



# Digital Identity

Are students' views regarding digital representation of 'self' gendered?

Lyn Lewis



## ePIC Conference presentation (July 2012)

“It’s your spell-checked version of yourself”: Student perceptions around (re) presenting self through ePortfolio.



Preparing the tiger enclosure at Auckland Zoo

## Research Project (2011)

‘Student perspectives of their learning through ePortfolio’

Focus group: 6 participants from the BEd (primary) programme = 18 months experience with ePortfolio



## 3 emerging issues around digital identity.....

### 1. Representing and revealing the personal 'self'

- conscious selection of material to reveal 'self'
- relationship with lecturer
- alignment with future role of 'teacher'



## 2. Identity construction for different audiences

- Accept that views 'massaged' for audiences
- Significance of context
- ePortfolio as backup, value face-to-face



### 3. Ethics around personal and professional honesty

- Concern with issues of honesty and authentic representation of 'self'
- Concerns about perceptions of others

*"I think its important that everything I put on there is truthful. I mean it's really what I believe and it really is coming from me"*  
(Jane)



## An ePIC conference attendee responds .....

“your participants must have been female... Males would have no ethical problem in projecting a digital ‘self’ very different from their authentic ‘self’, in fact they would consciously construct such an identity in order to create a positive impression on their audience”



## Research Project (2013)

'Digital identity: Are students' views regarding digital representation of 'self' gendered?'

Focus group: 6 participants (**male**) from the BEd (primary) programme = 18 months ePortfolio experience





# 1. Representing and revealing the personal 'self' through ePortfolio

- All 6 in agreement:  
Reveal only as much as is required to meet the assessment criteria and get the task done

*“Generally I would only post things that would be a requirement and nothing much else”. (Sam)*

*“I do not like to put anything of myself on line. That has always been at the back of my mind when I have been using it (ePortfolio). I have always been super cautious of what I put on there... who can see it in 10 years – where it goes when you delete it? Once I realised I had to do it to get through University you just do it in a way that gets you by.” (John)*

## 2. Awareness that digital identity can be constructed and manipulated for different audiences

- All purported to know about digital identity construction, its purposes and contextual influences

*“I would say you are not going to show the un-PC parts of yourself, you are only going to show the really you-PC parts of yourself. So, for most people that is not really who you are, you are only going to show the assignment-appropriate university side of yourself on an ePortfolio. That is not bad as it is a professional thing”. (Ian)*

- Clearly understand that different views will be constructed for different audiences and have no issue with that, as long as the selection of material is honest (not necessarily the message).
- Accept that views will be massaged to suit the purpose and audience's expectations

*“you just need to put the parts that they want to see and that are true. You can't really put in things that don't represent yourself at all.” (Ian)*

- Preference for the physical context where the true 'self' is expressed and concern about the risks associated with constructed identities

Physical  
space is  
real

Digital  
space is half  
real

No taking  
back what  
you say in  
physical  
space

Delete any  
mistakes  
made in  
digital space

Less human  
context in  
digital world

Disconnected  
identities

False personas  
are unhealthy

### 3. Concern with ethics around digital representation of 'self'

While discussing the construction of a view for an employer:

John: So if you're doing it for a principal, it might not even be a true reflection of what you are trying to display in its entirety but you are just putting out what you perceive they want to see

Ian: You can't just completely make it up

John: It's more like tweaking, directing....

Ian: White lies? (laughter)

John: No, not white lies, just like directing, adding or leaving out what you may see fit, directing it at who is going to see it.

- Concern for authentic verification of 'self' in face-to-face interactions

*“As long as you are going to lectures and the lecturer can see who you are there – there will be no ethical issue. But if it was all done online, I would have a bother with that “ (Ian)*

## In summary:

Based on a very small sample of male student teachers, the research findings suggest that:

1. Males are more reserved and reluctant to reveal the 'self' through ePortfolio than females, with a clear division between personal and professional 'self'
2. Males acknowledge that digital identities are constructed to present 'self' in a favourable light, however, value as strongly as females, face-to-face interactions for presentation of 'authentic' identity
3. Males are more pragmatic than females, about the importance of honest representation of the 'self' in a digital form



Are students' views regarding representation of  
'self' gendered?



## What does the literature say about representation of digital 'self'?

- Abrami & Barrett (2005) – showcase/presentation portfolios demonstrate achievements, attributes or competencies for a particular audience
- Ring & Foti (2006) – combination of control and customization raises ethical issues involving showcasing the 'self'
- Stefani, Mason & Pegler (2007) – warn that selection of material can “be used to evidence learning in a persuasive way” (p. 13)
- Ravet (2008) – digital identify or e-self = extension of a physical self to include the total extent of a digital presence, including data ..... Need for 'digital education'

## What does the literature say about representation of digital 'self'?

- Cambridge (2007) – ePortfolio = the genre at the intersection of two spheres of life : more personal than a CV and more professional than Facebook – need to negotiate the tension
- Grant & Grant (2003) – need for ethical ePortfolios which reflect personal identity and values
- Lewis & Gerbic (2012) – teacher educators confronted by challenges of digital representation, ethics of honesty and professional presentations
- Silence on gendered perspective of representing 'self' in the digital medium of ePortfolios

## Implications for Teacher Education Practice

1. Move away from a focus on ePortfolio as tool and beyond ePortfolio as pedagogy – to include digital identity education
2. Discuss with students, issue of ethics and levels of personal accountability, particularly around employment applications
3. Understand the gender differences in representing 'self' and digital identity – adjust expectations?

# References

- Abrami, P. & Barrett, H. (2005). Directions for research and development on electronic portfolios. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, 31(3) Fall. Retrieved from <http://www.cjlt.ca/index.php/cjlt/article/view/92/86>
- Cambridge, D. (2007). Audience, integrity and the living document: eFolio Minnesota and lifelong and lifewide learning with ePortfolios. *Computers in Education*, 51, 1227-1246.
- Grant, S. & Grant, A. (2003). Ethical portfolios: Supporting identities and values. *ePortfolio 2006 Conference Oxford 11-13 October*. Downloaded from <http://www.simongrant.org/pubs/ep2006/>
- Lewis, L. & Gerbic, P. (2012). "It's your spell-checked version of yourself": Student perceptions around (re)presenting 'self' through ePortfolio, *Conference Proceedings, ePIC, London, United Kingdom*.
- Ravet, S. (2008). *The ePortfolio is dead? Long life to digital identity*. IfEL Team Blog April 06. Downloaded from <http://www.learningfutures.eu/2008/04/eportfolio-is-dead-long-life-to-digital.html>
- Ring, G. & Foti, S. (2006). Using eportfolios to facilitate professional development among pre-service teachers (pp. 340-355) in A. Jafari & C. Kaufman (2006) *Handbook of research on eportfolios*. Hershey, PA: Idea Group Reference.
- Stephani, L., Mason, R., & Pegler, C. (2007). *The educational potential of e-portfolios*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge.