
Failure and Success: Lessons Learned from Two Eportfolio Studies

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Abstract: Electronic portfolios (ePortfolios) have been used in many disciplines for different purposes. In recruiting, employers assess the candidates' ability to perform the desired quality of work. Portfolios give employers an in-depth look at the applicant's skills and ability. A career portfolio is actually an extension of a resume. Two career ePortfolio projects were implemented in career planning classes in a community college in Fall 2012 and Summer 2013; 49 students participated. The data revealed tremendous differences between the two classes as regards the students' motivation to use the ePortfolio, project outcomes, and the desire to continue the ePortfolio on their own. In the fall class, 42% of the students were dissatisfied with the project, and 74% did not want to continue the ePortfolio after the semester ended. However, in summer class, 95% of the students were satisfied with the project and wanted to continue the ePortfolio on their own. What were the key success factors in summer class? The researcher found that a successful career ePortfolio project requires weekly lab hours, technical support, frequent feedback, one-on-one coaching from the instructor, a motivation for the students to work extra hours outside class time, and the embedded grade in the project.

Key words: career planning, community college, ePortfolio, job search preparation

1. Introduction

In recent times, the electronic portfolio (ePortfolio) model has been adopted by many disciplines. An ePortfolio serves as a tool to support student learning in higher education in both public and private colleges and universities (Skiba, 2008; Chen & Black, 2011). At the City University of New York (CUNY), ePortfolios have become a highly promoted initiative. In fact, 18 members of the university-wide ePortfolio subcommittee are drawn from its Committee on Academic Technology, which is composed of 48 members who represent the 25 campuses of CUNY. ePortfolios have been used in many disciplines for different purposes. For example, ePortfolios are used in the Teacher Education Department in various colleges/universities, such as the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) and Queens College. An ePortfolio can be used to help students in college transfers and career search. When recruiting, employers assess the candidates' capability for high-quality work. In a special event at the BMCC on April 4, 2012, entitled "Empowering College Graduates", the presenter, Mr. Elliott Levine, an Education Strategist from Hewlett-Packard, said that a resume only gives employers a glimpse of what the applicant can do, but a career portfolio shows the proof. Making the adoption of the portfolio model in career planning class a priority is aligned with BMCC's mission of fulfilling personal and career goals, and preparing students for career mobility.

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2. Statement of the Problem

The CUNY Six-Month Post-Graduate Survey 2011–2012 revealed that 35.6% of BMCC graduates hold jobs that are not related to their field of study, while 23.6% are unemployed and seeking employment. The problem of students in their employment search could be their overwhelming desire to simply land any job rather than satisfy their true passion. This is a common dilemma in the job search process, and it hinders students from discovering themselves and their life's purpose. A job search thus becomes an instrumental, task-oriented process (Wang, 2013). The process of setting one's life goals and achieving them can be extremely confusing for students. According to Wang, for students to succeed in their job search, they need to take the time to develop insights into themselves and assess what is meaningful to them. Self-awareness is a central concept in career planning and development because understanding one's self is crucial in employment search. Statistics reveal the need to reflect on how the faculty can help students deepen their self-understanding, improve their job search self-efficacy, and eventually plan a meaningful career path.

Each curriculum has its distinct challenges in supporting student learning. However, a common challenge for the faculty is how to create an innovative pedagogy in classroom teaching that motivates and enhances student learning. The Developmental Portfolio, a type of ePortfolio, can demonstrate the advancement and development of students' knowledge and skills over a period. It supports students' self-assessment and reflection by helping them find out what they want to become as regards career and life. At present, only the Teacher Education Department of BMCC implements the ePortfolio, and its format is prearranged specifically for student teachers. It is becoming increasingly essential to incorporate the ePortfolio in other disciplines to support the entire student body in successful job searches. Career planning was the first class to integrate the ePortfolio component.

3. Literature Review

An ePortfolio is an electronic system that facilitates the development, collection, and management of digital resources. These resources might be drawn from a range of learner experiences over a period, including formal and nonformal learning opportunities (Peacock, Gordon, Murray, Morss, & Dunlop, 2010). Recent research has shown that ePortfolios permit students to appreciate their classroom work as preparatory skills development for future jobs (Rowh, 2008; Ken, 2012). The method also increases the students' marketability by exhibiting their individual skills and capabilities to prospective employers (Fred, 2004; Saul, 2005; Anderson, Gardner, Ramsbotham, & Tones, 2009). A study by Naude and Moynihan (2004) on the ePortfolio experiences of 32 students indicates that self-reflection via activities, such as the evaluation of skills and setting of learning and career goals was thought to be the most valuable aspect of the process. Essentially, an ePortfolio is an extensive resume that links to an electronic repository of a student's papers, projects, and extracurricular activities. It affords students a new sense of their own accomplishments (Young, 2002), thus further contributing to a positive learning experience.

The researcher, backed by five years of teaching career planning, identifies the areas that should be improved to boost the students' success in their future job search: (1) a systematic approach with technological support to prepare students for employment search, pursuant to the current online recruitment trend and (2) an authentic approach to their self-exploration/discovery so as to deepen their awareness and understanding of who they are and what they desire in life. The ePortfolio concept is multifaceted, as it constitutes a technology, pedagogical approach, "process", and "product". According to Chen and Black (2011), an ePortfolio captures and documents

the students' learning, reflection, rationale building, and planning, thereby establishing a culture that shares personal learning and promotes student-centered learning. Because of the positive results, this researcher decided to integrate the ePortfolio in the career planning class so as to improve the students' chances of finding jobs in the current competitive market. This proposed study was guided by the following questions:

- (1) What impact does integrating the ePortfolio in career planning class have on students' job search preparation?
- (2) What impact does integrating the ePortfolio have on the students' overall learning experience?

4. Limitation

The two studies were conducted in different classroom environments. In Fall 2012, students met for one hour and 40 minutes a week through 15 weeks, for a total of 25 hours. In Summer 2013, students met for a total of four-and-a-half hours — twice a week for six weeks. The students in Summer 2013 had more professional work experience and were older and more mature than the students in Fall 2012.

5. Technology — Web Tool

5.1 Eportfolio Platform Selection — Epsilon

There are many portfolio software platforms, such as Digication, Coroflot, Carbonmade, VisualCV, and Epsilon, which the students can use to create their own portfolios. The researcher chose Epsilon (www.epsilon.com) to conduct this study because the tool requires a relatively low learning curve and is available with an "edu" address to faculty and students at no cost. Epsilon features that are relevant to this project include welcome notes (biography), resume, contact information, showcase (a collection of a student's document files, videos, and sites), interests, certification, and blog. To ensure online security, Epsilon provides users with the capability of assigning access keys to any part of an individual ePortfolio. An access key is a password for protecting a file, folder, entire section (such as a blog), or specific item (such as a telephone number in the contact information) of the ePortfolio. An Epsilon user can create multiple access keys to keep online items secure and show them only to the intended audience. In November 1, 2012, ConnectEDU announced the acquisition of Epsilon. ConnectEDU is a privately held technology company committed to preparing and transitioning 21st-century learners from school to college to career, helping them realize their potential, achieve a secure financial future, and ultimately connect to life's possibilities. Both Epsilon and ConnectEDU have an intense focus on students' lifetime success, and the companies complement each other in their solutions. The researcher is confident that the selection of Epsilon is good for the students.

6. The Study in Fall 2012

The researcher conducted an ePortfolio study in the CED201 Career Planning class in Fall 2012. The class met for one hour and 40 minutes a week for 15 weeks. Thirty-two business students registered for the class and learned how to create their ePortfolio project, 80% of whom were in the 18–22 age bracket and had very little or no work experience. Only 19 volunteered to fill out the survey on their ePortfolio experience at the end of the semester. The survey questions covered the students' technological skills, ease in navigating the Epsilon platform, ePortfolio completion status, challenges of creating an ePortfolio, hours spent on the ePortfolio outside class, and

desire to continue the ePortfolio on their own after the semester ended. Below is a brief description of the study.

6.1 Class Design

During the second week of the class, the students created their ePortfolio accounts via the Epsilen platform. They learned the basic technology functions with the help of Ms. Carina Nieves, a guest speaker and ePortfolio mentor from Queens College, City University of New York. The career ePortfolio project was given as an extra credit assignment to students in consideration of their possible anxiety and resistance to the new online environment. The students were given assignments for the project throughout the semester, such as “Statement of Who I Am”, “Resume”, and “Reflection on Accomplishments”. They needed to upload the assignments on three components of the ePortfolio: “Welcome Notes”, “Resume”, and “Showcase”. Because of the unavailability of a computer lab, the students had to build their ePortfolio practically on their own. Whenever they had questions, the researcher demonstrated the ePortfolio how-to functions in the classroom. In addition, the researcher allocated three office hours per week for individual consultation.

6.2 Data and Findings

Throughout the semester, the researcher received merely three e-mails from the students about technical issues. Only two of the 32 students expressed interest in developing their ePortfolio and had individual consultations with the researcher. By the end of the semester, 90% of the class had dropped the ePortfolio project, and their responses to the assignments were not positive. Nineteen students volunteered to fill out the ePortfolio experience survey. Following are the findings from the students’ responses:

(1) Lack of motivation. Forty-two percent (42%) of the students did not believe that the employer/human resources department would have the time and interest to read their career portfolio. Sixty-five percent (65%) believed that the ePortfolio is best suited for art, multimedia, and video students, not students of accounting, business administration, and nursing.

(2) Concern about privacy. The Epsilen ePortfolio is a public webpage that can be seen by anyone with Internet access. Thirty-two percent (32%) of the students were reluctant to reveal their school or job-related work in a public forum, even if Epsilen provides a key function that gives users access control over specific parts of the information to protect privacy.

(3) Difficulty with the Epsilen platform and future charges by the company. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of the students claimed to have difficulty in navigating the Epsilen platform on their own, even though 79% had rated themselves as having good or excellent computer skills. The Epsilen account is free, but 65% were concerned about possible future charges should the company change its policy. Therefore, they did not want to spend time and effort on the project.

(4) Not knowing what work to include and how to present it. A fourth (25%) of the students did not know what to showcase in the ePortfolio. A few said they were only in their first semester in college and did not have any work to present yet. Sixty-five percent (65%) said they were not in the habit of keeping a record of their school assignments. The rest claimed they did not find any accomplishment that was presentable enough for a prospective employer.

(5) Lack of time. Thirty-two percent (32%) of the students claimed they did not have time for the ePortfolio project because of the amount of work it required, their college course load, responsibility at home, and part-time jobs. Fifty-eight percent (58%) spent less than five hours on the assignment outside class during the whole semester because they did not have the motivation to work on this extra credit assignment.

The researcher struggled to successfully implement the Fall 2012 project because of the incomplete pedagogical design and the lack of lab hours and technical support. The researcher realized that the students needed individual support, but providing one-on-one guidance to 32 students required a tremendous amount of outside-class time. Finding time slots wherein both the researcher and students were available was a major challenge. In addition, the majority of the students did not believe that a career ePortfolio could help them with their job search. A few stated that they worried about employers' poor technology skills and did not want to take the risk of sending an electronic profile that might, ironically, be the cause of their rejection. Seventy-four percent (74%) of the students did not want to continue the ePortfolio after the semester ended. The researcher reflected on the pedagogical design and suggested improvements in the following areas:

(1) Show the class other students' ePortfolios and promote student engagement. It is important to help students make a psychological investment in learning and developing this ePortfolio project. Other students' ePortfolios and success stories in using their ePortfolios for employment search, college transfer, graduate school, and scholarship application may motivate the students of this class to complete the project.

(2) Graded ePortfolio assignment. Students will be motivated to complete their career ePortfolio project if it is a graded assignment. A grade is normally the most obvious extrinsic reward for most students.

(3) Provide technical support and lab time. It is extremely important to provide immediate support when students encounter technological challenges. Because of the time constraints of the students and faculty, the required lab hours can help students familiarize themselves with the online technological platform and hone their technical skills.

(4) Create a custom-made instructional ePortfolio manual. Since the ePortfolio is new to students who are planning their careers, the classroom alone is not sufficient to develop their skills. A custom-made ePortfolio instructional manual for the project is recommended.

(5) Encourage peer feedback. Feedback from peers is transmitted more quickly and in larger quantities. The objective opinions of peers can be very helpful in creating a good ePortfolio project. It also will save the instructor a tremendous amount of time and make the project more manageable.

(6) Create a career ePortfolio rubric. A rubric can communicate expectations between the faculty and students, and assess the students' performance in both graded and extra credit assignments.

Moreover, faculty who want to integrate the ePortfolio in classroom teaching should have experience in developing an ePortfolio. The experience of developing an ePortfolio allows a faculty member to foresee students' difficulties and thus create a better pedagogical design to facilitate their engagement in learning. In Fall 2012, the researcher was excited about implementing the project in classroom teaching but had very little practical experience in creating an ePortfolio. Thus, she could not anticipate the students' challenges and did not know how to encourage critical reflection on the design and use of the ePortfolios. An ePortfolio is not a collection of data, but a learning tool to deepen the students' learning about themselves and knowledge of the subject. The failure of the project is attributable to the researcher.

7. The Study in Summer 2013

Seventeen students registered for the career planning class in Summer 2013, 65% of whom had over five years of professional work experience. Their ages ranged from 23 to 55 years. The career planning class met for a total of four-and-a-half hours — twice a week for six weeks.

7.1 Class Design

The students were given a graded career ePortfolio project that accounted for 15% of their entire grade. The researcher was able to reserve computer labs in order to allow students to work on their ePortfolio for at least an hour per week, with guidance and support from the instructor and ePortfolio consultant. An ePortfolio instructional manual (Appendix) was created using Softchalk software and uploaded on the class Blackboard. A rubric of the ePortfolio project was included in the manual. The three key components that students had to complete on Epsilen’s ePortfolio design were (1) Welcome Notes — a place for self-introduction, (2) Resume, and (3) Showcase — a place for presenting achievements such as educational accomplishments, school activities, community participation, and work performance. The researcher designed class assignments that helped students complete the three key areas, such as a reflective writing about themselves, work value assessment, seven successful stories, and resume writing. The researcher invited ePortfolio consultant Professor Fei-Wen Pirovolikos from Queens College to demonstrate the use of the ePortfolio and explain Epsilen’s technological functions. This bolstered the students’ technical skills, and they were able to create a portfolio immediately.

In addition, the researcher made the purpose of the career portfolio project clear to the students on the very first classroom session. Three ePortfolios created by students from Queens College and their positive outcomes were demonstrated to the class. The students were receptive to the new way of presenting their knowledge, skills, resume, and accomplishments to prospective employers. They were responsible for giving their peers feedback on the design, writing, image, and evidence selections. The researcher asked the students about the effects of integrating the ePortfolio in career planning class.

7.2 Data and Findings

Below are the findings from the survey.

Table 1 Survey Results

The ePortfolio project ...	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1) Increased self-confidence.	95%	5%	0%
2) Improved self-understanding.	100%	0%	0%
3) Increased job-search confidence.	95%	0%	5%
4) Increased technological skills.	77%	23%	0%
5) Improved writing skills.	70%	30%	0%
6) Improved organization skills.	70%	30%	0%
7) Improved motivation to learn the subject.	88%	12%	0%
I want to continue to develop my ePortfolio on my own after the class is over.	95%	5%	0%

Note: Data from Summer 2013, 17 career planning students

The data revealed that 100% of the students agreed that the ePortfolio project helped them deepen their self-understanding. The project required them to constantly reflect on their learning experience, work-related skill levels, and desired career and life goals. Self-awareness and understanding is a central concept in career planning and development. A person who has deeper self-understanding can plan a better future. Seventy percent (70%) of the students agreed that the project improved their writing and organizational skills. A digital portfolio is a collection of electronic evidence, which often includes inputted text, electronic files, and images. The students needed to constantly assemble, manage, and check the accuracy and quality of their evidence. The data also revealed that 77% agreed that the project improved their technological skills. A few expressed their anxiety about

using technology and learning various functions of the Epsilon portfolio at the beginning of the class. All students completed their project at the end of the term, and 95% said they would like to continue to develop their ePortfolio on their own.

The students expressed their experience about the three key areas they needed to complete — “Welcome Notes”, “Resume”, and “Showcase”. Below are their responses:

“Welcome Notes”. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of the students said that “Welcome Notes” was meaningful and relatively easy to complete. The section helped them think deeply about themselves, and their interests and values. Below are excerpts of what they wrote:

I found “Welcome Notes” the most comfortable sections of the three. It is both interesting and a little bit challenging. It leads me to question myself: “Who am I? What are my interests? What are my values?” It makes me think deeply, be honest, and explore myself more than ever.

It was the easiest part of the ePortfolio because I used a quote that makes it meaningful.

I spent time to write my self-introduction. I reflect and think deeply about what I want for my future life and what career should I choose in order to be happy.

However, a small number of students found it difficult to complete this section because of their concern about privacy in the public forum. A student wrote:

[W]hen it comes to introducing myself to others ... I don't like people to know even a little about me because it is dangerous to put personal information in web pages these days.

“Resume”. Twenty-three percent (23%) of the students claimed that the “Resume” section was relatively difficult and challenging. Writing a solid and effective resume for landing a dream job required several skills: choosing right keywords and effective titles, knowing how to describe professional achievements instead of merely listing responsibilities, and more importantly, understanding the purpose of the resume and who the audience was.

However, 77% claimed that “Resume” was the most important and helpful section. The “Resume Wizard” was clear and easy to do. The Epsilon portfolio enabled the students to construct an organized and professional resume for presentation to prospective employers. Here are some passages that the students wrote:

It was the hardest to get done. I didn't know what I should put in the resume because I have little work experience. In addition, I am not familiar with how to change the font and letter size in the ePortfolio.

My resume looks very professional and I feel very confident about my job search.

I consider preparing Resume as one of the most important and helpful sections. The ePortfolio project helps me to prepare my resume in an organized manner — the best resume I have ever made. The challenging technical part is to how to adjust the font, size, and layout in order to produce a well-organized and presentable resume.

I used the Resume Wizard and the template makes my resume look extremely professional. The tool is very efficient. I am very confident about sending out my resume now.

While building my resume, I had a strong sense of pride in the work that I had done. The sense of pride came because I took the time to reflect on my previous job roles and saw how far I've come in the last few years.

“Showcase”. Sixty-five percent (65%) of the students claimed that “Showcase” was the hardest to complete. Among their challenges were the inability to understand the function of the section, difficulty in identifying what

to include in their accomplishments, and lack of documentation of past work. Below are some of the students' responses:

My biggest challenge was to create my showcase. It was hard for me to find the right words and images that would reflect me.

The difficulty of creating my showcase was in not finding pictures that could prove my accomplishments. I thus realized the need to document my future work and certificates in an electronic form.

It was the most challenging part of the ePortfolio project because I needed to take the time to figure out what comprised my best work. I finally chose my volunteer work and one of my best accounting projects for my showcase.

I struggled a little bit with the choice of the right showcase because it was not completely clear what should be stated in it. Fortunately, I was guided in choosing the images and work success stories that would best represent me. Choosing the right images took a lot of thinking and reflection.

It was the hardest part because I did not know what I could show to viewers. I am an ordinary person with an ordinary life. There is nothing special to show off. In addition, writing is the biggest issue for me. I struggled. With the professor's help, I was able to choose some work wherein I could demonstrate my skills and personal qualities. Then, it became easier.

8. Eportfolio Overall Experience

The students' overall learning experience with the career ePortfolio project was positive and meaningful. They stated that the project had helped them (1) organize prior work and identify achievements, (2) improve their writing and reflection skills, (3) appreciate teamwork and learn how to give feedback, (4) evaluate their personal progress and academic performance, and (5) improve self-confidence and job searching skills. The following are samples of what the students wrote:

I really appreciate this project, which allows me to organize my prior work and identify my achievements.

Working on my ePortfolio helped me improve my reflection ability and writing skills. Now it is easier for me to choose words that better express what I think.

Teaming up with classmates helped me stay focused while working on my ePortfolio, especially when I needed help and feedback about my project. I learned so much about how to create a dynamic portfolio by giving and receiving feedback.

I just love the ePortfolio because it can document my college experience. It gives me a chance to evaluate my progress and see my academic performance and personal growth.

At the beginning, I was truly intimidated by the task because I am not a tech person. But, through the journey of working this project, I learned job search skills, identified my desired career field, and discovered a lot about myself. My ePortfolio is something that I am very proud of and look forward to sharing with others.

9. Discussion (Overall) and Conclusion

Integrating the ePortfolio in classroom teaching requires a well-thought of pedagogical design. The researcher reflected on the two studies — Fall 2012 and Summer 2013 — and concluded that the success of the ePortfolio's implementation hinged on (1) the allocation of regular lab hours throughout the course, (2) technology support for students, (3) regular feedback regarding the students' work and the opportunity for peer

review, (4) one-on-one consultation outside classroom time between the faculty and students, (5) the creation and embedding of class assignments for students in preparing the ePortfolio project, (6) the making of the project into a graded assignment, and (7) the initial implementation of the ePortfolio on a small class — ideally 10 to 15 students — given the enormous time required of the faculty. The faculty needs to define the purpose of the ePortfolio project and its learning outcomes from the start. More importantly, the faculty should have practical experience in creating an ePortfolio. It is also recommended that samples of other students' ePortfolios and corresponding success stories be introduced, such as college transfers, scholarship awards, and employment offers. Presenting such samples can show the students the value of an ePortfolio project and motivate them to spend time and effort in completing it.

The students' experience in Summer 2013 revealed that the ePortfolio can support their college learning experience, prepare them for future employment, and improve their critical thinking and reflection skills. Students can internalize their learning when creating an ePortfolio. According to Light, Chen, and Ittelson (2012), documenting learning in an ePortfolio is a way for students to explore and reflect on their knowledge by asking critical questions, and a means to put the answers into practice. The students' experience revealed that the ePortfolio is a very useful project, helping them develop essential skills for future employment and supporting their learning and personal development.

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Appendix

Eportfolio Instructional Manual on Class Blackboard



How to Create Your Career ePortfolio?

A career ePortfolio is unique in that it focuses on accomplishments, skills, and qualifications acquired in preparation for the workplace and beyond. Some of the materials typically found in a career ePortfolio include a summary of career goals, a professional mission statement, a traditional resume, a list of skills and marketable qualities, a list of accomplishments, samples of related work experience, relevant research, testimonials, letters of recommendation, awards and honors, military records, volunteer service records, and a list of references.

In CED201 Career Planning class, students need to create a career ePortfolio. It is a whole semester long project and students should work on the project from the beginning of the semester.

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Sample Lesson



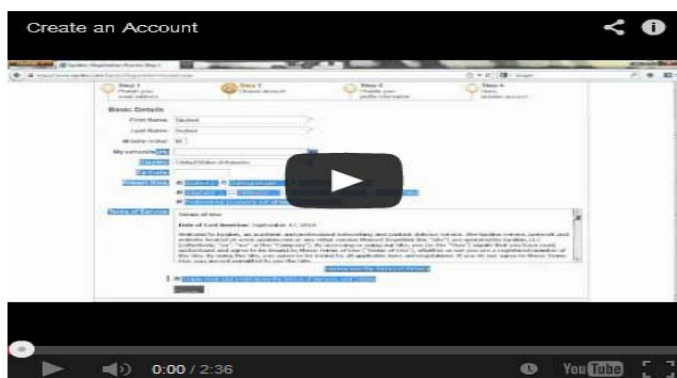
Lesson Two: Build a Career ePortfolio

Watch Video Tutorials [Source: Center for Teaching and Learning, Queens College CUNY]

The ePortfolio platform is Epsilon. Please watch the [video tutorials](#) first.

ePortfolio - Getting Started

1. Create an Account



[Self Check](#)

Eportfolio Rubric

ePortfolio: Rubric

	Exceptional 20 points	Effective 15 points	Satisfactory 10 points	Acceptable 5 points	Non-submit 0 points	
Response to ePortfolio Assignment	Followed all of the professor's directions; completed the assignment; added extra material.	Followed most of the professor's directions; completed the assignment.	Did not follow most of the professor's directions or failed to complete part of the assignment.	Disregarded professor's directions and failed to complete a significant part of the assignment.	Did not complete the ePortfolio assignment.	
Creative Use of Technology	Excellent use of graphics, sounds, e-mail, links, additional software and internet resources.	Several resourceful sounds, graphics, and links used.	A number of uses of sounds, graphics and links.	No evidence of independent resources; monotonous presentation.	Did not complete the ePortfolio assignment.	
Attractiveness	Graphics, colors, font size attractive and easy to read; enhanced portfolio.	Graphics, colors, font size appropriate.	Graphics, colors, font size distracting or adds little to the portfolio.	Graphics, colors, font size distracting and difficult to read; detracts from the portfolio.	Did not complete the ePortfolio assignment.	
Professional Image	ePortfolio presents an excellent professional image.	ePortfolio presents an overall good professional image.	ePortfolio presents an overall acceptable professional image.	ePortfolio presents an overall non-professional image.	Did not complete the ePortfolio assignment.	
Grammar and Punctuation	Flawless grammar and punctuation.	Very few grammar and punctuation errors.	Some grammar and punctuation errors.	Several grammar and punctuation errors.	Did not complete the ePortfolio assignment.	

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