Embracing Collaborative Opportunities Between Communication Centers and Departments: Examining an ePortfolio Bootcamp

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Introduction and Rationale

Turner and Sheckles (2015) explain that communication centers are centered on campus and impact students' relationships with career and community opportunities (p. xii). This point is apparent in our centers' relationships with departments in addition to the career-development of student communicators. This article situates the communication center at the intersection of experiences developed through an intensive, embedded collaborative effort to enhance the communication-design process and experience for students.

This unit activity challenged students to engage a full communication-design process through a collaborative partnership between the class and the communication center that tasked students to create their online, professional presence through an ePortfolio. The experience incorporated a series of workshops designed to provide students with the background and planning skills that contribute to the design of an effective professional online persona. Guided by the previous research of Carpenter, Apostel, & Hyndman (2012) as they examined the process of embedding workshops for ePortfolio design in communication-intensive courses, this unit activity focuses on enhancing the visual, written, and oral communication skills of students in the Communication, Leadership, and Change course at a regional comprehensive university.

As the capstone class for all Communication Studies seniors, part of the experience focuses on assisting students to move from their role as students to professionals. An alternative to the

traditional paper resume, the ePortfolio is a multimodal project, incorporating visual, oral, and written communication modes and serves as an important tool in preparing students for the job search. As students are directed to create their ePortfolio, summarizing the skills learned in their major, they are able to effectively articulate the experience and value of their communication degree to potential employers. The ePortfolio is intended to show the value of students' educational experiences in ways that are interactive, engaging, and creative. Through this experience, students can expect to create a professional ePortfolio from the beginning of the process to its end, making decisions about the design concept, considering aesthetic elements that showcase their experiences and educational background, and enhancing their work through the presentation of digital information. Building on Carpenter and Apostel's (2012) examination of the role of communication space in the teaching of oral and visual communication projects, the communication center where these workshops occurred provided students with an interactive environment where they began the process by sketching and talking about the potential organization of their ePortfolios and then drafted and showcased their final projects. The unit activity bridges both classroom instruction and interactive, peer-to-peer activity to enhance the experience and process for students. For this unit activity, we asked students to consider the following questions:

- What professional persona do you want (need) to create?
- If your ePortfolio was made available to potential employers devoid of any direct contact with you, how might it portray your professional preparation and education?
- What might you want visitors to remember about you?

The Project

This project exemplifies ways in which academic programs might embrace opportunities with the communication center. In particular, the collaboration between the capstone course and the communication center offers graduating seniors intensive and ongoing workshops as they design ePortfolios showcasing their academic accomplishments and their preparation for a career in the communication field. This collaboration also highlights the communication-design

process, which began with the design-thinking phase of pretotyping (examining ePortfolio options), moving to a prototyping process of sketching posters on large sheets with colored pencils, and then focusing on design and analysis. Collaborating with the communication center on campus, and positioning the director of the communication center as a second resource and point of feedback for the ePortfolio portion of the course, provided additional perspective on instruction, design, and technology.

We spent the first class workshop introducing the role of the ePortfolio, providing a description of the project, the evaluation rubric, and resources available in the communication center that support students in their design process. The evaluation rubric focuses on five dimensions as outlined in Table 1.

Dimension	Explanation
Concept Originality	Ability to define problems, explore various possibilities, and develop unique solutions
Aesthetic Quality	Sensitivity to the principles of design and successful fulfillment of project criteria
Digital Presentation	Display of technical skill, ability to follow directions, craftsmanship
Writing	Display of writing skill through grammar, diction, and structure as it relates to audience and purpose.
Formatting	Sensitivity to audience reading the text on screen

Table 1. Explanation of Rubric Dimensions

In the first workshop, students discussed:
- The definition of an ePortfolio,
- The rationale for creating an ePortfolio,
- The audience, purpose, and context for creating ePortfolios.

As a class, we then viewed three sample ePortfolios with varying strengths and weaknesses related to the dimensions discussed in Table 1. We discussed the first sample as a class, noting

any design elements or decisions the author made. We then approached the second ePortfolio specifically as communication designers and professionals, looking specifically at visual communication choices, writing and organization, and how these choices informed our impression of the sample. For the third sample, we displayed the ePortfolio and browsed it methodically as a professional viewer or potential employer might approach it, while students were placed into groups and then analyzed decisions that worked well and those that could be improved along with a rationale as to why they thought this way. The small groups debriefed and then developed a set of recommendations for the third sample that they then shared as teams. After this initial viewing and discussion, students then worked in their small groups of three to four using large sheets of paper and colored markers, selected a topic, and sketched their group ePortfolio to demonstrate and experience the design process.

For the second workshop, students brought in the most recent drafts of their resumes and color-coded what they found the most critical to include in the ePortfolio. They considered what headings and tabs they would need to include and what visuals would represent their experience best. Students then sketched an initial conceptual draft of the ePortfolio using these elements. They then used the final portion of class to begin exploring WIX, a freely available website development platform that they used to create their ePortfolios by working on their top-level headings while the facilitator roamed the room and provided feedback as students encountered challenges or questions.

For the third workshop, students used laptops available in the space and had, at least, all headings and organizational elements prepared in the ePortfolio. They designed elements during the workshop and broke into pairs to assist each other with any challenges while building in audio and visual elements as they collected and finalized them.

During the final workshop of the series, students presented their polished ePortfolios to the class through brief, three-to-four minute introductions with interactive demonstrations that showed design elements and navigational decisions. During this time, the professor and communication center Director both provided feedback from academic and potential professional perspectives. The showcase served as the culminating experience in the class while

also giving students the opportunity to reflect on their accomplishments, lessons learned, and rhetorical decision-making.

Debriefing

When students shared their final ePortfolios, we were interested to learn more about their process, approach, and decision-making while highlighting the importance not only of the final product but also the process that they had followed. Because students were seniors, and would soon be graduating and seeking professional employment, we also wanted to shape the curriculum in such a way that it would be valuable to them as an academic experience appropriate for a student but also encourage them to think, present, and analyze their work as emerging professionals.

During the showcase, the professor and director, in collaboration, posed questions to students to facilitate this process. We asked students to overview the ePortfolio so that we would understand the project and elements as a whole. We then honed in on design and organizational elements that were intriguing from an academic or potential employer's perspective. For example, we asked students to briefly explain design choices, including choice of bio or background photo based on their career aspirations and audience addressed in their ePortfolio. We also asked students to help us understand and connect organizational and aesthetic decisions as a potential employer might expect them to elaborate on their background, experience, and future career goals.

The ePortfolio project is not tied to one aspect of communication theory or leadership philosophy but provides an opportunity for students to adapt their experiences from the class and workshops in such a way that they also consider how communication impacts their personae as leaders of organizational change. This project and process can be employed and adapted in a variety of other communication courses. For example, the project can be scaled down to a minor component of the course or expanded to create a semester-long experience for students as they examine leadership philosophies and styles through course texts. The project can be incorporated into Organizational Communication, Visual Communication, and Business and Professional Communication courses.

Appraisal

This collaboration builds on the integrated model discussed by Carpenter, Apostel, and Hyndman (2012), which explores the convergent and divergent process of ePortfolio workshops, bringing students together to focus on design strategies and encouraging students as individuals to implement communication strategies. Carpenter and Apostel (2012) examine the communication center's role in providing a "dwelling place" for students as they design communication projects such as ePortfolios, highlighting the benefits of space designed specifically for envisioning and honing communication projects, including the layout of the space and access to trained consultants. Their research suggests that students benefit from having flexible space to design and hone their communication.

Following the process and rubric available in Carpenter, Apostel, and Hyndman (2012), the faculty member and director reviewed and evaluated ePortfolios for concept originality, aesthetic quality, digital presentation, writing, and formatting by giving each ePortfolio a 1-3 score in each of these categories. Once the semester concluded, the faculty member and director met to establish a coding scheme for this research, then through a norming process, ensured intercoder reliability by assessing and comparing rubric results. Each ePortfolio was reviewed individually and the totals for dimensions recorded for each one. We offer the total scores for the ePortfolios (Table 2) to examine the relative importance of the faculty member's review and scores when compared to the director's.

Dimension	Faculty Member	Director	Mean
Concept Originality	26	27	26.5
Aesthetic Quality	26	26	26
Digital Presentation	23	23	23
Writing	27	26	26.5
Formatting	28	27	27.5

Table 2. Rubric Scoring Results by Total and Mean

As indicated in Table 2, students scored the highest in formatting the ePortfolio, which included readability of font choices, color palettes, textual organization and paragraphing, and visibility of images incorporated. Writing and concept originality both received a 26.5 rating. Several sessions focused on brainstorming concepts for ePortfolios and the importance of elements of designing communication for the web. Digital presentation was rated the lowest, which considered factors such as hyperlinks and the use of digital media elements to enhance the ePortfolio. Technical skill was not as much a focus during the workshops as rhetorical considerations.
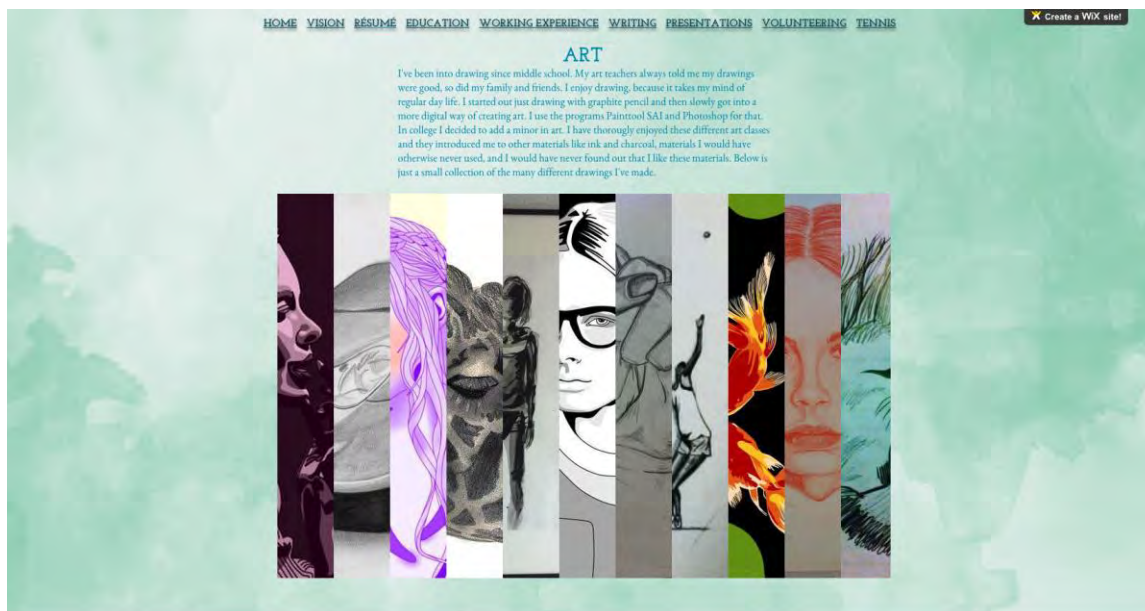

Figure 1. Student Sample ePortfolio (used with permission)

The ePortfolio evaluation process has provided guidance for developing future collaborations. Based on the results, future collaborations will include more class time for the ePortfolio planning and design process. We also plan to use the rubric (Appendix A) to organize and scaffold the workshop planning process, which will allow students to consider ways in which the dimensions contribute to their professional ethos through the ePortfolio.

Embracing the opportunity to share this model and the results with colleagues, we expect that the stages of the process will be adapted and replicated in other communication centers and courses.

References

Carpenter, R., & Apostel, S. (2012). Communication center ethos: Remediating space, encouraging collaboration. In W. Atkins-Sayre and E. Yook (Eds.), *Communication centers and oral communication programs in higher education: Advantages, challenges, and new directions* (161-174). Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.

Carpenter, R., & Apostel, S, & Hyndman, J. (2012). Developing a model for ePortfolio design: A studio approach. *International Journal of ePortfolio, 2*(2), 163-172.

Turner, K., & Sheckles, T. (Eds.). (2015). *Communication centers: A theory-based guide to training and management.* Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.

Appendix 1: Evaluation Rubric for ePortfolios

Dimension	Beginning	Developing	Prepared	Comments
Concept Originality **Ability to define problems, explore various possibilities, and develop unique solutions.**	Provides little or no evidence of new thought, inventiveness or creativity.	Concept supports design task; demonstrates some new thought, inventiveness or creativity.	Concept effectively addresses the design task; extends others' approaches in inventive ways; may show significant evidence of originality and inventiveness.	
Aesthetic Quality Sensitivity to the principles of	Visuals are either too simplistic or cluttered and busy. Graphic effects fail to support the message	Visual elements relate to content. Visual design criteria (balance, contrast,	Skillful handling of design elements creates unique and effective style. Visual elements and content reinforce	

design and successful fulfillment of project criteria.	and hamper communication of content; graphics are gratuitous. Concept fails to support design task.	proportion, harmony, etc.) expressed. Graphical elements reinforce content and are functional.	each other. Design strategy supports message. Overall, an effective and functionally sound design.
Digital Presentation Display of technical skill, ability to follow directions, craftsmanship.	Poor craftsmanship given available technologies. For multimedia, no attempt to manipulate timing, flow, transitions, for effect. Production errors not addressed. Project fails to address assignment criteria.	Acceptable craftsmanship. No obvious easily correctable errors. For multi-media projects, elementary efforts to control timing, flow, transitions. Project fulfills assignment criteria.	Clear effort to achieve high production values and to use production techniques to enhance product. Craftsmanship or presentation may approach professional quality. Project goes beyond assignment criteria.
Writing Display of writing skill through grammar, diction, and structure as it relates to audience and purpose.	Multiple instances of inappropriate grammar and word choice considering the audience; arrangement of ideas is illogical and lacks a clear purpose.	Word choice and sentence structure basic but effective for the audience; arrangement of ideas is inconsistent in logic and purpose. Mistakes in grammar do not interfere with content.	Word choice, sentence structure, and grammar are appropriate to the topic and audience. Ideas are logically arranged and demonstrate a clear purpose.
Formatting Sensitivity to the audience reading the text on the screen.	Text is difficult to read on the screen due to size and/or color choice; no usage of space or paragraphs.	Text is legible most of the time; some usage of space or paragraphs to make the text more accessible for the reader.	Text is easy to see and read; text is divided into easily scanned sections; section heads and subheads provide easy access.

The ePortfolio rubric is adapted from:

Carpenter, R., & Apostel, S, & Hyndman, J. (2012). Developing a model for ePortfolio design: A studio approach. *International Journal of ePortfolio, 2*(2), 163-172.

Metros, S. E., & Dehoney, J. (2006). *Communicating visually: New fluencies for the academic community conference workshop.* San Diego, CA: EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative.