includes two parts of identity, which he terms networked and symphonic. The networked self is flexible, reflective, and relational. It is the part of the student that reflects on choices and makes connections between courses and disciplines (D. Cambridge 2009:42). On the other hand, the symphonic self has more permanence and captures the “integrity of the whole,” which “articulates a sum of experiences and has an overall coherence.” The symphonic identity is stable, as it “articulates enduring commitments and systematic understanding” (D. Cambridge 2009:42). The concepts of networked and symphonic self offer a nonlinear way of viewing identity.

D. Cambridge (2010) subsequently examined ePortfolios and identity. He encourages institutions to help students convert their sense of identity into moral responsibility, noting that schools should “commit to helping students craft identities that reflect their own values and equip students to put that self-understanding to work in their communities and the rest of the world” (D. Cambridge 2010:ix). There is a social nature to ePortfolios, in which “previously inchoate identity and commitment are clarified and put into action” (D. Cambridge 2010:66). Further, he makes the point that to be known, one’s unique nature must be expressed in a “public appearance.” People display identity through a public means, which is then received by each viewer differently (D. Cambridge

2010:65). D. Cambridge highlights that the ePortfolio offers a means to publicly express oneself authentically.

Another area for exploration in D. Cambridge's book is the ethics of authenticity in regards to ePortfolios. D. Cambridge (2010:13) notes, "we do not really understand our unique selves or participate fully in life until we express our natures." The self, according to D. Cambridge (2010:13), "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" (2010:13). For D. Cambridge (2010), ePortfolios encourage expression of authentic selves.

Identity in the received research is often defined in developmental ways or only in terms of the student themselves. D. Cambridge's (2010) approach expands the notion of student identity from developmental approaches, onto a more interpretive view, yet it still relies primarily on the self. An ontological approach will further expand upon the understanding of identity to highlight the understanding of self with and for others. Identity does not exist on its own; it is shaped in relationship to others. In an interpretive tradition, learning and identity both involve new understandings and change in relationships, providing interpretive possibilities for assessment.

### **Assessment**

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. The traditional notions of assessment limit



learning to established outcomes. In this study, a critical hermeneutic approach opens up further possibilities for student learning and assessment.

Institutional assessment practices have often been researched as case studies. Patrick Lowenthal, John White, and Karen Cooley (2011:65) develop an approach for student assessment and program evaluation in teacher education programs. In their case study, the institution created a gate system, or “stages in each program where students must successfully pass a portfolio review to continue on in the program.” Alycia Shada, Kevin Kelly, Ruth Cox, and Savita Malkik (2011) examine ePortfolios for a culture of assessment in a collaborative project between San Francisco State University and the City College of San Francisco. They employ the metaphor of horticulture to explain an “ePorticulture,” where ePortfolio culture is planted as a seed that grows among students. The case studies examine the need to engage stakeholders in developing learning goals at the institution, program, and course level. The research builds on Kelly (2010), who provided a conceptual map of the various institutional objectives to consider in ePortfolio assessment.

Tracy Penny Light, Helen Chen, and John Ittelson (2012) examine assessment practices through ePortfolios, with an emphasis on documenting learning. They distinguish learning defined by the institution and by the student. In student-owned ePortfolios, individual goals are incorporated, instead of institution-mandated learning outcomes. These ePortfolios are formative in nature, capturing student interests and providing the institution with a look into meaningful learning experiences (Penny Light et al. 2012). Penny Light et al. (2012:98) posits, “students should follow a mastery orientation to learning, rather than a performance goal orientation aimed.”

Implementation guidelines are examined, such as creating an ePortfolio, developing a reflection cycle, and enacting assessment practices (Penny Light et al. 2012). The book is directed towards a faculty audience who use ePortfolios in their classrooms.

Another example of assessment practices with the electronic portfolio is at Clemson University, where ePortfolios are required for graduation. Gail Ring and Barbara Ramirez (2012) examine how ePortfolios are utilized to assess general education requirements. The purpose of the program is to “build a mechanism through which core competencies can be both demonstrated and evaluated” (Ring and Ramirez 2012:87). Their theory of change includes inputs, such as the ePortfolio requirements and software; outputs, including the activities and participation; and outcomes based on short, medium, and long term goals.

Throughout much of the prior literature, the assumption remains that student learning should be measured through established objectives. Research that supports student authored learning retains a focus on knowledge over being. 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.

The third section of the Review of Literature, Critical Hermeneutic Theory, is based on my research categories. The section provides an ontological view of identity through initial discussions of narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis.

## **Critical Hermeneutic Theory**

Critical hermeneutics provides an interpretive lens to explore the learning and understanding that may unfold through the ePortfolio. The three research categories that inform this study include Ricoeur's (1992) concept of narrative identity, Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1988) description of fusion of horizons, and Ricoeur's (1984) theory of mimesis. These critical hermeneutic concepts provide open-ended insights for assessing student learning and identity.

### **Narrative Identity**

Narrative identity, conceptualized by Ricoeur (1992) in *Oneself as Another*, maintains that personal identity is known through narrative of self in relation to others. Through narrative, one emplots, or creates a cohesive story, out of life events. Ricoeur (1992:148) posits, "it is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character." Narrative identity mediates the enduring and temporal characteristics of self, while also relying on the dialectic of self and others. Through narrative, one may live life with a greater sense of ethical aim. The theory provides a lens to explore how students express their sense of self in the world through the ePortfolio process.

Narrative identity distinguishes *idem*, the part of identity that remains constant, and *ipse*, which changes (Ricoeur 1992). *Idem*, or sameness, captures the core elements of personhood that are recognizable over time (Ricoeur 1992). This includes enduring qualities, such as one's history and culture. *Iipse*, or selfhood, reflects both relationships with others and changes to self (Ricoeur 1992). Ricoeur (1992:119) explains that narrative identity comprises a person's identity "in the manner of a specific mediator between the pole of character, where *idem* and *ipse* tend to coincide, and the pole of self

maintenance, where selfhood frees itself from sameness.” In other words, narrative reveals personal identity through the dialectic of permanent character and temporal selfhood.

In addition to *idem* and *ipse*, narrative identity can be further understood through relationships between the self and the other. Ricoeur (1992:3) observes, “selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other.” Herda (1997:37) further explains, “the identity of self in terms of individualism cannot do justice to the nature of the self when self is understood in terms of other. Otherness is constitutive of the self.” Narrative identity is who we are in our story among other characters. Identity relies on the other just as it relies on self.

Narrative identity also extends into ethical action. By understanding oneself through narrative, one’s actions are interpreted in term of ethical implications. Ricoeur (1992) considers ethics as the aim of an accomplished life. Ethics are socially oriented and involve esteeming others. Ricoeur (1992) differentiates this from morals, which are the individual articulation of ethics based on self-respect and acted upon through norms. The self-understanding of narrative serves as the basis for living an authentic life. Ricoeur (1992:172) notably describes ethical intention as “aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions.” Thus, narrative and ethics are closely intertwined. Expressing life through narrative may lead to new understandings, or a fusion of horizons.

## **Fusion of Horizons**

When an individual's viewpoint expands through exposure to unfamiliar people, cultures, or texts, a fusion of horizons occurs. Gadamer (1988) conceptualized fusion of horizons to explain how our understandings change through exposure to the unknown. When horizons merge, our current horizon expands to incorporate concepts that were once foreign. Gadamer (1988:272) explains, "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." When a fusion of horizons takes place, learning occurs. Herda (1999:129) explains that learning is much more than what can be measured with a grade. She writes,

Learning must go beyond the score to include understanding as well as a change in our present and our history—a fusion of horizons that happens when we make our own what was once alien. This action, however, does not take place in solitude. It is a social act in concert with another.

Learning is a fusion of horizons in relationship to others. Our horizons are composed of prior understandings.

Each person comes to a text or conversation with prejudices, or pre-judgments, from their history and tradition. Only through an ongoing process of challenging past understandings does a fusion of horizons take place. Gadamer (1988:273) contends that, "An important part of this testing is the encounter with the past and the understanding of the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past." Gadamer (1988) emphasizes that prejudices should not be dismissed; instead they should be tested critically through interpretation of texts and questioning tradition. Further, this historical consciousness is expressed through language.

A fusion of horizons, and all understanding, takes place in language. Language is not simply a means to communicate; it is the world in which we live. Gadamer (1988:401) observes, “language is not just one of man’s possessions in the world, but on it depends the fact that man has a world at all.” Language both limits the possibilities of understanding and opens one up to the world. Gadamer (1988:340) highlights, “the fusion of horizons that takes place in understanding is the proper achievement of language.” Gadamer’s ontological approach stresses that the hermeneutical concepts of language, understanding, and meaning are as important as life itself. Viewing language as an event that shapes understanding provides a framework for exploring a student’s expressions through an ePortfolio. Moreover, a student’s expressions are also time-related, which can be viewed through mimesis.

### **Mimesis**

Ricoeur’s concept of mimesis informs the student experience of creating a narrative in an ePortfolio. Mimesis explains the relationship between time and narrative, which Ricoeur (1984:53) refers to as “the mediating role of emplotment between a stage of practical experience that precedes it and a stage that succeeds it.” Through the three stages of mimesis, past understandings and future imaginings come together in action in the present. Mimesis<sub>2</sub> is where the creation of narrative, or emplotment, takes place. It mediates mimesis<sub>1</sub>, based on a view of history, and mimesis<sub>3</sub>, where an imagined future resides. Kearney (2002:4) summarizes the relationship of mimesis to narrative identity; he explains that when you tell your story, “you recount your present condition in the light of past memories and future anticipations. You interpret where you are now in terms of

where you have come from and where you are going to. And so doing you give a sense of yourself as a narrative identity that endures and coheres over a lifetime.”

Mimesis<sub>1</sub> explains tradition and past experiences. According to Ricoeur (1984:54), it is “grounded in preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character.” Herda (1999:78) refers to this stage as “a world already figured.” The hermeneutic concept of mimesis is founded in Gadamer’s (1988) notion that we are all historical beings, as identity is based in time. We come to each situation with a unique past that shapes our understandings. Mimesis<sub>1</sub> refers to our past, while mimesis<sub>2</sub> takes place in our present.

In mimesis<sub>2</sub>, narratives are constructed to make meaning of prior understandings and an envisioned future. The purpose of mimesis<sub>2</sub> is “to conduct us from the one side of the text to the other, transfiguring the one side into the other through its power of configuration” (Ricoeur 1984:53). Emplotment, or the process of expressing life events through narrative, allows us to move towards a hopeful future. Ricoeur (1984:64) observes that mimesis<sub>2</sub> “opens the kingdom of the as if.” Herda (1999:78) describes mimesis<sub>2</sub> as “a narrative configured.” People act in the current moment towards the imagined future.

Imagination and a hopeful future reside in mimesis<sub>3</sub>. Our idealized version of the world is what we strive towards. Mimesis<sub>3</sub> “marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader” (Ricoeur 1984:71). The possibilities of the world opened up by the text leads to action in mimesis<sub>3</sub>. A text may range from a book to an action, or from a conversation to a culture. Mimesis<sub>3</sub> is a “refigured action” (Herda

1999:78). The imagined future takes place in the present, where action unfolds towards a world of possibilities.

In the next section, I examine how anthropological theory relates to an interpretive study of ePortfolios.

### **Anthropological Theory**

The critical hermeneutic orientation of this dissertation has a foundation in anthropology. Some 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 posited that language shapes perception. Sapir's student, Leslie White, 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, where symbolic action could be analyzed for meaning. The contributions from these early anthropologists inform an analysis of ePortfolios.

### **Edward Sapir: Meaning and Language**

Sapir (1884-1939) was a linguist who contributed to the field of anthropology in regards to language and meaning. He studied American Indians and their languages in the United States and Canada, theorizing that different languages indicated different systems of perception. In other words, "linguistic categories structure and transmit culturally learned perceptions of existence" (Moore 2004:98). For Sapir, language revealed the relationship between individuals and their society, indicating the cultural existence of a people. Unlike anthropologists before him, Sapir observed individual



variances in viewing a culture, recognizing that there was not a singular view (Moore 2004).

In *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (1949), Sapir brought together anthropology and linguistics for a general audience. Sapir (1949:4) wrote that language serves a “non-instinctive, acquired, ‘cultural’ function.” Further, speech “is a human activity that varies without assignable limit as we pass from social group to social group, because it is a purely historical heritage of the group, the product of long-continued social usage.” He argues that language refers to thoughts and perceptions more than objects. Sapir (1963:104) contends that society is not static, but instead “is being reanimated or creatively reaffirmed from day to day by particular acts of a communicative nature which obtain among individuals participating in it.” Sapir’s anthropological theories explore how language relates to meaning, which sheds light on how a student’s language in an ePortfolio relates to how they see the world. His emphasis on language contributed to later interpretive anthropology.

Sapir and his student Benjamin Whorf developed the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which “posits a relationship between the categories of meaning found within a language and the mental categories speakers of that language use to describe and classify the world” (Moore 2004:88). In the hypothesis, the semantics, or meaning, of the language is as important as the structure of how a language is communicated. By examining linguistic expressions in ePortfolios, we can better understand a student’s culture and meaning.

Sapir’s theories were criticized by later anthropologists, who challenged his notion that language shapes thought. However his legacy was that he “made the study of

the cultural construction of meaning a central issue in anthropological theory” (Moore 2004:100). Sapir’s theories also shifted the focus in anthropology from the structure of language to the meaning behind the words, a concept that translates well to an analysis of ePortfolios and informs interpretive research. While Sapir’s theories emphasized meaning over structure, critical hermeneutic philosophers expressed an ontological view of language. Martin Heidegger (2008) and Gadamer (1988), for example, contend that language is more than just structure and perception; it is actually a medium that creates the world in which we live.

### **Leslie White: Technology and Culture**

White (1900-1975) was a functional anthropologist who studied under Sapir. White differed from his contemporaries by developing a general theory of all culture, while at the time many anthropologists focused on specific societies (Moore 2004). White’s functional theory of cultural evolution, referred to as the “layer-cake model of culture,” describes culture in three tiers (Erickson and Murphy 2008:143). The bottom layer, and the most important, is technology and economy; the middle layer includes social and political organization; and ideology represents the top layer. White (1971:366) contends, “the technological system is basic and primary. Social systems are functions of technologies; and philosophies express technological forces and reflect social systems. The technological factor is therefore the determinant of a cultural system as a whole.” White (1971:366) argues, “We are now in possession of a key to an understanding of the growth and development of culture: technology.” White (1971) maintained that technology was the most important element of culture, and was the foundation for sociological and ideological systems. To White (1971), technology provided the

structure a society needed to survive, and it also determined a culture (Moore 2004). White provided an approach for viewing technology and culture in the functional anthropology tradition.

White's central tenant of the importance of technology in culture provides one perspective for viewing the role that ePortfolio technology can play in an academic culture. The structures of a society shape the culture, according to White. He argued that "technology was the bedrock of cultural development" (Moore 2004:185). The electronic portfolio is a structure that may shape a culture of reflection and learning. This is similar to Chen's (2009) notion of "folio thinking," which refers to a culture of reflective student learning that is encouraged by the ePortfolio technology. White's functional theories highlight the importance of technological systems in culture. During his career, his theories were criticized for their general nature of applying to all cultures and overemphasizing technology. The structuralist focus that characterized White's work was challenged by the later interpretive anthropologist Geertz.

### **Clifford Geertz: Culture as Text**

Geertz (1926-2006) differs from earlier anthropologists like Sapir and White because of his interpretive perspective. Geertz theorizes that culture can be viewed as a text in which behaviors are analyzed symbolically. Geertz observes that culture is demonstrated publicly in order to have meaning. Erickson and Murphy (2008:162) describe this as a "cognition-focused perspective," which "depended on the social circulation and ritual performance of symbols." The emphasis on semiotics, or the cultural meaning of symbols, relates directly to Geertz's ethnographic approach, where he explores culture not as "an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive

one in search of meaning” (Geertz 1973:5). Geertz (1973) views culture in an interpretive light, where the meaning behind symbols matter more than the structural system. Geertz (1973:10) also contributed to anthropology through his concept of “thick description” in ethnography, in which layers upon layers of data and meaning are interpreted. Geertz’s approach to anthropology contributes to critical hermeneutic participatory research.

Geertz’s attention to symbolic meaning can be applied to ePortfolios. For Geertz, culture itself is a text. Therefore “culture, this acted document...is public” (1973:9-10). In the ePortfolio literature, D. Cambridge (2010) emphasizes the importance of a student demonstrating experiences publicly through an ePortfolio, as a true reflection of authentic identity. Additionally, Ramirez (2011) views the ePortfolio through the metaphor of theater, where students publicly perform for an audience. The public element of ePortfolios, including signs and symbols, is a key part of the learning that a student experiences. From a semiotic perspective, an analysis of ePortfolios provides insight on the student’s culture since the student publicly shares artifacts to communicate meaningful elements of their lives. Geertz’s interpretive anthropology gives a symbolic perspective to understanding ePortfolios and provides a foundation for participatory research.

### **Summary**

This Chapter provides a background on ePortfolios, and the theoretical paradigms that shape this study. Within ePortfolio Literature, I present the prior constructs of the ePortfolio. Additionally, Critical Hermeneutic Theory is described as it relates to an interpretive research orientation and an understanding of a student’s education. Anthropological Theory is explored in terms of its implications for interpretive theory

and a study of ePortfolios. In the next Chapter, I explain the Research Theory and Protocol for this dissertation.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH THEORY AND PROTOCOL**

#### **Introduction**

I conducted my study through participatory critical hermeneutic research, as outlined by Herda (1999). Herda (1999:86) explains that participatory inquiry “allows us to recognize, challenge, and evaluate our worlds of action as well as to envision new, possible worlds.” Through the critical hermeneutic approach, new understandings of the topic at hand emerge from conversation. Herda (1999:90) asserts, “if we bring to light our prejudices and fuse our present horizon of understanding with new understandings from the histories of others, we are in a better position to make policy, curriculum, and management decisions.” This interpretive framework guided my research on understanding how ePortfolios may encourage students to refigure their past and imagine new possible worlds.

My 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 theoretical orientation of critical hermeneutics provides a meaningful way to explore the ePortfolio experience, shedding light on new possibilities in education. An interpretive approach will provide deeper ways of understanding the human experience compared to prior literature based on scientific traditions. This Chapter includes sections on my research categories and questions, data collection and analysis, as well as the research site, participants, and timeline. Additionally, I provide an overview of my research pilot project. I conclude with a background of the researcher and summary.

## Research Categories and Questions

In critical hermeneutic participatory inquiry, the theoretical categories guide the dissertation research. The research categories that inform this study on electronic portfolios are narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis. These three research directives guide my data collection and analysis, including the questions for my research conversations. The questions served to direct the conversation and lead to new understandings about ePortfolios and student learning.

Narrative identity, conceptualized by Ricoeur (1992), highlights the significance of expressing our lives through stories. Identity can be known through relationships, as the other “has the role of providing what one is incapable of procuring by oneself” (Ricoeur 1992:185). Emplotting life experiences through narrative leads one to new understandings about self, which changes the way one views others. The following questions guided my conversation with research participants in regards to narrative identity:

### Category: Narrative Identity

- a. Tell me a story about sharing your ePortfolios with others. How did it change your way of looking at the world?
- b. How did the process of creating the ePortfolio direct your idea of who you are?
- c. How have you changed through the process of creating an ePortfolio?

In addition to narrative identity, fusion of horizons guided the research for this study. Gadamer’s (1988) concept of fusion of horizons provides a hermeneutical approach to understanding learning. A horizon incorporates traditions and historical consciousness. Through conversation with an individual or the interpretation of text, one’s ways of knowing can potentially expand. 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:

Category: Fusion of Horizons

- a. Tell me a story about something that you came to view differently through creating the ePortfolio.
- b. What did you learn through the process of creating the ePortfolio that you did not know before?
- c. 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. Mimesis provides an interpretive lens to view the ePortfolio process, as it explains the relationship between time and narrative. Ricoeur (1984:52) contends, “time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.” 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:

Category: Mimesis

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

In the next section, I review how data was collected for this research.

**Data Collection**

Data were primarily collected through research conversations. In critical hermeneutic participatory research, Herda (1999:123) contends, “each person needs to be



open to each other, truly accept the other's point of view as worthy of consideration, and understand what is said." Research conversations may provide new ways to interpret ePortfolios.

I invited eight Stanford University students during May and June 2012 to speak to me about their experiences with ePortfolios (see Appendix A: List of Conversation Participants). Upon their approval, I recorded the conversations, and then transcribed them. The students had the opportunity to review, edit, and delete any sections of the transcription. The transcribed conversations provided the primary source of data for this research. In some cases, electronic portfolios were a secondary data source that complemented the research conversations. Finally, my personal research journal, kept in an ePortfolio, provided a source of data collection.

### **Data Analysis**

In critical hermeneutic participatory research, the data analysis protocol follows specific steps. Herda (1999:98-99) outlines the stages for data analysis, which includes the following:

- a. Record and transcribe conversations with participants;
- b. Identify significant statements and categorize according to themes;
- c. Examine themes and important ideas in light of critical hermeneutic theory;
- d. Offer opportunity to participant for continued conversation utilizing the transcribed text;
- e. Discuss the research topic through critical hermeneutic theory;
- f. Determine implications from the conversation text.

These steps were carried out through the theoretical categories of narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis. After collecting the data, as described above, I transcribed the conversations. The transcription fixes the conversation in a text, thereby creating distancing from the conversation. The transcribed text is the basis for analysis. Herda (1999:86) maintains, “research analysis discloses a possible world from the texts—the medium in which we understand ourselves.” My analysis represents the appropriation step, where I interpret meaning through the critical hermeneutic theories.

### **Research Site Information and Demographics**

Electronic portfolios are becoming more commonplace to encourage and capture learning on college campuses. Therefore, a university is an ideal place for research conversations. The research community for this study is comprised of students from Stanford University who created ePortfolios. Electronic portfolios at Stanford are utilized primarily in pilot programs and in a decentralized manner. Some faculty members in the School of Engineering, for example, are experimenting with ePortfolios. The Diversity and First Generation Office partnered with the Career Development Center and Office of the University Registrar to offer an ePortfolio pilot program called Shadow Alums in the Real World, or SHARE. Another program piloting ePortfolios is Partners in Academic Excellence, which serves students as part of an expanded advising program, and is co-sponsored by the Stanford community centers, including the Black Community Services Center and El Centro Chicano, the Latino and Chicano student center. Experimental pilots are characteristic of the environment at Stanford University.

Stanford University was founded in a pioneering spirit by Leland and Jane Stanford in 1891. They established a coeducational, non-denominational university to

educate the citizens of California, which was groundbreaking for their time. The spirit of innovation remains a legacy of their vision. Silicon Valley, a place of technology inventions, has grown up around Stanford. Stanford's location situated in the heart of Silicon Valley encourages experimentation, especially with technology. The University, with over 15,000 students and on over 8,000 acres, is a highly decentralized organization. Decisions are made in various units throughout the University, such as within the different schools and departments. There are almost 2,000 tenure-line faculty and close to 10,000 staff members. The large and diverse faculty, student, and staff populations create an extremely complex organization.

### **Entrée to Research Site**

As an Associate University Registrar at Stanford, my professional role provides an entrée into the research location. The Registrar's office is developing an enhanced electronic transcript, which will be a more comprehensive student record with links to course descriptions, capstone projects, faculty biographies, and other educational information. The enhanced transcript project is closely related to electronic portfolios, as they both provide creative ways of demonstrating student learning and achievement. I have worked with staff on the ePortfolio initiative, which has provided me with an entrée to Stanford University as a research site.

### **Research Conversation Participants**

The University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) approved my dissertation proposal on March 29, 2012. The IRBPHS approval number is #12-044 (see Appendix B: IRBPHS Approval). Additionally, the Stanford University Vice Provost for Student Affairs consented to my

use of eight Stanford students for my research conversations on March 21, 2012 (see Appendix C: Stanford University Consent).

The participants for this study included selected Stanford University students who created electronic portfolios. Students partaking in different ePortfolio programs were contacted and asked if they would like to participate (see above-mentioned Appendix A: List of Conversation Participants). A letter of invitation was sent to each person, clearly outlining that names will not be anonymous (see Appendix D: Letter of Invitation). If the student agreed, he or she was asked to share their reflections on creating an electronic portfolio. Afterwards, I sent the student a thank you letter with the conversation transcript for review and approval (see Appendix E: Thank You Letter).

The eight Stanford students who participated in my research conversations are presented below. The photographs are included with permission from the student's electronic portfolios. Of the eight participants, two are male and six are female. I invited an equal number of male and female students to participate in the study, and four males originally responded that they would participate. However, due to final exams and travel schedules, only two of the males committed to participating in the research. The students in this study are introduced below with their academic and personal interests, as well as with a description of their electronic portfolio involvement.

### **Jennifer Bundy**

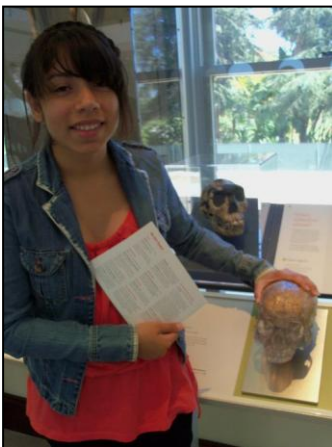
Jennifer is a class of 2012 master's student in the Stanford University School of Education, studying in the Learning, Design and Technology program. She graduated from Syracuse University with a bachelor's degree in music education. Before Stanford, she worked in Los Angeles at the California Science Center. During her master's



**Figure 1: Jennifer Bundy**

program, Jennifer served as an ePortfolio manager for the expanded advising programs, where she worked closely with the Stanford community centers. She partnered with the centers, including the Black Community Services Center and El Centro Chicano, to incorporate ePortfolios into the curriculum. Jennifer maintains her own personal ePortfolio, as well as an academic ePortfolio and a research blog.

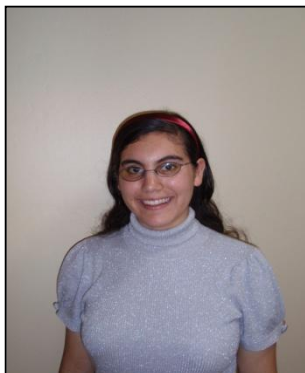
### **Angelica Ceja**



**Figure 2: Angelica Ceja**

Angelica was born in Mexico, and has spent most of her life in California. She is class of 2015 at Stanford, and is interested in majoring in Biology. Since she was a child, Angelica dreamed of working in medicine. Angelica mentors other students, including high school students in East Palo Alto during the academic year, and migrant students in the summer at University of California, Los Angeles. During her freshman year, Angelica joined a multicultural sorority. She created her ePortfolio as part of the Partners in Excellence Program, based in El Centro Chicano.

### **Michelle Grau**



**Figure 3: Michelle Grau**

As a young girl, Michelle was inspired by Sally Ride to become an astronaut, a dream she is still pursuing by following Sally Ride's footsteps at Stanford. Michelle is class of 2013 and majoring in Mechanical Engineering. In addition to engineering,

she spends her time pursuing a variety of interests, including robotics, gymnastics, martial arts, and teaching. Michelle started her ePortfolio as part of a summer engineering research project to track progress and communicate with her professor overseas.

### **Mary Harrison**



**Figure 4: Mary Harrison**

Mary Harrison, class of 2015 at Stanford, is interested in educational policy and school equity. She intends to major in Public Policy. Mary writes news articles for the student newspaper, tutors community members learning English, and works on campus at the Stanford Social Innovation Review. Mary has lived all over the country, spending her high school years in Wisconsin and graduating from a high school in Connecticut. During her freshman year,

Mary created two ePortfolios as part of pilot programs. One ePortfolio was for an economics course, and the other was for SHARE, the alumni mentoring program developed by the Diversity and First Generation Office, Career Development Center, and Office of the University Registrar.

### **Calista Kelly**



**Figure 5: Calista Kelly**

Calista Kelly is a class of 2012 master's student in the Policy, Organization, and Leadership Studies program in the Stanford University School of Education. She served as a mentor to students in the Black Community Services Center Ernest Johnson Scholars program. Calista both created her own ePortfolio and

reviewed the ePortfolios of her mentees. She is originally from Georgia and graduated from Paine College. After her undergraduate degree, Calista pursued graduate studies in English at Middlebury College. Her interests include language, teaching, and theater. In 2012, Calista will start a Ph.D. program in Teaching, Learning, and Culture at Claremont College.

### **Qudus Lawal**

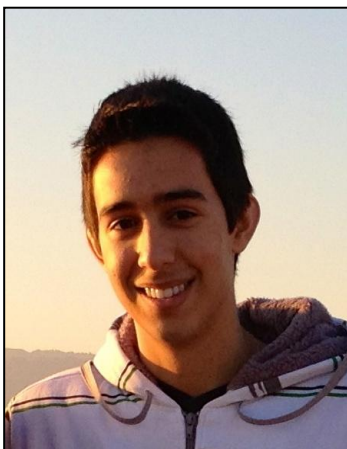


**Figure 6: Qudus Lawal**

Qudus Lawal, class of 2014, grew up in Nigeria. After finishing high school, he moved to New York City, where he completed his high school equivalency exam. He subsequently attended community college while working full time. Qudus, who was at the top of his class academically, earned a scholarship to cover college tuition and expenses.

He subsequently applied to Stanford, and was admitted as one of the few transfer students. He is interested in chemical engineering, with a focus on renewable energy technologies. His goal is to assist developing countries like his home country of Nigeria. Qudus created an ePortfolio as part of the Ernest Johnson Scholars Program in the Stanford Black Community Services Center.

### **Joshua Mendoza**

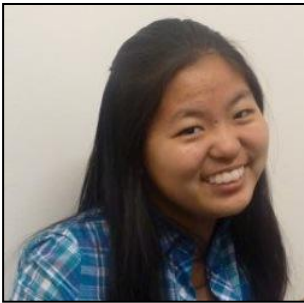


**Figure 7: Joshua Mendoza**

Joshua Mendoza grew up in Palmdale, California. He attended a high school funded by the Gates Foundation, where he was able to complete an associate's degree at the same time as his high school diploma. Joshua remains closely connected to his high school by visiting

counselors and students, creating a school website, and teaching a test preparation class. He is passionate about making education accessible to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, especially in the science, technology, engineering, and math fields. He is also interested in creative technology that incorporates engineering and the human experience. Joshua is a member of the class of 2015, planning to major in engineering. He created an ePortfolio through the Partners for Academic Excellence program in El Centro Chicano.

### **Susan Nitta**



**Figure 8: Susan Nitta**

Susan Nitta, class of 2015, attended high school in Palo Alto, on the other side of town from Stanford. Her interests include music and engineering. At Stanford, she participates in the orchestra, volunteers for robotics competitions, and plans to major in Mechanical Engineering. Susan worked for the ePortfolio initiative, where she created an extensive ePortfolio and explored it as an option for other students.

### **Timeline**

This dissertation research and writing took place from spring 2012 to spring 2013. I conducted research conversations with students at Stanford University during May and June 2012. After that, I transcribed the conversations. My data analysis took place through summer and fall 2012. The first draft of my dissertation was completed in February 2013.



## **Research Pilot Project**

My pilot research project allowed me to try my guiding questions and theoretical categories. Through the pilot, I was able to learn more about conducting research on ePortfolios, and to understand better critical hermeneutic research.

### **Background of Conversation Participant**

I invited Michelle Warner, a junior at Stanford University, to participate in my pilot research conversation (see Appendix D: Letter of Invitation). In the letter of invitation, I provided her with an overview of the research orientation, my guiding questions, and protocol for the pilot. Michelle captured her academic, personal, and professional experiences and reflections with great detail in her ePortfolio (see Appendix F: Michelle's ePortfolio—Employment). Michelle's extensive experiences with an ePortfolio made her an excellent person to approach for a pilot research conversation.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

#### **Introduction**

Michelle and I discussed her ePortfolio through the research directives of my study. In her ePortfolio, themes about narrative identity emerged, as she learned about herself through expressions towards another person. Michelle also experienced a fusion of horizons about herself and her world, through reflections and interpretation of text. Finally, Michelle's past, present, and future experiences were viewed via mimesis. Our conversation (see Appendix G: Conversation Transcription with Notes) provided data for an analysis (see Appendix H: Pilot Data Analysis and Presentation) of ePortfolios and their role in student learning, identity, and assessment.

## Narrative Identity

Ricoeur's (1992:180) concept of narrative identity holds that we establish our identities by expressing our narratives in relation to the other. Michelle created her online portfolio for academic and professional purposes. She shared her personal narrative, noting that in addition to a resume, the ePortfolio is “where I get a chance to explain my story so that someone understands better the details of who I am.” Sharing her narrative identity through an ePortfolio was challenging for Michelle, as it required reflective self-assessment. In her ePortfolio reflection, Michelle noted, “I’ve thought and wrote a lot about myself trying to distill the experiences that I’ve had in my life into some kind of coherent string of thoughts. It’s extraordinarily difficult.” Creating an ePortfolio narrative required reflective thought and meaning-making.

Through Michelle’s ePortfolio, the narrative she constructed mediated her core elements of sameness and selfhood. Ricoeur (1992:123) explains that narrative identity balances, “on one side, the immutable traits which this identity owes to the anchoring of the history of a life in a character, and, on the other, those traits which tend to separate the identity of the self from the sameness of character.” Michelle’s *idem* includes her core qualities about herself, including her analytical, detail oriented nature, manifested in engineering and sewing (see Appendix I: Michelle’s ePortfolio—Sewing). Her *ipse* was revealed in the transformation from her academic and work experiences that have influenced her understanding of herself and her world. The ePortfolio captured her learning and offered a way for her to reflect on her experiences for new understandings, or a fusion of horizons.

## Fusion of Horizons

Fusion of horizons provides insights into learning. Gadamer (1988) conceptualized fusion of horizons as the new understandings that unfold through engagement with texts or people. Herda (1999:135) applies this to learning, contending, “actual learning occurs when we change and fuse our horizons with something different and in the process become different.” Michelle experienced this deep learning through the ePortfolio, as she evaluated her prior knowledge and explored how separate parts of her life were related. For example, the ePortfolio process encouraged Michelle to make connections about different experiences, such as the similar processes of creation in engineering and sewing. She explained her realization, noting that, “sheet metal is like sewing with metal. You have something flat and it has to become three-dimensional somehow.” The ePortfolio also gave her a space to show the evolution of her learning, such as the increasing complexity of her design sketches during a course (See Appendix J: Michelle’s ePortfolio—Engineering Design).

The ePortfolio provided a means for reflection and self-understanding. Richard Bernstein (1983:144) contends, “learning from other forms of life and horizons is at the very same time coming to an understanding of ourselves.” Michelle reflected on her skills in the ePortfolio. She contemplated that from writing about leadership, “I have a better way to answer that question in the future. And to think about all these areas of my life I’ve had to exhibit leadership. I can bring that together with an overarching theme that makes my thoughts coherent and eloquent.” Michelle articulated her leadership ability better after writing about it. The reflection created the context for a critical evaluation of previous knowledge in order to develop new understandings.

## Mimesis

Mimesis informs a student's experience with ePortfolios, as students incorporate past experiences and future dreams through the present, in the ePortfolio text. The stages of mimesis explain the role that an ePortfolio can play for a student connecting life stories to past and future.

Mimesis<sub>1</sub> is where history and tradition reside. Ricoeur (1984:52) states, "textual configuration mediates between the prefiguration of the practical field and its refiguration through the reception of the work." This came through in my conversation with Michelle, as she reflected on past experiences, such as her leadership positions (see Appendix K: Michelle's ePortfolio—Leadership). She wrote in her ePortfolio reflection, "since writing these essays, I have discovered a lot about leadership...what I've discovered over time is that ... leadership can mean being with people, caring about people and using that caring to guide them." Through consideration of her past in her ePortfolio, Michelle developed her sense of ethical leadership.

The act of narration in the present, or mimesis<sub>2</sub>, connects past and future, thereby creating a sense of time. Ricoeur (1984) contends that time is not merely marked by days on a calendar; rather, it is how we shape life events into meaningful narrative. Michelle noted that the ePortfolio "encouraged me to pursue opportunities that allow me to utilize the skills I have from sewing and I have from classes. To integrate engineering and sewing together." By connecting her experiences through narrative, Michelle realized that she wished to work in a field that incorporated both her passions of sewing and engineering.

In the imagined future, mimesis<sub>3</sub>, we are propelled towards our vision of an ideal world. Ricoeur (1984:71) posits that mimesis<sub>3</sub> “is the intersection, therefore, of the world configured...and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality.” Michelle examined the future in the process of creating an ePortfolio. She explained, “I made some connections between activities that I’ve done and the implications they might have in terms of internships, jobs, future, those kind of things.” Michelle noted that the ePortfolio “incorporates what I can do and what I am capable of.” She displayed her proudest academic achievements and reflected on her past experiences, assessing herself in the process.

### Summary

Through the ePortfolio, Michelle expressed her personal story, which led to new understandings about her identity. These new views allowed her to apply her sewing and engineering skills towards a reimagined future, integrating the two interests. The learning that she experienced can be understood as a fusion of horizons, as her prior knowledge was expanded through interpretation of the text. Reflections of the past and hopes for the future were incorporated in the present through the creation of a narrative, which was interpreted through the framework of mimesis. The new understandings that emerged through our conversation suggest implications for my dissertation research as well as ideas for ePortfolio practitioners.

### **Implications**

My pilot study affirmed a critical hermeneutic approach to studying ePortfolios, as the theoretical categories provided enhanced understandings of the ePortfolio process. With growth of ePortfolios in higher education, new ontological ways of examining

ePortfolios may provide a richer exploration of how ePortfolios relate to a student's college education. Traditional epistemological approaches are limited in their view of ePortfolios as a tool or process. These approaches are often focused on metrics and statistics. The implications in the received tradition are frequently restricted to learning, identity, and assessment as defined by the institution. An interpretive approach involves seeing oneself in the other. The implications of this study include reconceptualizing ePortfolios from an interpretive perspective, where students participate in their own learning, and refigure their lives and world through narrative.

My initial findings from the pilot offer potential implications for ePortfolio programs. Fusion of horizons as a theoretical framework for ePortfolios provides educators with a deeper way of viewing student learning than established learning objectives. An interpretive view of learning involves challenging one's own pre-judgments and placing oneself in the other's perspective. The new understandings reached about ePortfolios from an interpretive perspective may inform faculty and administrators about utilizing ePortfolios for different type of assessment, where traditional notions of education are reinterpreted. Assessment in a critical hermeneutic tradition refers to students participating in refiguring their world through narrative and carrying the new understandings into action.

Critical hermeneutics moves from traditional notions of analysis onto that of interpretation and understanding. This ontological approach, in the traditions of Gadamer and Ricoeur, extends from the world of knowing, onto the world of being. This distinction has practical implications in education, by suggesting that we enrich our understanding of self and others by expanding horizons through genuine dialogue and

openness, and viewing oneself as another, in the words of Ricoeur. This shift from epistemology to ontology changes our understanding of “being-in-the-world” (Gadamer 1988:401). In light of narrative identity theories, participation and conversation about ePortfolios may bring about new possibilities of ethical living.

### **Reflections on Pilot Project**

In my pilot research conversation with Michelle, I field-tested my theoretical categories and guiding questions. The categories related well to the experience of creating an ePortfolio. My questions, however, needed some revision, as they were too direct about identity. When I shifted the conversation to stories about how Michelle understood herself, more concrete examples of self-understanding emerged. Additionally, I realized more clearly upon reflection of the pilot conversation the distinction between the ePortfolio as a document and as a process. For example, Michelle considered her future throughout the process of creating the ePortfolio, but not in the content itself. This helped me realize the many levels at which the theories may apply, from the text of the ePortfolio to the process of creation.

In my pilot study, I utilized the following research questions.

#### Category: Narrative Identity

- a. How has your ePortfolio influenced your sense of identity and understanding of yourself?
- b. Did the ePortfolio lead you to making connections between different parts of your life that you had not considered before? How so?
- c. What was it like for you to create a representation of yourself in the ePortfolio to share with others?

#### Category: Fusion of Horizons

- a. What have you learned through your ePortfolio? How have any of your prior understandings or knowledge changed (or not)?

- b. What kinds of conversations did the ePortfolio lead to, and what understandings came about from those conversations?
- c. When you return to your ePortfolio now, do you have different insights on the content than when you first created it? How has your view of it changed?

Category: Mimesis

- a. In what ways have you incorporated your past experiences into the ePortfolio?
- b. How have you incorporated future goals in the portfolio?
- c. Has the ePortfolio led to any action for you? Something you would not have done otherwise?

After the reflection on the pilot conversation, I revised the guiding questions in each category to those found in the Research Categories and Questions section of this dissertation.

Through the pilot study, the value of using critical hermeneutics also emerged. The theoretical categories of narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis offer rich perspectives on student learning. Narrative identity provides a different framework for identity than the linear approaches of developmental theories. Narrative allows us to understand ourselves through others, and to connect the permanent and changing elements of identity. Fusion of horizons provides a paradigm for the deeper learning that emerges from new understandings through texts and conversations that challenge our prior thinking.

**Background of Researcher**

My personal interest in learning and identity through the ePortfolio is a culmination of professional and academic experiences. In my professional career as an Associate Registrar at Stanford University, I am involved in the development of the enhanced electronic transcript. The new transcript will be a robust student record with



links to additional information, such as artifacts of learning or course descriptions (Nguyen and Kallman 2012). The enhanced transcript will integrate with a student's electronic portfolio to showcase a comprehensive educational experience. Through this work, I have familiarized myself with ePortfolio literature and participated in ePortfolio professional organizations, which has exposed me to the growing uses of ePortfolios in higher education.

Additionally, my academic interests have always involved understanding narratives, such as the ones students capture in their ePortfolios. As an undergraduate, my senior thesis was a cultural history of how a nautical story changed over time. In my master's program, I explored college presidential leadership through storytelling. As my professional and academic interests have evolved over time, I am now interested in the potential power of ePortfolio narratives for students to understand themselves and the world in new ways.

### **Summary**

Electronic portfolios have emerged on college campuses as a means to capture learning, encourage reflection, and promote assessment. The application and research on ePortfolios has thus far been rooted in scientific paradigms, where education is constructed as a linear, measurable concept. This research studies ePortfolios from an interpretive construct, where learning is a creative act based in language and understanding. My research shifts an analysis of ePortfolios from the received view of ePortfolios as a tool or linear process, onto that of ePortfolios as a medium for learning, understanding of self through others, and critical hermeneutic assessment. This

interpretive view enriches understanding of ePortfolios, as the student experience extends through the living portal of the ePortfolio into ethical action in the world.

In Chapter Four, I present the data that I collected from research conversations, in light of critical hermeneutic theory. A narrative of the student experience with electronic portfolios is presented.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **DATA PRESENTATION**

#### **Introduction**

Designing an ePortfolio can be a deeply personal experience for students, as it is an online expression of identity for others. The students I spoke to in research conversations created ePortfolios for various purposes and for different people. Some were crafted during the transitional first year of college, in order to share one's history and hopes with a mentor. These ePortfolios show an authentic side of students' lives that included personal challenges. Other ePortfolios showcase interests and achievements for advisors, faculty, and peers. Some of the ePortfolios were completed as part of a course, while others were integrated into research projects or special programs. In each of these scenarios, the research participants considered their lives, created a cohesive story, and put it online in a creative fashion for a specific audience.

As Kearney (2002:5) explains, in the communicative act "every story shares the common function of someone telling something to someone about something. In each case there is a teller, a tale, something told about and a recipient of the tale." This central feature of storytelling also applies to ePortfolios. In my conversations with the students, I sought to understand the meaning that ePortfolios carried in their lives. As a higher education administrator and critical hermeneutic researcher, I utilize an interpretive approach to examine how ePortfolios influence students, which in turn can inform educational practices in universities.

In this Chapter, I present a narrative based on the data from my research conversations and personal reflections. After speaking with the selected students, I

transcribed the dialogue into a text, creating a distance from the original conversation. Herda (1999:127) writes that “this presentation is a text that tells a story....The object is to configure a totality out of scattered events.” From the transcriptions, I appropriate new meaning in light of three theoretical categories. The student narratives are emplotted in this data presentation through sections on narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis. In addition to the transcribed conversations, data from my ePortfolio dissertation journal are incorporated.

The themes in this data presentation include: 1) ePortfolio as an expression of personal identity in concert with others; 2) new understandings of self and assessment through ePortfolios; 3) past, present, and future configured in ePortfolios. The data intertwines among research categories, creating a fluid narrative for understanding ePortfolios in a critical hermeneutic light. As mentioned earlier, Ricoeur (1992:172) characterizes ethical intention as “aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others in just institutions.” This concept of ethical aim emerged throughout the conversations and research categories. The first section of this Chapter emplots the data related to the theory of narrative identity.

### **Narrative Identity**

It’s allowed me to reflect on who I am,  
and my relationship to other people.  
(Angelica Ceja, conversation participant, June 12, 2012)

When I began my research, I imagined that the reflective practice of creating a personal narrative in the ePortfolio would influence students to see their lives in new ways, and in relation to others. However, the conversation transcripts reveal that the production of an ePortfolio alone was limited in its meaning for students. A prevalent

theme in the research was that engaging with others about the ePortfolio held deep significance. During my first week of conducting research conversations in May, I wrote in my dissertation journal, “Some themes jump out at me already—how an ePortfolio relates to a student’s relationship with the institution, and how conversations are an integral part to a successful ePortfolio experience.” The ePortfolio served my research partners as an expression of self in concert with others.

Narrative identity, Ricoeur (1988:249) posits, is “not a stable and seamless identity....it is always possible to weave different, even opposed, plots about our lives.” Each person has many stories to tell, and the ePortfolio represents one. In conversation with me, students shared narratives about refiguring and articulating their personal identity through the ePortfolio experience. In particular, this related to resilience for overcoming challenges in college. The students expressed a changing relationship to others, which often involved articulating an ethical aim. Conversations and engagement with others about individual ePortfolios provide some of the most meaningful learning experiences for students, and shaped new ways of understanding personal identity.

### **Personal Identity**

In ePortfolios, students represent a version of their personal story through text, images, and examples of academic or extracurricular projects. Some students explained how this experience, coupled with conversation, refigured their sense of identity. Their stories maintain unique qualities and histories, yet also address new meanings in their lives. Many of these narratives relate to life in college, and address both academic and personal matters. Five of the eight research participants are freshmen, and most mention developing resilience for the obstacles they faced in the university environment.

Qudus emphasized how his perspective of self changed during his involvement with the ePortfolio, especially through dialogue with others. When we met in the student union one spring afternoon, he brought his laptop to show me the ePortfolio that he made for alumni mentors as part of the Black Community Services Center program. Qudus encountered many challenges on his path from high school in Nigeria to community college in New York, and then to Stanford. He reiterated to me that he often questioned himself and felt insecure in his place at the university. Qudus stated that making a public ePortfolio about his life, and discussing it with others, gave him a different way of understanding and expressing his identity. He said,

That is where the ePortfolio really helped me. To internalize what exactly does this mean? How does that affect me as I journey on in my experience at Stanford? It makes me realize it's more of a motivation. A motivation that struggles are normal. That just made it easy for me to internalize and express it in a very lucid way. Because I'm reporting it to the outside world, I need to express it and ask, how does this make me feel? It helped me express exactly how that helped me.

He described a greater strength in facing struggles by refiguring his story in the ePortfolio and ensuing conversations with Stanford alumni. Instead of fighting what he viewed as weakness in himself, he came to learn that insecurities were a part of the human experience:

I've spoken to successful people in the past...I've placed them on a pedestal. Like they are at a place I hope to be. Or they never know what I'm going through now. What I've learned about myself is that I am not different from those people. I am just in the process of transitioning. The only difference between me and those people is that the insecurity that they had, they use it to have it as a positive energy towards doing better. I tend to use my insecurities to not give it my all sometimes. That helped me change my mindset. When I go through struggles now, instead of giving up, I just keep going. That is what it's done for me.

He began to see himself as the successful person, and the successful person as him. Each

shared the human quality of insecurity. Qudus highlighted how his view of his own identity changed in relationship to others through the ePortfolio, as he developed a newfound perspective on his own resilience.

Another freshman, Susan, found that the ePortfolio process guided her in facing challenges and reflecting on her personal identity. Susan made her online portfolio while working for the ePortfolio initiative on campus, where she sought to understand how students could best use the technology. I talked to her at the end of her freshman year, when she was about to leave on an orchestra trip to Germany. She recounted some of the academic obstacles that came with adjusting from high school to college. Susan described how the ePortfolio could encourage students to overcome disappointments. She stated,

Something like this is very useful, especially in college when people are trying to find themselves. Even if they think they found themselves, they get torn down freshman or sophomore year....Most people just brush things off and don't think about it later. Unless you sit down and take time to do it.

Susan said college was a significant transition from secondary school, most notably in terms of academics. In the ePortfolio, she took the time to consider the transition to college. Susan contemplated her own ability to overcome barriers, instead of moving on in her life without the reflection. Through reflection came resilience, and a new perspective on personal identity.

Angelica, also a freshman, related to me that she expressed her personal narrative in the ePortfolio and extended it to relationships with others. Her ePortfolio was designed for an advising program in Stanford's El Centro Chicano. Angelica had just finished her last exam of the academic year when we spoke. She was pensive about her first year of college. I asked her how she came to view herself and others differently through her ePortfolio participation. She said that she was not immediately engaged with it, but she

was drawn in by presenting her identity to others. Angelica recounted, “When I started to use it, I saw it as an assignment. But it eventually evolved to me thinking about what I was writing about.” She told me about this process:

I just started writing, with the usual. Then I started to really think about it. It seems like an outlet of ideas for me. Nothing I’ve really had before. I never took the time. I never had the interest. I just really started getting into it. As for how it led to new reflections about myself, well, I know who I am. I guess I’ve never really needed to verbalize that for myself. But to put that into words for other people was really interesting. The process of doing that, and presenting myself to other people, that’s what the ePortfolio is really about. Presenting the image of yourself. Who you are.

For Angelica, the reflection process did not have significant meaning as a solo task; rather, it was about presenting her identity to others.

Angelica realized that her understanding of personal identity came from relationships, which was expanded upon by the ePortfolio project. In our conversation, she brought up how she came to see the importance of identity in relationships. She commented, “The ePortfolio is very professional, polished, refined way of presenting yourself to the world and to other people. It’s really allowed me to think that I need to try new things.” I asked her to elaborate how it got her thinking about her relationships.

Angelica observed,

Well, it can be professional. And in terms of people that are around you. I feel like you can grow as a person, but you can only grow so much if you don’t share with other people. If you don’t have memories to build upon and reflect upon.... So finding your center point. Grounding yourself in who you really are and who you are with other people is a really big part of your identity. Because the way other people perceive you is very important to how you perceive yourself. That’s what I mean in terms of relationships.

In the ePortfolio process, Angelica found her “center point.” She established her identity in the context of others. Even though I had not articulated the theory of narrative identity to her, she brought out similar principles in her own observations about self and



relationships in the ePortfolio context.

The theme of personal identity resonated throughout my conversations. I never asked students directly about resilience in relation to the ePortfolio, and thus I was surprised that many of the freshmen brought up this quality to their experience. Their observations were related to the particular ePortfolio program that they participated in. The comments show the potential for ePortfolios to influence a student's personal identity, especially in regards to adjusting to the college setting.

### **Identity in Concert with Others**

Almost all of my conversation participants addressed the significance of sharing ePortfolios with others and engaging in dialogue about the online representation. Michelle, who made an ePortfolio for an engineering research project, told me that the ePortfolio served as a “conversation starter” with her research team. She said that her professor got to know her at “a whole other level.” In the ePortfolio, Michelle felt she demonstrated her true identity for her instructors. The one student lacking this engagement with others about her ePortfolio did not find it to be a fulfilling experience. Overall, the data revealed that the ePortfolio led to new ways of understanding, most notably when identity was considered in concert with other people.

Calista, a graduate student, found that face-to-face discussion about the ePortfolio was integral to meaningful mentoring. Calista experienced the ePortfolio from multiple perspectives, as she maintained her own academic version, and reviewed those of the undergraduate students whom she mentored for the Black Community Services Center program. She shared her observations with me while we sat at the Law School café, a popular spot on campus for graduate students. Before our conversation, Calista

gave me access to view her ePortfolio, as it was not publicly shared like some of the other ePortfolios. Calista told me that the ePortfolios “can facilitate deep conversations with individuals, particularly strengthening mentoring relationships with my mentees.” With the ePortfolio, she could more clearly see the struggles undergraduates faced, which helped direct her mentoring conversations. The unguarded approach of the mentees was different from how Calista constructed her own ePortfolio. She noted,

I was able to see how open students were in admitting to their weaknesses, not just their accolades or strengths. That really helped me to help them. I think with me, I don't want to call this an error, but I lean towards highlighting the successes and strengths more than the weaknesses and those things that are bothering me or where I'm finding struggles....Wow, that's an insight I'm just now realizing, that I did compared to these students whose portfolios I looked at. The student portfolios were very, for the lack of a better word, very real, in the sense that they really looked at them as individuals with these issues, with these weaknesses and problems. Mine more so didn't.

Calista's remarks highlight a distinction between ePortfolio purposes; one was for a candid account of personal experiences, and the other was a demonstration of accomplishments. From her perspective as a mentor, the authentic ePortfolios provided more insight into her mentee's lives than conversation alone.

The types of dialogue that students value ranges from the personal to the professional. While sitting in the student union bustling with undergraduates, Joshua spoke of ePortfolios as a way to complement a formal job interview with a thoughtfully constructed online identity. His ePortfolio, also for El Centro Chicano, had a private section for personal reflections to share with an advisor, and a public section that he imagined would supplement a job interview. Joshua stated,

With the ePortfolio, you can take your time to say things the way you want them said.... I don't think it should replace interviews. I think it should be used to supplement them. It could be used to see a person as they are outside an interview, when you have a limited amount of time to get to know them.

The professional ePortfolio and in person interview went hand-in-hand. Joshua took a different perspective than other students by addressing how ePortfolios would enhance formal interviews, and not just informal conversations. The engagement with another, whether personal or professional, was a key motivation in constructing the ePortfolio.

While several of the students described a meaningful ePortfolio experience that led to understanding and action, Mary, a freshman, was disappointed by the two ePortfolio pilot projects that she participated in. Mary noted that her ePortfolios were not carefully reviewed by others, and did not serve as a source of conversation. For one large class, the ePortfolio was employed primarily for homework submission and instructor review. Mary found that the responses from the instructors were “superficial” and less detailed than in traditional methods. In another program, she created a career-focused ePortfolio to share with an alumna who worked in education. Unfortunately, the alumna did not review Mary’s ePortfolio.

These experiences left Mary disappointed with ePortfolios. She said, “I don’t know if my bad experience was because it wasn’t clear. Where do I go from here? I made it, but I don’t know what to do with it now.” She observed that a clear purpose and human interaction were integral to learning through the ePortfolio. I asked Mary what was most important to her in learning. She replied, “For me, another reason I wasn’t a big fan of this, when I assess my own learning, I feel like I don’t understand what I’ve learned until I’ve discussed it with other people. This was very solitary and focusing on me.” Mary commented that sharing the ePortfolios with others and engaging in conversation were necessary for a successful project. Mary’s involvement with the ePortfolio focused solely on self, instead of self and other, and thus was not a meaningful

experience for her.

Overall, the student narratives expressed how self-understanding unfolded through the reflection process, online presentation, and conversation related to the ePortfolio. In many instances, students understood their identity differently, especially in overcoming challenges in college. Electronic portfolios, coupled with conversations, hold more significance for learning and identity. For the student who did not engage in deep conversations about the ePortfolio, the experience held little meaning. In the next section, I share how new understandings came about in terms of a student's place in college and in assessing oneself.

### **Fusion of Horizons**

“It gave way to insights about my actual interests.”  
(Angelica Ceja, conversation participant, June 12, 2012)

In my conversations with students, I was interested in what new ways of seeing one's life and world emerged in the ePortfolio process through the framework of fusion of horizons. Gadamer (2004:305) explains, “the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices.” I expected that the students would focus on self-understanding and academic insights, which some did address. However, the more prevalent theme was new understandings about past and present horizons, including different ways of evaluating self. Many participants discussed bridging their personal histories with new experiences for a greater sense of belonging in college. Some also spoke of evaluating self in new ways, focused less on grades and more on living authentically.

### **Past Traditions and Present Horizons**

Relating former understandings and present situations at Stanford was a common

theme among my research partners, especially for the first-year students. Many spoke of reconfiguring how they saw themselves in the college context. What emerged in many conversations was an increased sense of belonging at Stanford after creating an ePortfolio and sharing it with others. Belonging refers to bridging earlier experiences with current horizons to see one's place in the world differently. Some students had new ways of integrating Stanford into their life story, and started to see their life as part of the story of Stanford. Without this cohesion, students may feel disconnected and less engaged in the university. In my conversations, belonging was enhanced through new realizations gained in experience and conversation related to the ePortfolio program.

Joshua reflected that during his freshman year, there were times he was not sure of his place at Stanford. In the process of making his ePortfolio, he reoriented his view of his own contributions and those of others. He explained,

It definitely did help me see my past accomplishments in a better light. Especially here at Stanford, you think, I don't measure up to anyone. You're among so much talent, you feel like your own accomplishments aren't that much. 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 did accomplish quite a lot of things.

Joshua recognized that his talents and those of other students could go hand-in-hand to create meaningful work. He shared with me that one of his passions was supporting education for students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. He recounted a story about partnering with another student to make a flyer in Spanish for summer test preparation classes. The flyer was targeted to the Spanish-speaking parents of high school students in his home community. By working with a peer, whom Joshua said was more talented in Spanish, he realized that together they could achieve better results for the common good. Joshua observed, "It makes me think it the greater scheme of things, it's

not where you stand in relation to other people. But how you can leverage the talents of all the other people here.” Instead of comparing himself to others and feeling like he did not “measure up,” he started to see how everyone’s unique talents contributed to something bigger.

Other freshman shared personal revelations about how they came to view themselves differently at Stanford by expanding prejudgments in the context of new experiences. Angelica, for example, reflected on her point of view before Stanford, saying, “coming from my background, there’s this idea you are always on your own, and you figure things out on your own.” 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.” Qudus directly addressed the issue of belonging, telling me that he wondered, “Am I good enough? Do I belong here?” He said the ePortfolio experience guided him to see his place at Stanford 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. There are other people struggling. Now I’m more confident raising my hand in class and asking questions....Not to just hide it and create this persona of ‘I really get this,’ when I really don’t.

The process of making the ePortfolio helped Qudus realize that he could speak up in class and that he belongs at Stanford. Qudus reframed his prior horizons with the new experiences in college.

On the other side of the ePortfolio conversation was Calista, who carefully reviewed her mentees’ ePortfolios before advising conversations. I asked her what she observed in the students who created ePortfolios, and she shared the story of one

freshman who communicated more deeply through the ePortfolio than in initial conversations. Calista explained,

She was having a hard time finding her place here at Stanford and this sense of belonging here. Like many students of color, who come to a predominantly White institution, they have a hard time fitting in. Or they question why they are here. With this particular student, we talked about it in our mentoring meetings. But it didn't go half as deep as it did in her reflections. It was really helpful seeing that. Using how she was feeling to really come back to her to have those conversations, and help her to really understand her place and why she's here.

The student came to see her place at Stanford differently after writing reflections in the ePortfolio, and using that as a platform to speak more openly with Calista about her personal feelings. These new understandings came about as her prejudgments, based on her personal history, were expanded by the experiences in a college environment.

### **New Ways of Assessment**

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 lent itself to new perspectives on how they assessed themselves. Before conducting my research, I anticipated that portraying oneself through narrative would provide a different means for assessment. This expectation came through in several student conversations. However, what I did not expect was that many of the participants would bring up how grades were less important than living authentically. The ePortfolio captured a shifting focus from external measures of assessment, like grades, to internal views of living life well, with and for others.

Michelle found that in her ePortfolio she could demonstrate achievements, interests, and reflections, which deemphasized grades as a mode of assessment. Her

ePortfolio captured a variety of interests and was directed towards her instructors.

Michelle 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 feel like I struggle a lot as an engineer. I'm not necessarily the best student all the time. But it's something that I love to do, so I do it anyway.... 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.

Michelle realized that her focus was on learning over grades. She gave me the example of an advanced chemistry class that she chose to take as an elective because it sounded interesting to her. Michelle commented,

I realized I don't need to have the best grades to be an engineer. I don't have the best grades partially because I do things like take organic chemistry for fun. If I didn't do that, yeah, my grades would have been higher that quarter. But I don't regret that. It was a great experience and I'm really glad I learned it. Having that space not only to reflect on it, but also to talk about it, I have this intellectual curiosity thing in my life, and that's why I do these things that result in my GPA not being the best. That doesn't mean I'm a bad engineer. In fact, I might be a better engineer because I have gone and taken random things like organic chemistry. That's the most helpful. Here's what I did in class, and reflecting on it as part of my life.

In the ePortfolio, Michelle expressed her passions and evaluated herself by a personal assessment of pursuing her interest and diversifying her knowledge. The ePortfolio captured her expanded understanding of self-assessment.

I met with Jennifer at the end of the school year, when she was finishing up her master's degree and a yearlong internship coordinating ePortfolio programs. Jennifer, more than any other student, expressed a tension of the ePortfolio as a technology and a learning medium. She addressed potential technological downfalls, as well as assessment opportunities. Her focus during the year was the technical requirements of implementing ePortfolios, and she found that there were occasionally limitations that prevented students



or advisors from utilizing the ePortfolio effectively. I asked her to tell me more about what she felt the purpose of the ePortfolio was in an educational setting once the technological barriers were overcome. For Jennifer, the observations of others were the most important element of an ePortfolio. She explained the importance of “having people point out things that you hadn’t noticed. How your thinking has changed.” Once the technology was in place and embraced by educators and students, the assessment practices of having others review and comment on ePortfolios was most important.

Qudus embraced the ePortfolio, and expressed new understandings about assessing himself. Without any prompting from me about grades, he addressed how external measures were less important than genuine learning. Qudus observed,

Before I came to Stanford, I was in a community college in New York City and I was the top student there. Coming to Stanford and realizing that I’m an average Stanford student, that was a tough transition of identity. I had defined myself by getting straight As. Now having to define myself by getting a couple of Bs was difficult to accept. What the ePortfolio did was teach me that the person who was getting a B at Stanford and getting an A at a community college is still the same person, but just in a different environment. I shouldn’t see myself as a failure or as inadequate just based on my grades. I should see myself as a person who is trying to evolve and adapt to the environment here. Instead of letting the process get me down, I should see it as a moment of growth and adaptation. That has helped me evaluate myself. I saw myself in the past as someone who got straight As to this person who works at doing well at school. If after working hard, I get a B, I should be okay with that, because I know I did my best.

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

Just expressing my profile, my bio in words, expressing it in this public forum, it’s a reminder to me about why I’m at Stanford. 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 Stanford degree. That in itself is comforting to know. I shouldn’t be defined by my grades here. I should be defined by what my experience at

Stanford leads me to end up doing in the future.

He experienced a different kind of self-assessment through the ePortfolio. Qudus deemphasized grades and focused on learning. Assessment shifted to an ontological, internal guide to living authentically.

In the next section, I review how the student view of self in the ePortfolio related to an understanding of personal histories and future anticipations.

### **Mimesis**

“It reminds me of who I used to be  
and it also reminds me who I want to be.”  
(Qudus Lawal, conversation participant, May 22, 2012)

In addition to personal identity and new understandings, I was interested in learning how students thought about their past, present, and future in the ePortfolio. Kearney (2002:133) explains triple mimesis as the “prefiguring of life world as it seeks to be told, configuring of the text in the act of telling, and refiguring of our existence as we return from narrative text to action.” I expected that reflections and anticipations would be equally represented in the online profile. What I found was that the past was articulated by almost all of the students, but imagining the future was a fluid, ongoing experience that was captured in different ways.

Most of the conversation participants discussed how their prior experiences were characterized in the ePortfolio. They overwhelmingly recognized qualities about themselves that they never acknowledged before. Fewer students deliberately addressed their future in the content of the ePortfolio, but many had still considered their hopes in building their ePortfolio. Configuring their future in the ePortfolio was a continual process. One of the themes that emerged was an examined life in terms of past

experiences and future possibilities. This continuity brought discordance in life to concordance in narrative, represented in the ePortfolio itself.

### **Examined Life**

One of the most prevalent insights that students conveyed to me was a recognition about their personal qualities, which came about through reflection of their past in the electronic portfolio. 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.

Angelica expressed to me that 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, such as her identity as a mentor. Angelica always tutored younger students, but never viewed herself as a volunteer. 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's 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.

Angelica's inclination to guide others was second nature for her. When she designed the ePortfolio, she started to see mentoring as a quality that was a distinct part of her identity.

While Angelica realized the theme of volunteering in her life, Michelle uncovered a trend of intellectual curiosity. When I reviewed Michelle's ePortfolio before our conversation, I saw a multitude of interests with numerous reflections. When we talked, Michelle explained that she never saw how diverse interests were connected until she crafted her profile. Discussing her ePortfolio with an advisor led Michelle to a

“mind-blowing moment” when the advisor observed that a theme of intellectual curiosity pervaded Michelle’s experiences. She recounted it during our conversation.

Michelle: 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 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 you life. That was really interesting.

Celeste: I noticed the science theme also really came out. Even when you were doing these different activities, like Girl Scouts, you would always tie it back to science.

Michelle: But I never had a good framework to explain that to someone. There were a lot of things in my life that I could point to a lot of different things of it, but I didn’t know exactly it was.

Michelle further commented that once she realized the themes in her life, she could more easily talk about herself 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, Michelle brought coherence to her diverse interests with the theme of intellectual curiosity.

In my conversations, many other students recognized how their past contributed to how they saw themselves and their futures. Calista summarized that in ePortfolio, “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 more clear about where I want to go.” For Calista, examining her past brought to the forefront the theme of linguistics and language in her studies. When I asked if she recognized this before, she said, “Not at all. Not at all.”

Susan, too, shared how the ePortfolio gave her the space to look at the deeper meaning of her experiences and passions. She had spent significant time on robotics and

orchestra, but asked herself, “What does that actually mean? What have I learned from it? Those are the important things I wrote about in the ePortfolio.” Susan stated, “It helped me put everything in a very organized and coherent manner...why I chose robotics and music. On the outside it looks like they are completely different. But really it’s about discipline and creativity and communication.”

Susan viewed her experiences differently by thoughtfully constructing her ePortfolio. She told me, “It just solidified the main ideas of my past. What I got out of it, and why these ideas are important to me.” Further, she reiterated that once she acknowledged these qualities in herself, she could speak more easily about them with others, like faculty or employers. For several of my other conversation partners, the discordant elements of life were tied together in a new narrative in the ePortfolio, which encouraged a different way of interpreting the present and imagining the future.

### **Imagined Future**

In addition to retelling the past, imagining the possible often guided the ePortfolio presentation. The imagined future is integral to Ricoeur’s mimesis (1984), for it prompts action in pursuit of a dream. Kearney (2002:132) observes mimesis “is the power, in short, to re-create actual worlds as possible worlds.” For my conversation partners, integrating the future in the ePortfolio was an ongoing process that was represented in different ways. For some, it was articulated in terms of educational and professional goals. Susan said the ePortfolio “solidified my goals...to be expanding my portfolio of skills.” She constructed her future vision in terms of a professional path, as well as a personal quality of becoming a more well-rounded person. Joshua discussed being on a path of incorporating his various passions towards a singular goal. Students

also addressed the future in terms of ethical intention.

As I expected before the conversations, many students talked about their academic and professional interests in conjunction with the ePortfolio. Often this observation related to authentic living, as these young adults were continually striving to discover their true interests and the path to achieve their dreams. Michelle reimagined her future by reflecting on her life and engaging in conversations about the content of her ePortfolio. She said,

I want to be an astronaut, and I also want to be a teacher. In talking to [my advisor] and discovering that her research area is engineering education, I realized that is exactly what I am interested in. The combination of my interests. The ePortfolio as part of the summer experience changed me since I'm interested now in how you teach engineering.

Conversing with her faculty member about her ePortfolio reflections helped expand Michelle's pursuits to include teaching engineering. This professional desire emerged from an in depth examination of her interests.

Qudus saw how his academic efforts would help him achieve his dream of contributing to renewable energy in developing countries, like his home country of Nigeria. During his ePortfolio experience of creating his online profile and talking with alumni, he observed that staying true to his future dreams held more significance than earning good grades. He told me,

For my future, I'm thinking about going on to get my Ph.D. and work on renewable energy in developing countries. That is my goal. When I was in community college, I took classes to get good grades, so I can show it off and to feel good about myself. Coming to Stanford, the classes I'm taking, I see it as little steps to where I want to be. If I take a class on physical chemistry, how does this apply to what I want to do eventually? I'll have to learn how that affects solar energy. Finding a way to make connections between my classes and what I want to do in the future. Not just focus on what I need to learn to get a good grade. Or what material I need to be a better researcher in the future, to be a better student of engineering in the future. That guided me in

selecting classes. Because I know I'm interested in renewable energy, and Germany is very progressive when it comes to that. So I chose to go study abroad in Berlin, to take German. Those things I hope will add up to give me the foundation necessary for me to build the future I imagine for myself.

Qudus incorporated professional and intellectual pursuits in his ePortfolio. In this venue, he considered how he could work towards his desired future. This imagined world for Qudus was based on his authentic interests of creating more renewable energy opportunities in developing countries.

Joshua expressed a tension in the ePortfolio between aligning his passions and discovering who he was. His professional interests were taking shape, while his self-understanding was an ongoing process. Reflecting on his life in the ePortfolio gave more meaning to his experiences, and new ways of seeing his interests. He shared that the ePortfolio

definitely helped me merge my interests. I used to think of them separately. As time goes on in my Stanford career, with the ePortfolio, I saw how connected they are to have one end goal, one end vision. That's how the ePortfolio has helped me. At Stanford I think, what will I do with the rest of my life? Being able to put all of this down, saying this is a passion of mine, this is another passion of mine, seeing what can I do that integrates all of them. I think that's definitely something the ePortfolio helped me with.

For example, he discovered that he has an "entrepreneurial mindset" that applies to all of his activities. Yet there was still discord he was trying to reconcile. Joshua said,

I'm struggling with what kind of person I am. I see the entrepreneurial stuff. I see the techy stuff. I see the fuzzy stuff. Right now it's clashing a bit. I'm trying to see how can I make them work harmoniously together. This definitely helps me see the separate things about my personality, about who I am.

In his ePortfolio, Joshua was on a journey to understanding himself better and creating a cohesive story that tied together different parts of his identity.

The potential of the ePortfolio process for ethical aim and a hopeful future was eloquently elucidated by Angelica. At first Angelica told me about her subtle inclination towards the medical field, which she never knew how to make a reality until college. Then she expanded to a broader notion of how ePortfolio encouraged her to think about the kind of life she wants to live. She reflected on the ongoing process of what it means to her to lead the good life. She stated,

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.' As if that would 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.

She imagined a life for herself with ethical aim. After speaking with Angelica in June, I observed in my research journal, "She's not focused on grades, she's focused on living a good, ethical life." In her ePortfolio, Angelica had the space for creating a future that transcended her pursuits to work in medicine, to also living a genuine life for herself and others.

The future resided powerfully in the imagination of the students I talked to. College serves as a meaningful time in life to forge relationships and pursue dreams. For most students, the ePortfolio and pursuant conversations encourage a reimagined future, which prompts them to make decisions in the present about their education and their lives. The actions taken in college, and in the wake of the ePortfolio, rely upon imagination of the possible.



## Summary

This Chapter presents the data from conversations with selected students and reflections from the research process. This initial analysis of configuring a narrative from the data is guided by critical hermeneutic theory. The themes include narrative identity in the ePortfolio and in relationship to others; new understandings through the ePortfolio; and examining one's past and future in the ePortfolio.

Exploring the student perspective of the ePortfolio offers insight into different ways of learning and living. Each student's experience was unique, a quality that is embraced in the critical hermeneutic tradition. During the research conversations, students shared their distinct journeys with me. The students who configured their narrative in ePortfolios, and engaged in conversation about their online representation, expressed new understandings of self and others. For the student who had a solitary experience with the ePortfolio, the experience was not as rich as for those who engaged with the ePortfolio as a genuine expression of themselves. The stories students told described how, through the ePortfolio, they were able to reflect on their lives and consider their future.

In Chapter Five, I analyze the data from this Chapter within the research categories of narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous Chapter, I presented a narrative of the data that emerged in my research conversations with students about the meaning of ePortfolios in their lives. In this Chapter, I analyze the data presentation through an analysis based on the critical hermeneutic theories of narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis. I create a new story, providing a deeper understanding of the role of ePortfolios for college students. Herda (1999:98) explains, “analysis is a creative and imaginative act. In data analysis the researcher appropriates a proposed world from the text.” As I wrote in my dissertation journal in July, with a critical hermeneutic approach “there is not a single way or a right answer. It is about emplotting a narrative, making meaning, and envisioning a new future. This creative act can lead to new ways of learning and living—as I imagine an ePortfolio might.” The narratives that students provided in their ePortfolios were an interpretation of their lives and their place in the world. Within the interpretive act lies new understandings about self and community. In this Chapter, I apply my own interpretation to their stories.

As a participatory researcher, I bring my identity and history to an analysis of the conversation transcripts. Herda (1999:127) contends that “the researcher is more of a narrator than an analyst” in creating a text with a plot that “opens up a world of possibilities.” Through this narrative, I imagine new possible worlds for student learning. 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 refigure the past, and imagine one's future.

### **Narrative Identity**

“Life is lived and the story told.”  
(Ricoeur 1991:437)

Narrative identity provides a framework for exploring college students' changing sense of self and others in the context of ePortfolio programs. As Ricoeur (1991:437) indicates in the quotation above, life is lived as a series of events that gain meaning when configured in narrative. With narrative identity, a person is “understood as a character in a story” (Ricoeur 1992:148). Stories shape our identities. Ricoeur (1992:158) posits that “gathering together one's life in the form of a narrative is destined to serve as a basis for the aim of a ‘the good life,’ the cornerstone of ethics.” The ePortfolio can serve as a place to emplot one's story, as a foundation for living authentically.

The ePortfolio gives students a way to create a narrative applicable to academic, professional, or personal aspects of their lives. The ePortfolio approach varies from traditional methods of storytelling; it offers a modern method to demonstrate one's story. Kearney (1988:312) addresses the concern that technology “threaten[s] the traditional practices of imaginative creation, and, more broadly, storytelling as a whole.” Further, Kearney (1988:312) notes, “The crisis of narrative in our time is construed accordingly as a symptom of the decline of communicable experience.” However, he recognizes the potential for expanding ways to share narrative. Kearney (2002:11) writes, “I hold that the new technologies of virtualized and digitized imaging, far from eradicating narrative, may actually open up novel modes of storytelling quite inconceivable in our former cultures.”

Through my research, the ePortfolio serves as a “novel mode of storytelling” for college students, where their narrative was shared with others through written text and multimedia visuals. Moreover, Kearney (2002:3) notes, “stories are what make our lives worth living. They are what make our condition human.” Stories, or in this case ePortfolios, provide a “shareable world” (Kearney 2002:3). In this context of the ePortfolio as a mode of storytelling, students articulate their narratives, reflecting both consistency and sameness in identity, as well as self-understanding for an ethical aim.

### **Constancy and Change in Identity**

Creating a narrative in the ePortfolio encourages students to explore who they are at their core and how they have changed, especially in the college environment. An integral feature of narrative identity is the dialectic of sameness and selfhood. The tension between these aspects of one’s life can be resolved through an ever-changing narrative that mediates idem-identity and ipse-identity. The ePortfolio serves as this medium that connects constancy and change in identity. Ricoeur (1988:246) posits, “Unlike the abstract identity of the Same, this narrative identity, constitutive of self-constancy, 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.”

In the ePortfolio, students are charged with the task to read and write their lives. In particular, some research participants expressed a newfound resilience through their engagement with ePortfolio programs. Qudus, for example, realized after the ePortfolio experience, “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.” Qudus reinterpreted his narrative to live in the world differently. Even

though his insecurities remained the same, the way he related to others changed. Ricoeur (1988:246) observes, “The story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This re-figuration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told.” Narrative is an act of interpretation, where truth and fiction are blurred in constructing meaning. By portraying challenges and reinterpreting stories, some students see their lives differently in relation to others.

In addition to the dialectic between sameness and selfhood, narrative identity is further understood through relationships between the self and the other. Ipse-identity captures the changing nature of relationships in our lives. Through narrative identity, we start to see ourselves in the other and through relationships. In life and in narrative, “the actions of each one of us are intertwined with the actions of everyone else” (Ricoeur 1992:107). Several research participants emphasized that the ePortfolio encouraged an understanding of self in relation to others. This extends students’ horizons and encourages new ways of thinking, which in some cases influenced how the student related to others in the world. Ricoeur (1988:76) notes that narrative allows for “understanding of oneself in terms of values, ethical action, experiences, and personal history.” Ultimately, reflection through narrative may encourage conscientious living.

College is a critical time for recognizing ethics in life and living responsibly with others. Ricoeur (1988:169) writes, “on the ethical plane, self interpretation becomes self-esteem.” In the ePortfolio, a student emplots various experiences into narrative, which increases self-understanding and an awareness about living well with others. Narrative, Ricoeur (1988:249) explains,

Induces a new evaluation of the world and of the reader as well. In this sense, narrative already belongs to the ethical field in virtue of its claim—inseparable

from narration—into ethical justice. Still it belongs to the reader, now an agent, an initiator of action, to choose among the multitude of proposals of ethical justice brought forth.

This observation brings to the forefront the relationship between narrative, ethics and action. When students become a narrator of their stories in the ePortfolio, they are often compelled to live and act responsibly.

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 affirmatively express who they were. Michelle, for example, pointed to her ePortfolio on the computer and said, “Here’s really all my life!” Ricoeur (1988:249) notes 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.

Joshua firmly felt the ePortfolio “really conveys the person that you really are.” Susan noted, “It’s very clearly me.” These all point to how the ePortfolio presents an authentic identity for students to show others. By making this statement, the idem-identity is represented. Ricoeur (1992:118) contends that this self-constancy means “faithfulness to oneself in keeping one’s word,” or making a promise to oneself. This promise occurs in the ePortfolio as students show this is me; here I stand. With that, ethical intention emerges.

Ethics involves reciprocity between self and others to care for, and be cared for. Angelica highlighted her new understanding of reciprocity in the ePortfolio, when she came to realize she can both give and receive help. Reagan (2002:18) explains 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. For Ricoeur, this shows the primacy of the ethical goal of the good life.” Before college Angelica viewed herself as a solo person, but changed her view to be one interconnected with others. In this recognition, she shows solicitude for others. Most often, student realizations such as Angelica’s came about through conversations with others about one’s online representation in the electronic portfolio.

### **Narrative Identity in Conversation**

The personal connections that supplemented the reflective practice of the ePortfolio was a meaningful way for students to learn and understand in new ways. Sharing the ePortfolio with others was a critical part of the student experience, especially when supplemented with conversation. Narrative identity relies on the other, and conversation allows for the interaction between self and other. Gadamer (1988) describes conversation as a game, which Linge (1977:xxiii) explains as the “back-and-forth movement in which the players are caught up.” The research participants related that conversation was integral to the ePortfolio experience. In this way, the ePortfolio serves as a living text, whereby it is continually reimagined for new meaning.

Through the conversation and text, the ePortfolio becomes what I refer to as a “living portal.” This extends Carey’s (2007) notion of a “living text,” which is based on Herda’s (1999) critical hermeneutic participatory research. Carey (2007) found that the internet, in its combination of evolving content coupled with interpersonal communications, was a text that was appropriated differently by users. Carey (2007:27)

observes, “In the process of understanding, meaning moves from one party to the next, and back and forth, creating a living text to be told, interpreted, clarified or argued, and then reinterpreted.” 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 of the next” (Carey 2007:28). Carey (2007:29) concludes that in her online learning community, “we became the narrative identity created in our relationship with each other, face-to-face and online. More than an imagined creation, we appropriated and inhabited an entirely new understanding of self.” In a similar way, the ePortfolio is a living text that is continually reimagined by the student creator and the viewer. Each time the ePortfolio is viewed anew, the distancing from prior viewings brings about new meaning. Further, it 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.

A story, such as one in the ePortfolio, “does not realize itself in the text but in the reader, and under this condition configuration makes possible reconfiguration of a life by the way of narrative” (Ricoeur 1991:431). Ricoeur (1991:431) further explains this point that a text comes alive when others interpret it: “the act of reading becomes the crucial moment of the entire analysis. On this act rests the ability of the story to transfigure the experience of the reader.” The reader and the writer interpret the text differently than each other, and it changes each time they engage with the subject. In the ePortfolio context, this encourages meaningful conversations for the student and the viewer.

Numerous students addressed the importance of conversation to their ePortfolio experience. Electronic portfolios in mentoring relationships was a topic of discussion for



Calista, Michelle, Angelica and Qudus. Their learning came about initially in creating the online profile, but then expanded significantly by conversations. In narrative identity, the other is inseparable from self. In conversation, the self and other engage for new interpretations, which provides students with a deeper understanding of identity. The ePortfolio relies on the dialect of self and other, not self alone.

Mary, the one student who expressed disappointment with the ePortfolio, lamented the lack of face-to-face interactions in her experience. Without conversations for learning, the ePortfolio experience fell flat for her. The structures of the ePortfolio program were not in place for the educational benefits elements to occur. White (1971) contends that structure is the most important aspect of culture, upon which philosophical and social systems follow. His notion supports the concept that ePortfolio technology must first be implemented effectively for the ePortfolio to have meaning for the student. The ePortfolio program requires a social component to encourage conversation and learning. Mary's assertion draws attention to the importance of the ePortfolio as a public expression of self that is shared to engage with others.

Kearney (2002:129) contends, "every human existence is a life in search of a narrative." The ePortfolio provided a space for many students to reflect upon their identity and create an online representation of their narrative. By grounding oneself in narrative, ethical aim is more clearly articulated. The ePortfolio serves as a living portal, as it is continually reinterpreted by both the author and the reader, in text and conversation. The emerging insights about self are in relation to, and through conversation, with others. In isolation, the potential learning is limited. Sharing the

ePortfolio with others for genuine dialogue is a powerful interpretive act that has rich meaning for students, and often led to new understandings.

### **Fusion of Horizons**

“Understanding is the interplay of the movement of tradition  
and the movement of the interpreter.”  
(Gadamer 1988:293)

Understandings come about as one merges past horizons with new ones (Gadamer 1988). When encountering different situations, one’s historical point of view has the chance to expand, which Gadamer refers to as a fusion of horizons. Gadamer (1988:277) reminds 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.

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 on a continuous cycle, changing the college and being changed by it. For students, it is a place in their life journey.

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 (1999:77) writes, “Although we belong to history, we also can distance ourselves from it when it is in narrative form. We can read and reflect.” Student engagement with ePortfolios changed their relationship to the institution and to other people. Many students also addressed expanded understanding

about self-assessment through their representation in the ePortfolio. Several of the freshmen expressed an enhanced sense of belonging.

### **New Understandings of Belonging**

Different interpretations often came about through the interaction of a student's unique perspective and their experiences in the college environment. Gadamer (1988) observes that one's history is always interacting with new situations, and prejudgments are challenged. Gadamer (1988:290) contends, "Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated." Moreover, Gadamer (2004:295) describes belonging as "the element of tradition in our historical-hermeneutical activity." Through the ePortfolio and the conversations that ensued, students broadened their views to see themselves differently in the world. In particular, a number of my conversation partners described an enhanced sense of belonging at the institution. This integral aspect of a student's engagement in the university can be understood through fusion of horizons.

Entering college is one of the most significant transitions in students' lives, as they leave familiar home surroundings and enter the unfamiliar world of a new campus. First year students spoke to me about adapting to the campus culture while transitioning academically to more advanced work. The students came from various backgrounds, but shared the common theme of translating past experiences to the present environment. Some discussed struggling with their sense of self in a new setting.

Qudus described how he brought his distinct history and perspective to Stanford, and how his preconceptions expanded. Gadamer (2004) emphasizes that often prejudgments are legitimate, as each person carries with them a unique historicity.

Gadamer (2004:272) notes, “The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings.” A willingness to see differently expands a person’s prior horizons. Other students described a different sense of belonging through the ePortfolio program, which emerged through reflections on identity and engaging with others to expand horizons about life and learning.

The ePortfolio works for students in numerous ways, including as a text for new understandings. As a text, the ePortfolio serves a reiterative function, whereby students returned to the text for new meaning through a process of distanciation. An interpreter of the text, whether it be the student or viewer, engages with text through imagination. Linge (1977:xxiii) explains, “like the game, the text or art work lives in its presentations.” Moreover, the text serves as the “self-presenting, self-renewing structure of the game” (Linge 1977:xxiii). The ePortfolio is this presentation, a dynamic text that allows continual imagination from the interpreter.

Joshua, for example, had lost sight of his strengths, but examining his own ePortfolio helped him realize his accomplishments. Gadamer (2004:295) explains, “It is in the play between the traditional text’s strangeness and familiarity to us, between being a historically intended, distanciated object and belonging to a tradition. The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between.” The ePortfolio helped students navigate this space between their personal history, which is so familiar, and the foreign world of a new environment, or a distanced text.

Beyond the ePortfolio as a text, it also serves as a process for students to reflect on the content and engage with others in discussion. Conversations, which take place in

language, were integral for new interpretations. Language is an event that forms the basis for understanding. Sapir (1949) posits that language shapes one's system of perception, thereby creating a cultural orientation. He emphasizes that language is based in the history and heritage of a society, and that the categories of language are less important than the meaning that is conveyed (Sapir 1949). Gadamer (2004) also recognizes the importance of tradition in language. For Gadamer (2004), language is much more than structure; it represents life itself, and creates a world to inhabit. Further, Gadamer (2004:443) contends, "language has its true being only in dialogue....Coming to an understanding....is a life process in which a community of life is lived out."

Qudus, who gave his ePortfolio to successful professionals, came to see himself differently at Stanford once he realized through conversation that everyone encountered obstacles. Calista's story about a mentee who discovered belonging also showed how conversation from the ePortfolio led to deeper understandings, and different ways of seeing a past story in a new situation. The potential for a fusion of horizons occurred with each conversation about the student's personal ePortfolio.

### **New Ways of Assessment**

Many participants indicated that the presentation of themselves in the ePortfolio gave them a different perspective on self-assessment. Through a robust online image, 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. Gadamer discusses how pre-understandings change with a willingness to see differently. He observes, "All that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the person or text. But this openness always includes our situating the other meaning in

relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it” (Gadamer 2004:271). By remaining open to the ePortfolio as a text and cornerstone of conversation, students expanded their view of assessment.

The ePortfolio represents a different approach to assessment, not only for the viewer, but also for the student. Many of my research partners presented an authentic view of themselves in the ePortfolio, which was imagined through an internal process. Self-assessment took place through reflection, narrative, and conversation. Further, students focus on authentic living over grades through the new understandings encouraged by the ePortfolio experience. Many students explicitly addressed how grades mattered less than learning and living responsibly. Angelica highlighted that the way she assessed herself was through observing her own learning, both in accomplishments and disappointments. She reflected,

You realize, I’ve really learned something here. It’s a lifelong lesson. I’ve come to realize something that I didn’t understand before, but I do now. The way I got here, the path I’ve taken, maybe I’ve made a mistake, or maybe I’ve misjudged something, or I’ve had a misconception. But I’ve eventually got to this point, to this realization. Whatever path you took to get there, it was a learning experience.

Understanding and learning shaped her personal assessment. Evaluation shifted from external measures to internal observations. It was about being true to oneself, such as Michelle’s example of taking harder classes for her love of learning, instead of improving her grade point average.

Gadamer’s (1988) notion of fusion of horizons sheds light on the new ways of living and learning that many students described in conjunction with the ePortfolio. Prior ways of understanding are challenged by new experiences. This quality is particularly relevant to higher education, as students pursue an education to achieve their dreams after

college. A notable theme from the research was the nature of the ePortfolio in prompting a different way of assessing self, understood in ontological terms about living in the world with others.

In the next section, I analyze the conversation data through Ricoeur's (1984) idea of mimesis, where views of the past and visions of the future are the foundation for present action.

### **Mimesis**

“We are following therefore the destiny of a prefigured time  
that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time.”  
(Ricoeur 1984:54)

The ePortfolio allows for a configuration of life. 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 emplotted for meaning. Ricoeur (1984) refers to mimesis<sub>1,2,3</sub>, as the “mediation of time and narrative.” Kearney (2002) writes 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.” The majority of my conversation participants viewed their past in new ways and expanded on their imagined future through the activity of creating an ePortfolio. These students configured their story differently, creating new possibilities for future actions. Retelling one's story through iterations of the ePortfolio provides a space for learning about self. This back and forth between the text and the writer, in the process of refiguring a life story, shows how the creation of the ePortfolio gave new meaning to one's narrative.

## Creating Concordance

In conversation, 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. Herda (1999:78) notes that “this mediating function allows the transformative power of retelling a story to be used to draw out meaning from a diversity of people, events, histories, and ideas of our futures and, further, from our work to draw about a new quality of time.” In the ePortfolio, my research partners emplotted stories that preceded them and followed them.

The first part of mimesis includes “prenarrative features attached to the demand constitutive of human desire” (Ricoeur 1988:248). For many, mimesis<sub>1</sub> was refigured in the ePortfolio process. Joshua shared that in the ePortfolio, “you can reflect on who you are, where you’ve been, who you want to be. Shaping that path.” Susan explained that it made her stop and reflect. She said it served “to think about what you learned and what you did and what it meant. I know lots of people don’t like spending the time to think about that stuff. For me it’s been helpful.” She explained the new insights expanded her self-understanding, which she could use to express herself more clearly in professional interviews. The ePortfolio is a place for examining the past, leading to a new recognition about self.

Throughout the conversations, students noted an awareness of their qualities and experiences that they had not noticed before. The ePortfolio was a way to remember and re-remember their lives. Plot mediates concord and discord, bringing configuration to events. Ricoeur (1992:142) explains that narrative “participates in the unstable structure of discordant concordance characteristic of the plot itself. It is a source of discordance



inasmuch as it springs up, and a source of concordance inasmuch as it allows the story to advance.” Several students explained how separate parts of their life became coherent as they constructed the ePortfolio. Angelica said the ePortfolio “allowed me to verbalize this idea of myself as a mentor.” Michelle integrated the disparate meaningful activities in her life, which expanded her sense of personal identity. The new understanding came about first by her own construct, and then through another’s observations. Michelle created the ePortfolio to show her identity to others, and in turn the conversations led to the insight of intellectual curiosity as the concordant thread present through her life.

By looking at their past, many of the young adults referenced how the present took a different shape. Geertz (1973) highlights that culture is a text, and that actions can be interpreted for meaning. By putting their story in a public display, the students present a text rich with symbolism and significance. The students expressed a new way to describe themselves to others, such as Calista’s linguistic interest or Susan’s creativity and discipline. As Kearney (2002:132) explains, “the recounted life pries open perspectives inaccessible to ordinary perception. It marks a poetic extrapolation of possible worlds which supplement and refashion our referential relations to the life-world existing prior to the act of recounting.” In other words, an examined life through narrative leads to new ways of acting in the present. This self-understanding comes about as the students took the time for reflection and articulation of new meanings in the ePortfolio process.

### **Imagined Future**

Imagining a desired future, or mimesis<sub>3</sub>, creates the possibly for inhabiting an ideal world. Kearney (2002:133) explains this central concept to 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.” By envisioning the future in narrative, real world action in the present, or mimesis<sub>2</sub>, is altered in pursuit of the vision.

While describing the past was prevalent throughout the research conversations, students expressed that imagining the future as an ongoing process. The notion of living an authentic, ethical life is intertwined with educational and professional pursuits. For some students, this vision was oriented in terms of professional goals and being true to oneself. Michelle dreamt of being an astronaut and a teacher. Her ePortfolio connects a childhood dream to an academic path, as she tells the story of watching a television show in first grade about astronauts going to the moon. At that time she realized if she worked hard and studied engineering, she could make her dream come true. Qudus spoke of how present actions contributed towards his vision of the future. He highlighted his desire to work with renewable energy in developing countries. Joshua emphasized the ongoing process of relating his interests and experiences to a meaningful future.

These student narratives integrate mimesis in 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 (1988:248) writes there is an “endless rectification of a previous narrative by a subsequent one, and from the chain of refigurations that results from this.” By contemplating their histories and hopes, documenting them in the ePortfolio, and talking with others, their forthcoming path became clearer as their personal notions of authentic living expand. For most students, imaging the future was a continuous cycle of interpretation about lives.

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. Angelica directly addressed this in her reflection that showed how she took the time to consider her goals in terms of ethical aim. She maintained,

You can have a career path, these ideas of who you are going to marry, where you are going to live, how many children you are going to have. In the end, if you can just say 'I've lived a happy life. I've lived a fulfilling life. I never betrayed myself and I never betrayed others.' That would be the main goal.

Angelica, and others, expressed a narrative that reflected Ricoeur's (1992) notion of the good life. This ethical aim is a meaningful experience for college students who look to a future beyond the university and consider how to live well for themselves and others in the world.

In college, the events of a student's life happen quickly, in rapid succession. Classes, activities, and people come in and out of one's life. As Michelle and Susan explained to me, college students have little time or motivation to stop and reflect on these occurrences in the context of their life journey. The critical hermeneutic theory of mimesis underscores the importance of configuring past and imagining the future to live in the present with purpose. As Kearney (2002:46) explains, "retelling of the past is an interweaving of past events with present readings of those events in the light of our continuing existential story." The present, *mimesis*<sub>2</sub>, mediates the past life-world of *mimesis*<sub>1</sub> and the idyllic image of *mimesis*<sub>3</sub> (Ricoeur 1984). As many students noted, the ePortfolio has the potential to provide the much-needed space to reflect on their life story among others.

## **Summary**

In this Chapter, I analyze the data from research conversations with students and personal reflections during the research process. Through narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis, an ontological view emerges of the ePortfolio as a medium for learning about self in the world. The ePortfolio provides a means to share one's identity with others, which was complimented 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 the student to refigure their narrative and imagine their lives differently.

In the next Chapter, I present findings and implications from this study, which create the potential for meaningful new approaches to learning and assessment in higher education.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **SUMMARY, FINDINGS, AND IMPLICATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

As universities increasingly utilize electronic portfolios, college students are asked more 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 are selectively shared with trusted advisors, and recount learning experiences, challenges, and personal dreams. Researching the ePortfolio experience from a critical hermeneutic orientation underscores notions of interpretation and understanding. This ontological framework also highlights the role of the student in narrating his or her own life and imaging a desired future. In this Chapter, I provide a summary of my dissertation research, and the findings and implications from the data presentation and analysis. I present recommendations for future research, and conclude with a personal statement.

#### **Summary**

In this research, I examined the influence of ePortfolios on students' identity, learning, and assessment. Over the last decade, electronic portfolios have become more commonplace for academic and advising reasons in higher education. In 2010, almost half of all public and private institutions used ePortfolios in some fashion on their campuses (Green 2010). While ePortfolios vary in function and audience, they commonly take the form of a comprehensive personal website to share with others. In the online portfolio, students reflect on their lives, education, and career goals. The growth in

ePortfolios has occurred as assessment practices have expanded to document learning outcomes (Penny Light et al. 2012), and new pedagogical approaches focus on students authoring their own learning (Baxter Magolda 2004). Traditionally, ePortfolios have been studied from scientific paradigms, where they are viewed as a tool to measure outcomes. This study contributes to the understanding of ePortfolios through a critical hermeneutic approach, where the ePortfolio is a medium for learning among others. The approach is grounded in critical hermeneutic theory, which is oriented in terms of language, narrative, and identity.

The literature review provides the context for this interpretive research inquiry. First, an overview of prior ePortfolio literature summarizes existing research, with a focus on student learning, reflection, and assessment. A review of critical hermeneutic theory establishes the ontological approach for this study, based on narrative identity (Ricoeur 1992), fusion of horizons (Gadamer 1988), and mimesis (Ricoeur 1984). Finally, anthropological theory that relates to this research was presented, including Sapir's (1949) work on linguistics, White's (1971) notion about the primacy of technology in culture, and Geertz's (1973) interpretive contention that culture is a text conveying symbolic meaning.

The research protocol of this study is critical hermeneutic participatory inquiry (Herda 1999). My research was guided by the categories of narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis. The broader intention of this study was to create a narrative of students' experiences with ePortfolios that integrated critical hermeneutic theory. To create the narrative for analysis, I spoke with eight Stanford University students who created ePortfolios for various programs. Our conversations took place during spring of

2012. These selected students discussed their experiences with ePortfolios, focusing on their personal identities, histories, and hopes, which informed the overall research.

Through an interpretive approach, this study incorporated variations of the participants' stories while creating a larger meaning out of their narratives.

The conversation data revealed how the participants interpreted ePortfolios in their lives. Students shared that they expressed their identity online to others, came to view themselves differently, and represented their life journey in the ePortfolio. The data analysis integrated critical hermeneutic theory with the participants' stories and my own reflections. The themes that emerged from the data analysis include: 1) the ePortfolio is a sharable narrative to engage with self and others; 2) new understandings of self and assessment emerge in the ePortfolio; and 3) ePortfolios mediate views of the past and anticipations of the future. The data presentation and analysis inform the research findings and implications for this study.

### **Findings and Implications**

Below I present the findings and implications from my research, which emerged through a literature review, conversations with participants, data analysis, and reflections during the research process. 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 (1999:109) contends, "The fusion of horizons is the aim of hermeneutic research, which opens possibilities for our new understandings with concomitant actions." The implications may guide faculty, academic advisors, and student affairs staff in implementing ePortfolio programs and engaging with students about their ePortfolios. This research moves beyond prior understandings of the

ePortfolio as a technology or object. Instead, the ePortfolio emerges as a relational process and learning medium, whereby new understandings come about by presenting one's narrative online and engaging in dialogue about the content. Additionally, the focus on identity in this research may add an additional dimension to discussions about culture and technology.

These findings relate to the diverse experiences of my conversation partners with ePortfolios. The portfolios served purposes related to advising and mentoring, or as a way to present an academic identity to employers or faculty. I present the research findings and implications through the research categories of narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis. These findings address ePortfolios as a way to engage with others about identity, to expand prior understandings and new 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, ever-changing world.

### **Narrative Identity**

Narrative identity is integral for analyzing ePortfolios in a critical hermeneutic tradition. This concept highlights that one's identity can be understood as story with many characters that is recounted to others. Herda (2010:141) writes that Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity is "an identity that sustained both a tension and harmony in each of our selves and in relation to each other." The stories that we tell reflect our sameness and selfhood in identity 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 One: The ePortfolio serves as a “living portal,” whereby identity is shared with others and reimaged in narrative and conversation.**

In my research conversations, I found that the ePortfolio functioned as a “living portal.” “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.

Electronic portfolios encourage students to put a narrative of themselves online for others. In some cases these are personal portrayals of life, including obstacles, while other times students highlight achievements. The reasons vary, but in either case the student presents a personal narrative online in a shareable format. Students show an honest view of themselves that was rarely displayed in other venues. As Susan 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, Angelica 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 online representations include temporality and constancy in identity, as well as changing relationships with others.

The students who spoke of ePortfolios in the most powerful way described them as meaningful expressions of self when coupled with deep conversations. Michelle, for example, presented her ePortfolio to an advisor, who observed a theme of intellectual curiosity throughout her pursuits. Michelle told me, “I never stopped to think about that.

... To explain who I am, and to show here's how it's played out in my life. We had a long conversation about that. Now it's a means for me to concretely explain something about myself." 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 implication for practice.

- **Implication One: Integrate narrative and conversation in 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 portal. As ePortfolio programs are created, student narrative and conversation with others ought to be cornerstones of the design.

### **Fusion of Horizons**

In the critical hermeneutic tradition, learning is conceptualized as a fusion of horizons. Linge (1977:xii) explains Gadamer's theory that "understanding remains essentially a mediation or translation of past meaning into the present situation." 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 Two: 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 prejudgments based on one's history. In college, this encounter begins with the transition from home to the university setting, and it continues by engaging with different experiences and people. The ePortfolio encouraged reflection on this process by allowing students to recognize that they had a new understanding of a previously held notion. This process 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 in the college context, as compared to traditional measures.

Almost all of the students observed that in the ePortfolio, past interpretations were expanded in light of present experiences. The students, especially freshmen, experienced an enhanced sense of belonging at the university with the ePortfolio programs. For example, Qudus described gaining confidence in class from talking to alumni about the content of his ePortfolio. He said, "When I look at my reflections of what those alumni told me, it reminds 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 and say, 'Can you please elucidate more?'" 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 in terms of student belonging and 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. Joshua spoke of a shifting view from solely focusing on academics to being more balanced in his relationships with people and his studies. Another student, Calista, 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 Two: Utilize ePortfolios for new understandings and narrative assessment.** Electronic portfolios 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, 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 (2010:138) summarizes 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.” 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 Three: 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 never realized before. College is a time that 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 the content. Susan stated, “It helped me tie together how everything wove together, all of my experiences.” Calista 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 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, Angelica 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. Qudus 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 Three: 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 an increasing reality on college campuses. This research provides an interpretive look at the experience of students crafting ePortfolios at one institution. The critical hermeneutic nature of this study presents a shift from prior epistemological perspectives on electronic portfolios. The suggestions below for future research expand on the findings and implications from this

study in the interpretive tradition. The recommendations could provide administrators and faculty with meaningful, ontological approaches for utilizing ePortfolios for student learning and assessment.

- **Suggestion One: Explore the faculty or advisor’s perspective on ePortfolios for identity and conversation.** This research found that a student’s personal identity is represented in the ePortfolio and is shared with others in conversation. Students expressed that a version of their authentic narrative was conveyed in the ePortfolio for a specific audience, and that conversation was critical to the value of an ePortfolio. Future research could examine the experience from the perspective of those viewing the ePortfolio, such as faculty and advisors. 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.
- **Suggestion Two: Investigate ePortfolios 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 further examined to understand the implications for belonging and retention. Additionally, narrative assessment practices, 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. It would expand upon frequently used metrics that are intended to measure mastery of a subject. A focus on narrative assessment highlights the complexity of a student's unique identity and learning.

- **Suggestion Three: Research how students apply new understandings of past and future.** 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 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.

### **Personal Statement**

When I first began my research, I was intrigued by the richness of the student expression in an ePortfolio and its relationship to several critical hermeneutic theories. As I was becoming more familiar with the ePortfolio field, I realized this interpretive approach could contribute considerably to the existing research. A study of electronic portfolios lends itself to the interpretive theory, due to the textual, conversational, and personal qualities of the online representation. On July 13, while analyzing the data, I noted in my research journal that,

The focus of my dissertation is not just the electronic portfolio. It is about the fundamental nature of a college education. This includes how students learn through narrative, reflect on the past, and imagine the future. How new understandings of self and others leads to living the good life with ethical aim



and action. It's about how we measure learning and teach students. The ePortfolio offers one way to examine these concepts.

To me, the questions in this research extend beyond just the ePortfolio, but touch upon the nature of education, assessment, and learning.

This study brings together an educational technology for student learning and critical hermeneutic theories based in narrative, understanding, and imagination. The ontological paradigm extends beyond an examination of student knowledge to shed new light on the influence of the ePortfolios for a student's being. The interpretive approach was only the beginning of what I would discover speaking with students about their experiences. They opened up to me about their lives and learning in connection with the electronic portfolio. It was eye opening for me to hear about their educational experiences and to see how the ePortfolio medium related to their lives.

A central finding of my research is the concept of the ePortfolio as a living portal. This notion changed considerably throughout my research. At first, I created the idea of a living portal to explain a student's ongoing engagement with the ePortfolio. However, through the research conversations, living portal expanded to include interactions with others. I reflected in my journal on October 19 that,

Before my research, I thought the ePortfolio itself was a place for self-understanding. The process of looking at a life and representing the academic side would be enough for self-discovery. However, in my research conversations, a strong idea that emerged was that this experience cannot be in isolation. It is by sharing the ePortfolio with others, and continually re-crafting it, that meaningful insights come about. Today I realized this ePortfolio succeeds not when it is a static text, but instead when it is a living portal.

My own experience of analyzing the data, writing about the research topic, and engaging with students about their experiences led to a more complex view of the ePortfolio as a living portal.

While working on this project, I crafted my own professional ePortfolio. Each week I would thoughtfully reflect on my experiences to create an online portfolio to share with my professional contacts. One of the most meaningful aspects of this work was meeting with a small group of colleagues to present and discuss our ePortfolios. In these conversations, we spoke of the ePortfolio in terms of personal experiences and intended audiences. The ePortfolio was a medium for getting to know each other better and supporting each other in the professional context. These conversations always led to broader discussions about learning and education. I value these lunch meetings for allowing me to experience ePortfolios as I simultaneously researched student engagement with ePortfolios. As a critical hermeneutic researcher, this perspective enhanced my understanding of the participants' narratives.

My personal narrative expanded through this journey in critical hermeneutic research to incorporate new insights from student stories, as well as a deeper understanding of theoretical concepts. Herda (1999:128) observes, "the interpretation of the text is complete when the reading of it releases an event in our lives whereby we understand each other anew." I conclude this dissertation with the hope that it will provide new opportunities for understanding and action in higher education. As my personal story continues beyond this study, I am deeply grateful for this experience of researching the electronic portfolio as an entryway for creating narratives and examining lives.

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## APPENDICIES

### Appendix A: List of Conversation Participants

<b>Student Name</b>	<b>Academic Year</b>	<b>Degree</b>	<b>ePortfolio participation</b>
Jennifer Bundy	Class of 2012	M.A. in Education	Partners in Academic Excellence, ePortfolio Manager
Angelica Ceja	Class of 2015	B.S. in Biology	Partners in Academic Excellence, El Centro Chicano
Michelle Grau	Class of 2013	B.S. in Mechanical Engineering	Engineering research
Mary Harrison	Class of 2015	B.A. in Political Science	Shadow Alums in the Real World (SHARE), Diversity and First Generation Office; Economics course
Calista Kelly	Class of 2012	M.A. in Education	Partners in Academic Excellence Mentor, Black Community Services Center
Qudus Lawal	Class of 2013	B.S. in Chemical Engineering	Partners in Academic Excellence, Black Community Services Center
Joshua Mendoza	Class of 2015	B.S. in Engineering	Partners in Academic Excellence, El Centro Chicano
Susan Nitta	Class of 2015	B.A. in Mechanical Engineering	ePortfolio initiative



**Appendix B: IRBPHS Approval**

March 29, 2012

Dear Ms. Nguyen:

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your application has been approved by the committee (IRBPHS #12-044). Please note the following:

1. Approval expires twelve (12) months from the dated noted above. At that time, if you are still in collecting data from human subjects, you must file a renewal application.
2. Any modifications to the research protocol or changes in instrumentation (including wording of items) must be communicated to the IRBPHS. Re-submission of an application may be required at that time.
3. Any adverse reactions or complications on the part of participants must be reported (in writing) to the IRBPHS within ten (10) working days.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRBPHS at (415) 422-6091.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your research.

Sincerely,

Terence Patterson, EdD, ABPP  
Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

-----  
IRBPHS – University of San Francisco  
Counseling Psychology Department  
Education Building – Room 017  
2130 Fulton Street  
San Francisco, CA 94117-1080  
(415) 422-6091 (Message)  
(415) 422-5528 (Fax)  
[irbphs@usfca.edu](mailto:irbphs@usfca.edu)

-----  
<http://www.usfca.edu/soe/students/irbphs/>

## Appendix C: Stanford University Consent



STANFORD  
UNIVERSITY

Office of the Vice Provost for Student Affairs

March 21, 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is in reference to Celeste Fowles Nguyen, a doctoral student at the University of San Francisco and a staff member at Stanford University. Celeste has asked permission to conduct her doctoral research with eight selected students at Stanford University, and has provided me with her IRB Initial Application submitted to the University of San Francisco.

I am aware of the focus of her research pertaining to the influence of electronic portfolios on student learning, assessment, and identity. Her use of Stanford students as human subjects is contingent upon evidence of approval from her IRB from the University of San Francisco.

Celeste Nguyen's initial IRB Application will be kept on file, and she will provide a copy of her final proposal and official IRB approval for my records. She may begin research once I have received these documents.

Feel free to contact me (650-723-7130 or [gboardman@stanford.edu](mailto:gboardman@stanford.edu)) if you have any question.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Greg Boardman".

Greg Boardman  
Vice Provost for Student Affairs

cc: Celeste Fowles Nguyen

## Appendix D: Letter of Invitation

Date:

Participant's Name  
Participant's Address

Dear (Name of Participant),

I am a doctoral student at the University of San Francisco School of Education, in the Organization and Leadership program. I'm conducting research for my dissertation on how electronic portfolios influence learning and identity. I'm interested in learning more about your experience with an ePortfolio.

My research utilizes interpretive theory, and has a participatory orientation. This means that I will have conversations with students such as yourself, instead of an interview or survey. I will record the conversation, but at any time the recorder can be turned off. Then I will transcribe the conversation and provide you a copy for review. Any of the material can be edited or deleted. Once the transcript is approved by you, I will analyze the transcript data. The research conversations are not anonymous. Your name and the conversation transcript would be included in my dissertation. The conversations will last about 30 minutes.

My guiding questions for the conversation include the following:

- Tell me a story about sharing the ePortfolios with others. How did it change your way of looking at the world?
- How did the process of creating the ePortfolio direct your idea of who you are?
- How have you changed through the process of creating an ePortfolio?
- 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 didn't know before?
- How has your view of your ePortfolio changed over time?
- 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.

Please let me know if you would be willing to talk to me about your experience with an ePortfolio. You can reach me at [celestefo@gmail.com](mailto:celestefo@gmail.com) or [650-319-5316](tel:650-319-5316). I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,  
Celeste

Celeste Fowles Nguyen  
Researcher, Doctoral Student  
University of San Francisco  
Organization and Leadership, School of Education

## **Appendix E: Thank You Letter**

Date:

Participant's Name  
Participant's Address

Dear (Name of Participant),

Thank you for speaking with me last week about your ePortfolio. Your insights and stories about your portfolio experience are invaluable to my dissertation. I truly appreciate your willingness to participate in this project.

I've attached a transcript of our conversation. Please take a look and make any additions, deletions, or clarifications. Please let me know your changes. After your review and approval, I will use the transcript as part of my data analysis.

Thank you again for your participation. I have many new insights about ePortfolios as a result of our conversation. If you have any further questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Celeste

Celeste Fowles Nguyen  
Researcher, Doctoral Student  
University of San Francisco  
Organization and Leadership, School of Education  
[celestefo@gmail.com](mailto:celestefo@gmail.com)/ [650-319-5316](tel:650-319-5316)

## Appendix F: Michelle's ePortfolio—Employment

### Employment Experience

From a young age, I have always had a passion for doing work and making money. When I was in elementary school I would sit for hours on the corner of the street where I lived trying to sell tomatoes, strawberries, lemonade or popsicles. When I found my passion for sewing, I couldn't help using this skill to make money and I soon developed a business making doll clothes and selling them to my grandparents and family friends as Christmas and birthday gifts for my younger cousins. At one point I even expanded my business by making doll furniture and selling it on consignment at a local children's toy store. In high school I had moved on to making and selling spandex tennis shorts in a variety



of exciting colors and patterns to teammates on the high school tennis team. Additionally, in the summers of high school I did odd jobs for my dad at his work. One of the mottos I like to live by in my working career is that no job is too menial or seemingly unimportant for me to do as long as I'm paid a decent wage and respected for the effort I put in.

This being the case, I would consider my first real job to be my position at the Stanford Drama Department Costume shop where I have been working as a student stitcher since my freshman year of college and continue to work there today. What I mean by real job is the is the first time that I worked somewhere consistently every week for pre-set hours (about 6-10 a week) for an hourly wage. Not only this however, but this is also the first time I have ever been treated like a real employee. Working at the costume shop has been an invaluable experience in college not only because it has given me the opportunity to learn how to be a good employee but also because it has taught me what to expect out of a job and from my employers. My job has taught me how to interact with my supervisors, and how to create a fun working environment that is still productive. I feel a sense of community in my job that I want to try to create someday when I have a job. I know that my bosses care about me and value my work so I want to work hard for them and do the best I can do on every job they assign me.



## Appendix G: Conversation Transcription with Notes

*Conversation with Michelle Warner*

*February 2, 2012*

*With analysis notes*

*(N) Narrative Identity*

*(F) Fusion of Horizons*

*(M) Mimesis*

*Celeste notes*

CELESTE: Michelle, first can you tell me a little about yourself and your background in general?

MICHELLE: Okay. I'm a junior majoring in Mechanical Engineering at Stanford. I did research over the summer with professor Sherri Sheppard and that's why I made the portfolio to begin with, as a test model for other students to base their portfolio, that they make in the future, off of.

CELESTE: Where are you from?

MICHELLE: I'm from Portland, Oregon, and lived there all my life. And I really like to sew.

CELESTE: Yeah, I saw that in your portfolio. One of the things I wanted to ask you just in general what this experience was like for you to have a portfolio. And have you ever made those connections before about how like sewing relates to your major?

MICHELLE: Um, I feel like have in some ways and not in others. I have learned a lot of skills from sewing, such as being detail-oriented. I've been filling out a lot of internship applications lately and a lot of them ask, are you detail oriented? In sewing I'm definitely very meticulous and stuff like that.

One thing I feel like I didn't really make the connection with until I did the portfolio was the idea of the process of creating something. I'm in a machine shop class right now so we're working on learning milling, turning, casting, welding, all those different kinds of things. Of course the processes are very different than sewing. But, sometimes thinking about how you're going to make something in your head is actually much more similar than I thought it would be.

*metacognition – connecting different parts of her life*

CELESTE: So sewing is similar to the kinds of things you're doing in the class you're taking?

MICHELLE: Yes, in the class I'm taking and in attacking the production of any kind of product.

CELESTE: So, had you thought of the detail part before, but you hadn't thought of how all the pieces all fit together?

MICHELLE: Yes.

CELESTE: I thought that was interesting that the way you put this together: your experiences all lead to the direction of you becoming a Mechanical Engineering major, like your sewing...

MICHELLE: That's how I envisioned the portfolio in general. When Helen gave us the task to make this portfolio, she didn't give us a whole lot of the, "you should go this way, you should go that way."

I always envisioned my portfolio like an interactive resume, that says something about myself, and that a future employer could look and be like, "oh wow I can see how this person has these skills and contribute to my company in this way."

*Narrative identity: most important part is the other – our narratives are known by other. Ricoeur.*

*"Our identity cannot be known directly by ourselves or by others, but through diversions and the most important being narrative" (Herda 1997: 37)*

CELESTE: When you say interactive what do you mean by that? Is it the conversation that it sparks? Or in what way?

MICHELLE: I guess when we talked about the project, Helen talked about the commenting feature and how that could form some kind of conversation. Personally I never really thought of it being interactive that way. Just being like an addition to a resume, where I get a chance to explain my story so that someone understands better the details of who I am. And interactive that there are pictures, videos, and links, and things like that.

*NI: explaining our story is one of the most important ontological tasks. Ricoeur*

*He maintains that narrative identity is as important as life itself, and that there is "a certain mutual belonging between the act of narrating (or writing) history and the fact of*



*being historical. In other words, the form of life to which narrative discourse belongs is our historical condition itself” (1981:288).*

CELESTE: How did it change your sense of who you are or your identity? If it did?

MICHELLE: I guess I don't really feel like it did. That's a hard metric to measure for yourself though. As we're talking about it, I made some connections between activities that I've done and the implications they might have in term of internships, jobs, future, those kind of things. I wouldn't say it changed who I am in any way.

*mimesis – using the past towards the future. Mimesis Ricoeur*  
*“textual configuration mediates between the prefiguration of the practical field and its refiguration through the reception of the work” Ricoeur (1984:53)*

CELESTE: Did it spark conversations? Did you look at it with people and talk about it?

MICHELLE: I know when I looked at it with Helen we talked about the sewing thing, with was cool. I was working on this with my fellow research associate for the summer, also named Michelle, and we definitely had a lot of conversations about that. It was interesting because even though we were super good friends before we did the portfolios together, we did learn a lot about each other from reading the portfolios. It was informative and interesting.

*Narrative for the other – learn more through a text*

CELESTE: One of the parts of the portfolio I really liked in yours and in the other Michelle's was the summer blog, because you could really see the progress week by week of the projects you were working on. Yours was interesting to me – the personality and engineering research project. And some of the other fun things you had going on in your life.

MICHELLE: That was good. That was also a way for Sherri to keep up with what we where doing because she was abroad this summer, but we were still working in her lab.

CELESTE: If I could point out a part of your blog that caught my eye - where you talked a little bit about your portfolio and you're reflecting on the process of your portfolio. You wrote, “I've thought and wrote a lot about myself trying to distill the experiences that I've had in my life into some kind of coherent string of thoughts. Its extraordinarily difficult.” It sounds like you're saying to take your story and put it in your portfolio takes a lot of mental energy. Could you expand on that at all?

*NI: process of telling story*

*“to narrate and to follow a story is already to ‘reflect upon’ events with the aim of encompassing them in successive totalities” (1981:279)*

MICHELLE: Definitely. So much happens in a week. Writing these weekly things was difficult. The weekly things weren't even as bad as the long-term things.

One that was really tough to write was the leadership one. I wanted a general page and specific things. In order to answer the questions which people ask in applications all the time: how are you a leader, what makes you a leader, we want a leader, blah blah blah. But what does that even mean? Coming to some kind of specific definition of terms. Coming up with criteria that you have to meet to be a leader. You have to set up a background framing and use your examples to illustrate that you meet those criteria – it's really hard. You don't want to be too vague and say I'm a leader I organize stuff. But you don't want to be so specific. It just goes on and on forever. That was really hard. The leader thing in particular, I had to decide I had to focus on what aspect of leadership I want to focus on.

*Fusion: learning, new understandings of leadership. Gadamer.*

*Bernstein (1983) further contends, "learning from other forms of life and horizons is at the very same time coming to an understanding of ourselves" (p. 144). When a fusion of horizons occurs, self-knowledge expands.*

CELESTE: It's interesting how you question what leadership is. You don't take some assumption of what a leader is, but really ask what is it?

When you look at this now, after a period of time, what is that like for you? Is it different than when you created it?

MICHELLE: It's really different actually, because I honestly haven't looked at it in a long time. I'm definitely proud of what I created. One interesting experience I had last quarter was I was trying to find companies that I wanted to do internships in over the summer, and I wanted to make preliminary contacts with almost cold emails to from the Stanford alumni list. One guy I emailed with actually Googled me, and if you Google Michelle Warner at Stanford, this is the first thing that pops up. So, the interesting thing about this person, is he is actually works for Ziba Design firm, I think he is one of the upper level executives or founders at this firm. Ziba is basically the IDEO of Portland.

*Distanciation – renewed understanding from leaving a text and returning to it results in a fusion of horizons.*

*When an interpreter engages in a conversation with a text, he "opens himself to the text by listening to it and allowing it to assert its viewpoint" (Gadamer, 1976, p. xxi). The "dialogical encounter" with a text, person, or culture brings an openness that is a precondition of understanding (Bernstein, 1983). This engagement with the text occurs between a student and their electronic portfolio, to foster learning and growth.*

*As horizons change, the way a student view the text, the ePortfolio, changes: "the conversation with the text is in this sense resumed anew by each succeeding horizon that*

*takes it up, applying it and bringing it to language within the present situation” (Gadamer, 1976, p. xxxiii).*

CELESTE: IDEO?

MICHELLE: IDEO company in Palo Alto, huge consulting, extremely popular, very hard to get into kind of thing. Ziba is the Portland version of that. It so hard to get a job there. They don't even do internships. Because he Googled me, because he saw my portfolio, saw my advisor is Sherri Sheppard, who was his advisor here, he took the time to email me. **I thought that was very interesting, scary, and impressive at the same time.** Partially because I wanted to edit more and I haven't had the time. I'm not completely happy with what's up there, but I have to realize it's completely public, but it's also really cool I made that connection.

*Mimesis: future dreams incorporated into presentation of portfolio “by mediating between the two poles of event and story, emplotment brings to the paradox a solution that is the poetic act itself” (Ricoeur 1984:66)*

CELESTE: What was your conversation like with him? Did you talk about your portfolio?

MICHELLE: I didn't honestly have a chance to talk to him because he didn't have time. What it came down to was, “I looked at your portfolio, and saw we had the same advisor, isn't that cool kinda thing. If you have questions about Ziba let me know.”

CELESTE: That makes me think there are so many online identities one can have, like Facebook or Linked in. How do you see this portfolio as different from those online spaces?

MICHELLE: For me Facebook is completely different. It has nothing to do with my career or my academic persona. It's pretty much just pictures and writing random things on people's walls I wouldn't say it captures my identity in any seriously significant way. **This is the persona I want to put out toward academic and professional communities.** There's nothing offensive on my Facebook page, but there's nothing that would encourage someone to hire me. I actually don't have a Linked in.

*Narrative: quote about how to project oneself to others. Sense of yourself.*

*Narrative identity is also concerned with one's relationship with the other. The story depends on an audience. Herda declares, “the identity of self in terms of individualism cannot do justice to the nature of the self when self is understood in terms of other. Otherness is constitutive of the self” (1997: 37). Narrative identity stems from the reader. Understanding belongs with the text, and needs an interpreter to extract the meaning (Bernstein 1983). With each interpreter, the meaning changes. Ricoeur contends, “to understand is not to project oneself into the text but to expose oneself to it; it is to receive a self enlarged by the appropriation of the proposed worlds which*

*interpretation unfolds” (1981:94). Sharing ePortfolios with mentors initiates conversation and lets the student’s narrative be known by others.*

CELESTE: I actually just started an ePortfolio today because I figure if I write about ePortfolios I should have the experience. I realized it is a ton of work.

MICHELLE: It is!

CELESTE: Like what to put in each tab. First I started writing on the website, then I realized I should start in Word and then copy and paste once I feel good about it . Did you have that experience of revision?

MICHELLE: Yes, Word is a much better format.

CELESTE: Another thing I wanted to ask about, you incorporate a lot of your past experiences. I want to ask how you incorporate your goals as well. How do you bring your past and future together into this space?

MICHELLE: I honestly don’t think I do a very good job about bringing in my goals and my future. I do a good job showing who I am as of now. I guess **the future is incorporated because it incorporates what I can do and what I am capable of.**

I had goals for the summer, but I didn’t have overarching goals of life.

*Future – potential for employers*

CELESTE: Let’s look at your goals here.

MICHELLE: Let’s see if I achieved any of them.

CELESTE: Stellar ePortfolio!

MICHELLE: I definitely need to do more work on it. I was working on an application today and they asked for a link to your portfolio. I was like great, I already have one started! Second I was like, I should probably edit it one more time before I send it to this important company.

CELESTE: What do you want to do to edit it? What steps would take to edit it?

MICHELLE: I want to update my resume, which is pretty standard procedure. There are a couple blog entries that are not as polished, shall we say. I think I’d like to highlight , or reorganize my employment experience. Put the summer research as a subcategory of research experience and maybe break it up a little more. I like this overarching view of my history of employment, but I also have some specific things that I’ve done.

CELESTE: Like the costume shop?

MICHELLE: Yeah, like research, costume shop, this past quarter I worked as a dresser at a theater. That was interesting. That's the main stuff. And then the sewing. I think I need to update it with more recent pictures. I remember my parents saying it's too much, I should cut down on the number of pictures I have up. It becomes a really big section.

CELESTE: So you shared this with your parents as well to get their input on it?

MICHELLE: Yes it's interesting. They had a very different view of it than you or Helen or me. They were very much like, why do you have sewing up? That's not part of your resume. I'm like Mom, Dad, it's not an online resume, it's my portfolio. It's not the same thing. I have my resume listed here. I do not have pictures of sewing on my resume, but this is not my resume.

Yeah I need to update my coursework section too and make that a bit more to the front, because I think a lot of companies would care about that stuff.

CELESTE: So if a company was asking you to put this in an application, does this mean students are doing this, they are requiring it?

MICHELLE: I would assume so.

CELESTE: I didn't realize that portfolios were required by some companies. Or is it an optional thing?

MICHELLE: I think it is technically optional and they have space for not one but three portfolio links. Who has three portfolios? I think the reason that is that I'm applying to engineering design internships. I think they are expecting design portfolios. Like, this is all the stuff I've made.

CELESTE: I see, more like a traditional art portfolio?

MICHELLE: Yes.

CELESTE: When you've done this it seems like thinking about employers is a big part of it. What is the purpose of ePortfolios? What is the value?

MICHELLE: I mean, that's pretty much how I see the value. I remember we did talk to some other people about it being a tool for the development of students and a tool for personal identity. I feel like I've experienced some of those benefits, but I feel like there are lots of other opportunities to experience those benefits in college, like talking to other people.

CELESTE: What I imagine a portfolio to do is that there's all these different areas of your life that maybe there's not opportunity to bring together and connect. So that's where I was thinking a portfolio might be beneficial. I know when I was in college we

didn't have portfolios. So I would take one class and I didn't necessarily connect it to other things in my life.

MICHELLE: I feel like I've definitely made connections in my life that way because of the portfolio, especially the sewing thing. Like having to write up the leadership tab, I have a better way to answer that question in the future. And to think about all these areas of my life I've had to exhibit leadership, can I bring that together with an overarching theme that makes my thoughts coherent and eloquent. As far as coursework, whether it brings together different aspects of coursework, I think it does. I think it more works with extra curriculars and coursework together.

*Fusion/ mimesis: new understandings, working towards imagined future.*

CELESTE: Has this inspired any action for you? Has it inspired you to take any action that you wouldn't have otherwise?

MICHELLE: Um. It was so long ago I created it. I think I guess one of the things it's made me realize is what an important part of my life the sewing aspect is. And perhaps encouraged me to pursue opportunities that allow me to utilize the skills I have from sewing and I have from classes. To integrate engineering and sewing together. And I've been applying to internships that allow me to do that. I think the portfolio has showed me a structured way that I can talk about sewing where it doesn't sound like I am a wannabe fashion designer, because I don't want to be.

*Mimesis – action towards the future*

CELESTE: it was interesting to read about patterns and how you design clothes. How you conceptualize it and how it looks in the end. Sometimes you said it looks like how you imagined it, and sometimes it didn't.

MICHELLE: It reminds me that we're learning about sheet metal forming. Sheet metal is like sewing with metal. You have something flat and it has to become three-dimensional some how. How are you going to design the pattern? There are hard ways and there are easy ways.

*"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 Truth and Method 272*

CELESTE: Interesting. What are the internships that combine these interests?

MICHELLE: One of them is at Levi. So you're not designing the clothes, but you're taking the ideas the designers have and making them work in manufacturing. At least that's what I hope it is. And getting those things out in a timely manner.

The other one is at Nike. They do product development, which would be fun. They also do a lot of scientific testing on equipment. They're trying to do that on apparel as I understand.

CELESTE: That's really neat. I wasn't familiar with that before, but now I see that engineering, sewing, and manufacturing are closely related.

MICHELLE: I mean the other thing I use to justify it in my head is that all clothing has to be manufactured, and manufacturing has so much engineering. That if you have someone who understands how to manufacture clothes and how machines work and has a good sense, an ability to think about problems critically and analyze solutions, there's got to be jobs for people who do those things.

*Mimesis – connections in life towards future.*

CELESTE: Oh yeah, absolutely.

What was your favorite part about the portfolio?

MICHELLE: My favorite part was the pictures. I really liked to put up pictures. I'm sure you noticed that. Because the other Michelle didn't put up many pictures, she put up a lot of text.

CELESTE: I didn't realize you had pictures with the courses that you included.

MICHELLE: Yeah. Which might be a design flaw. This is my favorite page. I did a really weird project in an intensive summer course. It was redesigning the pasta experience, which is like the weirdest thing ever.

CELESTE: Okay. So you mean pasta like you eat?

MICHELLE: Yes. So I had to explain it in a way that people would actually understand. What we ended up making was really weird. We made this swear word pasta. That was kind of a joke. So we made this concept video of it, so I posted the video. And I posted the pictures of the final project. We worked hard on this weird packaging.

CELESTE: Oh that is really cool [looking at pictures].

MICHELLE: It was fun. It's the kind of thing that is impossible to explain without some sort of visual representation. I think the video actually explains our product concept the best. Hopefully an employer who is interested in product design will look at that and understand more of my experience.

*Mimesis/narrative – putting together story for future dream*

CELESTE: I'll definitely look at that more. I saw you wrote you had trouble uploading a video, so I didn't realize you got it in there.

MICHELLE: I figured it out eventually because I realized it was posted on YouTube already.

CELESTE: What areas were hardest with the portfolio? Or could be improved?

MICHELLE: You mean with the portfolio software itself or the process?

CELESTE: I guess I mean the process. What would you change? What parts are harder than others?

MICHELLE: I guess it would have been nice to have more guidance. I realize the point of doing it with Helen the first time was that she didn't know what she wanted either. An idea of where to begin. An idea of what the goal is. My portfolio is still a little confused. Is it telling my life story or is it a resume? I think I would rephrase things if I really knew what it was.

CELESTE: I think that covers a lot of things I was wondering about. Is there anything else that you wanted to add that we didn't touch on? Could you see this catching on more at Stanford?

MICHELLE: I feel like with the Stanford population in general, the problem is that it really takes a lot of time. I don't have that much time to make something if I don't see the immediate benefit to myself. I see the way for kids to see it as useful is if it is to apply to internships and jobs.

CELESTE: Or like a course requirement?

MICHELLE: Yes, one of the useful ways is to display the stuff that isn't easily communicated via text. Like this is – I took a drawing class- I had to design a product – I put up the six sketches that show the evolution of my product. Yeah this is really cool. Honestly I was really going to throw that portfolio away because it's too big and cumbersome, all the sheets of paper.

CELESTE: A paper portfolio?

MICHELLE: I was going to chuck those papers because it's too cumbersome to carry around. I ended up scanning them and putting them on the internet. If a class was to require you to have a portfolio –which honestly wouldn't take that long and could benefit you later in life. I could see people doing it. Then at the bare minimum they would have pictures from everything they've done. There would be some incentive to go back and fill in the textual narrative between classes. That's true with every single engineering design class. Like I'm in one where at the end we're graded on the project itself and the portfolio that accompanies the project. This one's electronic. It's not on the internet. It should be



on the internet because it's easiest for everyone that way. Then the professor doesn't have to worry about the disks, and the student doesn't have to worry about dropping off the disks. On the internet everyone can access it.

CELESTE: It's nice you have it all in one place where you can reflect on it all together, and share it with others.

MICHELLE: And you can get commentary. Which is good. Because sometimes pictures do need commentary. I like this one in particular because I ordered the pictures in chronological order. This is my starting point, this is what I ended up. You can see development of sketching technique. It utilizes the functions of the interface well.

*END OF CONVERSATION*

## **Appendix H: Pilot Data Analysis and Presentation**

### **Introduction**

Michelle and I discussed her ePortfolio through the research directives of my study, including narrative identity, fusion of horizons, and mimesis. In her ePortfolio, themes about narrative identity emerged, as she learned about herself through expressions towards another person. Through the portfolio process, Michelle experienced a fusion of horizons about herself and her world, through reflections and interpretation of text. Finally, Michelle's experience could be viewed in light of mimesis, which mediates past, present, and future. Our conversation (see Appendix G: Conversation Transcription with Notes) provided data for an analysis of ePortfolios and their role in student learning, self-assessment, and identity.

### **Conversation**

Michelle and I met on a late Thursday afternoon at a campus café. I arrived ten minutes early. The area was buzzing with students, working collaboratively on projects, or taking a break from their work. Michelle and I had never met before, but I reviewed her ePortfolio thoroughly before our conversation, and I felt like I knew her. When Michelle arrived I recognized her immediately. Michelle, a mechanical engineering major, wore a t-shirt covered with complex math equations, and a sweatshirt from a Stanford sorority. I read in her ePortfolio about how much she loved tea, so I had hoped we could get tea before our conversation. Unfortunately the café counter had closed for the day. We were both a little disappointed, but we proceeded to sit at a good table to have our conversation.

I opened my laptop to Michelle's ePortfolio. Because our conversation focused on her ePortfolio experience, I thought having her ePortfolio available as a reference would be conducive to our discussion. Michelle was at ease with her ePortfolio in front of her, and we started chatting right away. This was my first research conversation, and I wanted it to flow naturally. I kept my ears open for comments she made that would steer the conversation in directions I had not anticipated. She was the first student I talked to about ePortfolios, and I was eager to hear her perspective.

### **Narrative Identity**

Ricoeur's (1992:180) concept of narrative identity holds that we come to establish our identities by expressing our narratives to the other. In the ePortfolio, Michelle constructed her narrative for others, allowing insights into her own identity. Michelle specifically imagined employers and faculty as the audience. Ricoeur (1992) posits that explaining our story is one of the most important ontological tasks. Narratives provide the opportunity to learn more about self and others.

Michelle created her online presentation in the portfolio for academic and career purposes. She explained that, "this is the persona I want to put out toward academic and professional communities." The ePortfolio was a way to express herself beyond a resume. She reflected, "I always envisioned my portfolio like an interactive resume, that says something about myself, and that a future employer could look and be like, 'oh wow I can see how this person has these skills and can contribute to my company in this way.'" Through this process, Michelle expressed her personal story, explaining that in addition to a resume, the ePortfolio is "where I get a chance to explain my story so that someone

understands better the details of who I am.” Through the portfolio, Michelle connected her life experiences to express a coherent narrative to an audience.

Expressing narrative identity through an ePortfolio was challenging for Michelle, as it required reflective self-assessment. In her summer blog, Michelle noted, “I’ve thought and wrote a lot about myself trying to distill the experiences that I’ve had in my life into some kind of coherent string of thoughts. It’s extraordinarily difficult.” When I asked her to expand on this, she gave the example of the leadership section (see Appendix K: Michelle’s ePortfolio—Leadership). Michelle examined numerous life events to articulate her understanding of leadership. She explained it like an engineering problem, saying, “you have to set up a background framing and use your examples to illustrate that you meet those criteria. It’s really hard.” Creating an ePortfolio required reflective thought and meaning-making.

Narrative is a medium to mediate a person’s *idem*, the permanent part of identity that remains the same, and *ipse*, the temporal aspect of identity that changes (Ricoeur 1992). Ricoeur (1992:123) explains, “it will be the task of a reflection on narrative identity to balance, on one side, the immutable traits which this identity owes to the anchoring of the history of a life in a character, and, on the other, those traits which tend to separate the identity of the self from the sameness of character.” Through Michelle’s ePortfolio, the narrative she constructed mediated her core elements of sameness and selfhood. Michelle’s *idem* includes her core qualities about herself, including her analytical, detail-natured nature, manifested in engineering and sewing (see Appendix I: Michelle’s ePortfolio—Sewing). Her *ipse* was revealed in the transformation from her

academic and work experiences that have influenced her understanding of herself and her world.

In an electronic portfolio, Michelle constructed her narrative identity for others. She emplotted her experiences into a text, thereby constructing meaning and developing deeper self-knowledge. Michelle connected disparate classes, activities, or life events. Through narrative, deeper meaning emerged. The ePortfolio captured her learning and offered a way for her to reflect on her experiences for new understandings, or a fusion of horizons.

### **Fusion of Horizons**

Fusion of horizons is a theoretical concept that provides insights into learning. Gadamer (1988) conceptualized fusion of horizons as the new understandings that unfold through engagement with texts or people. Herda (1999:129) applies this to learning, contending, “learning must go beyond the score to include understanding as well as a change in our present and our history—a fusion of horizons that happens when we make our own what was once alien.” Through the ePortfolio, this type of deeper learning may occur, as understanding grows beyond one’s original assumptions.

For Michelle, the ePortfolio encouraged such a fusion of horizons, by offering her the opportunity to narrate her story in a text and to engage with the text for new understandings. The text provides a distance from the lived experience (Herda 1999:86). New insights may emerge from leaving a text and returning to it, resulting in a fusion of horizons. When an interpreter engages in a conversation with a text, there is “the fusion of horizons of understanding, which is what mediates between the text and its interpreter” (Gadamer 1988:340). The “dialogical encounter” with a text, person, or culture brings an

openness that is a precondition of understanding (Bernstein 1983:162). This engagement with the text may occur between a student and their electronic portfolio, to foster learning and growth. Michelle, for example, gained new understandings through the ePortfolio, as she evaluated her prior knowledge and explored how separate parts of her life were related.

The ePortfolio process encouraged Michelle's ability to make connections about different experiences, such as the similar processes of creation in engineering and sewing. She explained, "I didn't really make the connection until I did the portfolio was the idea of the process of creating something." Michelle elaborated that in her machine shop course she was learning sheet metal processes. Michelle said, "of course the processes are very different than sewing. But, sometimes thinking about how you're going to make something in your head is actually much more similar than I thought it would be." At one point she explained her realization, noting that, "sheet metal is like sewing with metal. You have something flat and it has to become three-dimensional some how. How are you going to design the pattern? There are hard ways and there are easy ways." The ePortfolio gave Michelle the opportunity to assess her own skills and learning.

The ePortfolio also provided a means for reflection and self-understanding. Bernstein (1983:144) contends, "learning from other forms of life and horizons is at the very same time coming to an understanding of ourselves." Michelle reflected on leadership in a new way, asking about leadership, "what does that even mean?" Her questioning of leadership led to learning about her own meaning of leadership, which she understood to be an ethical action and care for others. When a fusion of horizons occurs, self-knowledge expands. Linge (1977:xxxiii) states, "the conversation with the text is in

this sense resumed anew by each succeeding horizon that takes it up, applying it and bringing it to language within the present situation.” Michelle’s horizons changed through creating the ePortfolio, especially in regards to how she viewed herself.

Michelle told me that she was able to express her leadership ability better after reflecting and writing about it in an ePortfolio. She contemplated that while writing about leadership, “I have a better way to answer that question in the future. And to think about all these areas of my life I’ve had to exhibit leadership. I can bring that together with an overarching theme that makes my thoughts coherent and eloquent.” As we talked, Michelle clicked through her ePortfolio, showing me more on the leadership tab as she explained to me the process of creating the section (See Appendix K: Michelle’s ePortfolio—Leadership).

The reflection initiated by an ePortfolio for Michelle created the context for a critical evaluation of previous knowledge. Through the ePortfolio, previous understandings were merged with new interpretations. The ePortfolios created a path for a fusion of horizon through reflection of a text, leading towards praxis, or ethical action. In addition to a fusion of horizons, viewing an electronic portfolio through mimesis reveals new understandings reached in the process of moving from one’s past towards an envisioned future.

### **Mimesis**

Mimesis informs a student’s experience with ePortfolios, as students incorporate past experiences and future dreams through the present, in the ePortfolio text. There are three temporal stages of mimesis established by Ricoeur (1984). The first stage, mimesis<sub>1</sub>, is the pre-figured world of history and traditions. Mimesis<sub>2</sub> is our configured

world, where we make sense of the past and future. Finally, mimesis<sub>3</sub> allows us to refigure our past into action, towards an aspiration for the future (Herda 1999:78). Herda (1999:76) explains that mimesis is necessary because, “to represent human action we first need to pre-understand what human acting is in its various forms.” These three stages of mimesis explain the mediating role that an ePortfolio can play for a student connecting life stories to past and future. In my conversation with Michelle, she elaborated on how she incorporated her past, present, and future in the ePortfolio.

The first stage, mimesis<sub>1</sub>, is the world before interacting with it, where history and tradition reside. Ricoeur (1984:52) states, “textual configuration mediates between the prefiguration of the practical field and its refiguration through the reception of the work.” In other words, the past is reconstructed through a text. This came through in my conversation with Michelle, as she reflected on her academic, personal, and extracurricular accomplishments. As we viewed the ePortfolio, Michelle pointed out her relevant coursework and examples of engineering design projects. The ePortfolio also included reflections on her prior jobs and leadership opportunities. She wrote in her ePortfolio reflection,

Since writing these essays, I have discovered a lot about leadership, mostly from finding myself in leadership positions. Before being in these leadership positions, I would always picture leadership as Moses guiding the Israelites through the Red Sea or something like that and I could never envision myself doing something like that, standing above the rest and guiding people. But what I've discovered over time is that being a leader doesn't have to be like that. Leadership can mean being with people, caring about people and using that caring to guide them.

Through the reflections of her past in her ePortfolio, Michelle developed her sense of ethical leadership and the ability to articulate it.



The present is captured in mimesis<sub>2</sub>. The act of narration in the present, connecting past and future, creates a sense of time. Ricoeur (1984:52) posits, “time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.” In the ePortfolio, Michelle narrated her story to others. This narration creates a life story of separate events. Ricoeur (1984) contends, “by mediating between the two poles of event and story, emplotment brings to the paradox a solution that is the poetic act itself.” The process of creating an electronic portfolio occurs in mimesis<sub>2</sub>. In addition to narration occurring in the present, action also takes place in mimesis<sub>2</sub>. Michelle noted that the ePortfolio “encouraged me to pursue opportunities that allow me to utilize the skills I have from sewing and I have from classes. To integrate engineering and sewing together.” By connecting her past experiences through narrative, Michelle had the realization that she wished to work in a field that incorporated both her passions of sewing and engineering.

The third stage of mimesis is the imagined future, mimesis<sub>3</sub>. We are propelled towards this vision of an ideal world. Ricoeur (1984:71) posits that mimesis<sub>3</sub>, “marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader; the intersection, therefore, of the world configured by the poem and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality.” In my conversation with Michelle and analysis of her ePortfolio, I realized that the future is not necessarily explicit in the text of the portfolio, however it exists in the process of creating an ePortfolio. Her ePortfolio was created as a way to realize her goals of working in engineering and design. This vision of herself gave her motivation to establish her narrative with this goal in mind.

Michelle's future goals were inextricably connected to her ePortfolio. As we continued to converse on her process, themes about her future continually emerged. Michelle explained that in her portfolio, "I made some connections between activities that I've done and the implications they might have in terms of internships, jobs, future, those kind of things." One story she told was about a potential employer from her favorite company that found her portfolio. The experience "was very interesting, scary, and impressive at the same time." She reflected about her own job potential, noting, "if you have someone who understands how to manufacture clothes and how machines work and has a good sense, an ability to think about problems critically and analyze solutions, there's got to be jobs for people who do those things." After expressing how enjoyable an engineering design project was, and showing pictures of the letter-shaped pasta she designed, Michelle noted, "hopefully an employer who is interested in product design will look at that and understand more of my experience." Michelle explained that the portfolio "incorporates what I can do and what I am capable of." She displayed her proudest academic achievements and reflected on her past experiences, assessing herself in the process.

### **Summary**

Through the ePortfolio, Michelle expressed her personal story, which led to new self-understandings about her identity. In turn, her narrative was shared with others. The learning that she experienced can be understood as a fusion of horizons, as her prior knowledge was expanded through interpretation of the text. Finally, reflections of the past and hopes for the future were mediated in the present through the creation of a narrative, which was interpreted through the framework of mimesis. The new

understandings that emerged through our conversation suggest implications for my dissertation research as well as ideas for ePortfolio practitioners.

## Appendix I: Michelle's ePortfolio—Sewing

[About me](#) | [Resume](#) | [Course Work](#) | [Summer Research 2011](#) | [Employment Experience](#) | [Leadership](#) | [Sewing](#) | [Contact](#)

### Sewing



For me, sewing is so much more than a hobby. It's a way to express my creativity in a practical medium. I first learned to sew on a sewing machine at the age of 12 when I started making dresses for my dolls. From the very beginning I was never satisfied with standard sewing projects. Most of the patterns available for 18 inch doll clothing is pretty much the same boring princessy style. So, when I decided I wanted to make high fashion dresses for my dolls, I had to adapt my patterns to match the vision that I had in my head. This is when I first started to hone the visualization skills that are so important to designing and creating clothing.

Imagining how to take a 2 dimensional medium and create a 3 dimensional product is a skill that I have found useful in more than a few of my engineering classes.

In addition to the visualization skills that sewing has taught me, I have also found that sewing has taught me important skills in the creation process that you can't learn from anything other than experience. For instance, when something isn't going right in a sewing project, I'm forced to come up with new solutions, to innovate and to figure out a way to make it work. Another thing it has taught me is that to do something right, it takes time. Most of my sewing projects take a solid week of working about 10 hours a day to finish. And this process can be frustrating and tiring but the results are always worth it. In this way, my hobby of sewing has become an integral part of my life. Not only has it taught me a unique set of technical skills, but also it has taught me important engineering skills, like visualization and problem solving as well as important life skills, like patience and dedication. To really understand what sewing means to me, I encourage you to click on my photos and read the captions. Every garment has a story and I have done my best to capture them here.





## Appendix K: Michelle's ePortfolio—Leadership

[About me](#) | [Resume](#) | [Course Work](#) | [Summer Research 2011](#) | [Employment Experience](#) | [Leadership](#) | [Sewing](#) | [Contact](#)

### Leadership

AEPHi  
Science Olympiad



Every single college application essay I wrote (and I wrote A TON) asked about leadership. How do you think of yourself as a leader? Describe a situation when you had to take on a leadership role. What qualities do you think are important for being a leader? Write about a time when you exemplified these qualities. BLAH BLAH BLAH, leaders, leadership, BLAH! As you probably gathered, I've never been a big fan of these

questions. I definitely remember complaining loudly to my mother every time I had to write ANOTHER essay about leadership. What if I'm not a leader, I would complain, what if I'm just a follower? The world needs followers after all. Who are "leaders"

supposed to lead if EVERYONE is a leader? Since writing these essays though, I have discovered a lot about leadership, mostly from finding myself in leadership positions. Before being in these leadership positions, I would always picture leadership as Moses guiding the israelites through the Red Sea or something like that and I could never envision myself doing something like that, standing above the rest and guiding



people. But what I've discovered over time is that being a leader doesn't have to be like that. Leadership can mean being with people, caring about people and using that caring to guide them. And fortunately, I love doing all three of those things. I like to be around people and I care about my inter-personal relationships more than anything else in my life. And from these experiences, I've discovered that living my life with people who I care about, gets me 90% of the way to being a leader.