ePerformance: Crafting, Rehearsing, and Presenting the ePortfolio Persona

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"ePerformance: Crafting, Rehearsing, and Presenting the ePortfolio Persona" exposes vital intersections between pedagogy and performance to reveal how using ePortfolio encourages not only student-centered learning, but facilitates collaboration through cooperative exchanges. Productive interactivity with audiences who actively influence process, content, and outcomes displaces classroom hierarchies and the passive absorption of predetermined material. It is the powerful intersection of multiple modes of performance that establishes the ePortfolio medium as an elastic, ultra-accessible theatrical arena in which students may create, rehearse, and present themselves. By recognizing that they are not only at the center of learning, but that they are one of multiple centers in a multicentric teaching and learning dynamic, students activate the discourse of which their work is already a part.

Who am I anyway? Am I my résumé?
-A Chorus Line

This essay engages the field of performance theory along with the scholarship of teaching and learning in order to investigate how students use ePortfolio to craft, rehearse, and present themselves through interactions with various audiences. Subheadings below introduce categories common to both theatres and classrooms in order to best explore the overlay between disciplines. Exposing intersections between pedagogy and performance reveals how using ePortfolio can enhance the ways in which students already perform in school and in everyday life. ePerformance encourages not only student-centered learning, but facilitates collaboration through cooperative exchanges, destroying classroom hierarchies by introducing a multicentric teaching and learning dynamic.

Gauging Performance

As Jon McKenzie points out in his turn-of-the-millennium book *Perform or Else*, "performance" remains a "heavily contested concept" whose definition depends highly upon the context in which it is used. We might speak, for example, of an actor's or dancer's performance when referring to a play or a ballet; of a student's or employee's performance while evaluating an individual's work-based output; or of a machine's or software program's performance in determining how well a piece of technology functions. Inside this broad-based, 21st century definition, everyone—and everything—performs.

The electronic portfolio exists as digital technology (which performs) as well as a vehicle for evaluating an individual's work (performance). The ePortfolio also has an inherent ability to function as a performance space, a kind of theatre in which the self is both rehearsed and presented to an audience. In fact, the

multiple modes of "performance" listed above, and nearly every other possible manifestation of performance, articulate to a corresponding multitude of ePortfolio functions, including, but certainly not limited to, its assessment, showcase, and archival capabilities.

Electronic performance shares a great deal in common with live theatrical performance; it even possesses the potential for real-time exchanges. "ePerformance," however, is already an everyday phenomenon beyond the idea of an electronically-staged event. Theorist Steve Dixon recognizes the ubiquity of "digital performances" in everyday life— conducted via blogs, chatrooms, electronic social networks and other interchanges—noting a parallel to Erving Goffman's seminal social-psychology text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1953). Dixon brings into technological play Goffman's notions of performative presentations of the self, with the subject being progressively erased, redefined, and reinscribed as a persona/performer within the proscenium arch of the computer monitor. Personas are honed like characters for the new theatrical confessional box, where, like postmodern performance artists, individuals explore their autobiographies and enact intimate dialogues with their inner selves (2007, p. 3-4). Reflecting, rehearsing, and presenting the self through the ePortfolio medium requires one distinctive element crucial to performance: audience.

Audience

The "audience" for any given ePortfolio may not be readily located or defined. Because ePortfolio invites asynchronous exchanges and promotes sharing through wikis or web-based interfaces, its audience is variable and potentially infinite. A student may perform multiple roles for multiple audiences, as s/he does in everyday life. Audience and actor may also be one-in-the-same, as Goffman put it, "performer and observer

Figure 1
Critical Distance: Performer as Observer

Figure 1: Students record a rehearsal of a colleague's oral presentation in front of a live audience of peers (left), which is then uploaded for reflection on the student's ePortfolio (right). The video prompts self-reflection and is also open to receive tags, comments, and embedded survey evaluations by others. The student may solicit and contemplate feedback before adjusting his performance for a second recording. He may also track his development as a speaker by comparing his different class presentations over time.

of the same show" (1953, p. 80-81). In his examination of social interactions in a pre-digital world, Goffman insists that behavior may be adjusted in private rehearsals of the self where "an individual may be his own audience or may imagine an audience to be present" (p. 81-82).   A student soloing on ePortfolio's virtual stage performs in part or exclusively for the self, as a way of conducting private metacognition. The student may regard his or her self-as-audience by using the digital space to assemble and manipulate what s/he does and is to examine and experiment with a self-authored persona. In this kind of auto-performance, the student constructs, tests, and revises the self for re-presentation to him/herself or to others.

The meta-reflective process of crafting, rehearsing, and presenting an ePortfolio persona requires the student to project the self into a digital environment through representative words, visuals, media, links, etc., thereby necessitating a certain degree of self-estrangement.   When creating an ePortfolio, the student must continually step back to maintain sufficient critical distance in order to best reflect on him/herself and his/her evidence of learning. This reflective strategy relates to a foundational tenet of Bertolt Brecht's instructive epic theatre as expressed in his "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction." Brecht calls for a critical detachment on the part of the actors and the audience in relationship to their investment in the characters and action, emphasizing, "alienation is necessary for all understanding" (Willet, 1964, p. 71). The ePortfolio medium accomplishes this by allowing one to see

oneself performing. As Bret Eynon has quoted one student, ePortfolio "helped me see a new me" (2009). Using 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 (See Figure 1).

Brecht's 1959 vision of the epic stage incorporates multimedia teaching and learning practices to a profound degree, anticipating many of the challenges currently posed by digital stages like ePortfolios. He envisioned "big screens recalling other simultaneous events elsewhere…projecting documents which confirmed or contradicted what the characters said…concrete and intelligible figures to accompany abstract conversations…figures and sentences to support mimed transactions whose sense was unclear…" (1964, p. 71).   Such techniques for rendering intangible encounters and perceptions visible through multimedia stagecraft is particularly relevant in the case of the student who must furnish evidence of the abstract concept of "learning" and to reflect upon it critically. ePortfolio affords the 21st century student a wealth of tools to articulate his/her experiences. Many ePortfolio platforms allow users to incorporate a variety of text, portable documents, images, video, hyperlinks, comment boxes, and web-based sharing tools. Through the ePortfolio medium, a virtual yet hyper-visible, process of self-reflection and presentation may take place.

Sharing, linking, and publicizing ePortfolios realizes the abstract "audience" that students, previously, have only been able to imagine. By preparing to present themselves and their work to potential viewers, students can consider their research and writing in the context of something to be experienced by others. Bret Eynon relates one student's insight of how publishing her ePortfolio sensitized her to a "broader audience." Eynon concludes:

"[t]he situated quality of the learning, its connection to an audience, reinforced its embodied quality…and the fact that Angelica's learning connected to her sense of herself, made it all the more important that she think carefully about her audience and what she wanted them to learn…" (2009).

Such hyperawareness results in raised stakes, motivating higher quality performance because the work stands to be viewed, evaluated, used, and even cited. The "audience" that professors have been encouraging students to consider through their writing and other projects has finally materialized; it is no longer a hypothetical notion within restricted transactions between students and teachers. The virtually unlimited potential for ePortfolio compositions to engage multimedia and promote interactivity brings to light the discourse that writing and performance (in all academic disciplines) has always been.

Setting the Stage

Digitized artifacts may be assembled into the virtual environment much the same way that a theatrical setting might be constructed, costumes built, or properties introduced. One may behave simultaneously as director, actor, spectator, and scenographer, manipulating the scene according to one's personal dramaturgy, powerfully self-producing. Bernie Cook has observed that "[u]ser-generated digital audiovisual content is a signature aspect of Web 2.0." arguing that this "explosion of amateur digital media production has significant implications for teaching and learning" (2009). The ability to "self-produce" through ePortfolio places the student at the center of the learning experience, enabling him to literally operate the controls of his/her own inquiry-based encounters.

Gabriella Giannachi insists that a virtual medium "acts as a theatre" by behaving as a laboratory-like stand-in for reality. She argues that a virtual realm is not antithetical to the real, but rather "a perfect rehearsal space for it…it is both the practice of the real and its theatre….not only a rehearsal space and a theatre, but an archive, a place of memory, a repository for humankind's past, present and future plans, activities, dreams and failures" (2004, p. 151). Giannachi's description of virtual performance spaces is closely aligned to ePortfolio capabilities, but much of

ePortfolio's power lies in its ability to truly function both as a rehearsal and a presentation space, a studio for works-in-process and a slate for goal-planning as well as an exhibition space. Students benefit from the fluid and rapid ease with which they may rehearse and present themselves in the same environment.

ePortfolio may also extend the student's learning experience in a way that renders visible what may not already be apparent. That is, ePortfolio, by necessitating an arena in which the author must continually "set the scene" with evidence of his/her learning facilitates a process of making learning visible. If nothing is deposited or created within the ePortfolio environment, nothing is there, and thus there can be no confirmation of knowledge, no auto-reflection, or any presentation of the self to others. The stage may remain uncomfortably vacant for students and instructors in disciplines not traditionally accustomed to collecting visible evidence of learning. The traditional paper-portfolio medium is already familiar to students and teachers of many creative arts in which learners are guided through a process of constructing and reflecting upon artifacts, or what Helen Chen terms folio thinking (see Chen, 2009, p. 31). Most common are the visual artist's portfolio, the writer's portfolio, and the actor's collection of reels and headshots. For such creative personas, the practice of maintaining a body of work to represent one's range of capabilities and experience is likely standard. In the case where portfolio learning is not already customary in one's discipline, however, the challenge is two-fold: one must integrate folio thinking into the learning experience as well as learn to craft a portfolio electronically.

Running Time

In her analysis of experimental ePortfolio usage, Julie Hughes observes that "ePortfolio seem[s] to expand time," awarding students the rare luxury of time to think, listen, and react (Hughes, 2009, p. 56). Asynchronous interactivity made possible through multimedia ePortfolio exchanges maximizes opportunities for reflection. Whereas in live performance one's cognitions and impulses are confined to parameters established by the dramatic time or real time spent in a theatre/performance space, ePortfolio interactors—including spectators and performers—may each process material at their own speed, with additional time to craft, rehearse, and present meaningful responses. Gertrude Stein has remarked on the anxiety of keeping pace with any live stage play:

"[Y]our emotion concerning that play is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening. So your emotion as a member of the audience is never

going on at the same time as the action of the play…the fact that your emotional time as an audience is not the same as the emotional time of the play is what makes one endlessly troubled about a play." (Last Operas and Plays xxix)

At last a performance space exists where the audience is free from the temporal constraints of the live theatre experience. Asynchronous interactions via ePortfolio, by virtue of not attempting to conduct a live performance, inspire richer reflections, thus resulting in more informed and influential exchanges.

Interactivity

A proliferation of user-friendly, wiki-based, template-driven ePortfolio platforms continue to invite students with even the most rudimentary technical skills to create digital identities. This hyper-inclusive phenomenon is heightened by every creator's ability to conduct exchanges with an audience. Whether a performer presents alone on a private stage for him/herself or his/her instructor, a limited space for his classmates or peers, or for the World Wide Web, the capability exists to interface with a limitless audience though ePortfolio. In the case of wiki-enabled systems, spectators may tag ePortfolio pages with terms to help classify them for future searchers, as well as begin or continue a comment thread. The creator and/or the audience may also elect to link ePortfolio content to Web 2.0 networks, archives, and sharing tools like Twitter, del.icio.us, Diigo, Facebook, and LinkedIn. ePortfolio's seemingly infinite potential for interactivity is a phenomenon that has just begun to be explored.

The ultra-accessibility of a communal, digital performance space is analogous to what performance theorist Herbert Blau has called the "participation mystique." Different from Lucien Lévy-Brühl's concept by the same name, Blau's participation mystique cites trends in a burgeoning 1960s interactive theatre "where anyone could perform, even the audience, regardless of talent or training" (2002, p. 313). This "mystique" designation points to untapped layers of interactivity; we must first ask ourselves: "What do we mean by participation? To what degree? What type—passive or active?" While current pedagogical innovations have just begun to scratch the surface of what interactive exchanges among peers and with external audiences might be facilitated through the use of ePortfolio, experimental performers have probed these questions for decades. We have only begun to uncover the types of exchanges that might become possible as ePortfolio and interfacing Web 2.0 technologies evolve.

Helen L. Chen notes that a student's productive, curatorial role in constructing an ePortfolio cooperates with "the emergence of Generation C (for content), a consumer trend shifting interest away from passive consumption in order to take advantage of technologies offering creative avenues to create and produce digital content" (Chen, 2009, 32). Initially, students often balk at the sheer creative power ePortfolio affords them, preconditioned by habitual media interactions that give users the sensation they creating while ultimately offering only a shallow level of engagement. David Z. Saltz observes that many "interactive" technology audiences merely wind up behaving as "explorers…they are like tourists…[t]heir objective of attention is the work, not themselves in the work" (1997, p. 121). This is the typical case with everyday Internet navigation; one clicks through a series of pre-programmed options with some sensation s/he is interacting with website content, but without power to manipulate or influence the explored terrain. Such perfunctory modes of interactivity mimic traditional classroom attitudes in which the student merely faces the task of following a lecture or navigating a textbook, without power to influence the ideas presented or effectively synthesize course content in the context of his own goals and experiences. Inspired in part by Brecht's instructional theatre, Blau, in his examination of interactive theatre audiences, emphasizes productive exchanges between actors and observers who are "mutually aware" in an arena where performances belong exclusively to neither (1990, p. 277). The concept dissolves barriers between director/actor/audience in the same way that student-centered learning displaces traditional classroom roles and hierarchies established between teacher/student/peers.

A Multicentric Approach to Teaching and Learning

It is not sufficient to say that the center of learning is merely repositioned so that the focus shifts from the teacher and/or pre-established course content to the student. While ePortfolio usage promotes ways of learning that are student-centered, ePortfolios encourage exchanges to be conducted between multiple centers; learning may be performed between student-to-student, student-to-faculty, faculty-to-student so that no one individual may claim an exclusive authorship of its production. It is this multicentric approach to teaching and learning that distinguishes ePortfolios most sharply from course-centric digital exchange mediums like class websites, course-management systems, or course blogs that demand that students travel toward a static, centralized knowledge base in order to gather knowledge. A multicentric community of learning displaces the notion of any one fundamental center. Instead of students congregating around a deceptive, remote concept of a "course" (rendering them no more
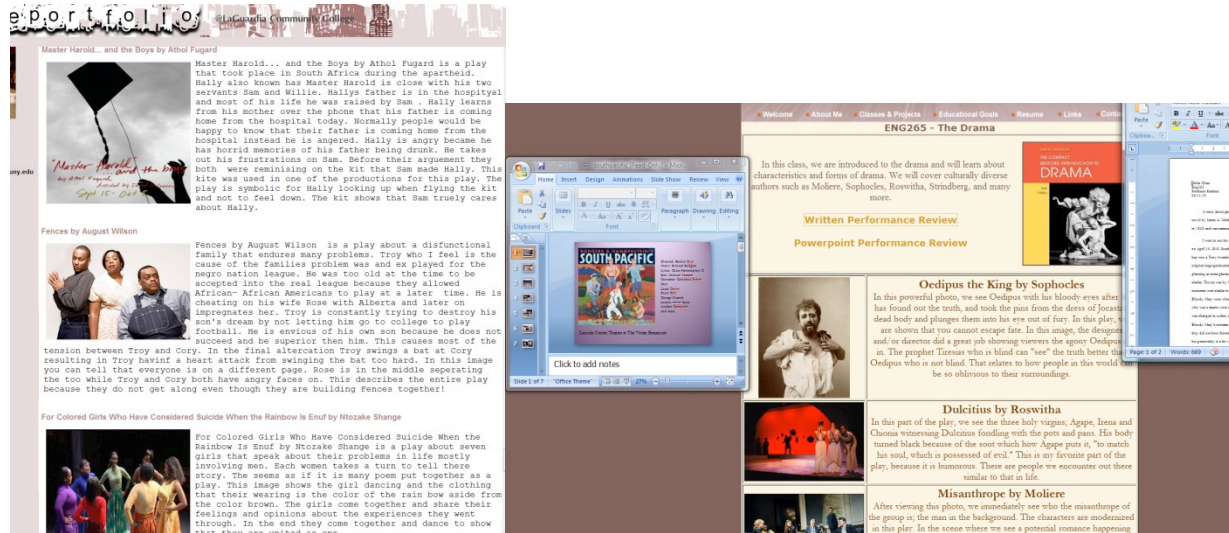
Figure 2
Prosthetic Performances

Figure 2: Drama students craft and transmit impressions of theatrical productions they have endeavored to experience "prosthetically." Some entries invite viewers to encounter performances that the ePortfolios' authors have witnessed. Others attempt to reflect on productions mounted decades or centuries ago.

than "explorers/tourists" of knowledge rather than manufacturers of meaning), they conduct productive dialogues from their centers where they actively synthesize course content in the greater context of their larger digital personas. At last the notion of a larger "course" existing independently of its learners may be recognized as illusory.

The benefits and characteristics of a multicentric approach to teaching and learning cooperate with those illustrated by performer Suzanne Lacy and performance art theorist Meiling Cheng for "multicentric performance." Cheng and Lacy describe authors/performers/audience as an arrangement of concentric circles in which participants behave as non-hierarchical co-developers and roles overlap through collaborative exchanges (2002, p. 130-131). A network of ePortfolio learners exists in much the same way; individuals conduct interchanges concentrically, relating while interacting from multiple cores, exchanging and synthesizing information with direct application to the goals and experiences expressed by individual ePortfolios. Faculty may also choose to build ePortfolios; a faculty ePortfolio emphasizes the instructor's role as another sphere in a multicentric learning process, where collaborative exchanges, transactional communication, and co-authorship are fundamental. Faculty eportfolios may also serve as models for student portfolios, offering pragmatic evidence of the practice of lifelong learning.

Cheng also proposes the idea of "prosthetic performance," claiming that a person who experiences images, recorded music, text, artifacts, documentation, or other residue from a performance could feel even more affected by this virtual encounter than a person who has seen it live—so much that they might even re-imagine the original theatre event as a "prosthetic performance." ePortfolio permits students to transmit first-hand encounters that may then be experienced prosthetically by others. It also allows students to synthesize information in a way that activates a prosthetic connection with learned material. Figure 2 reveals two ePortfolio logs created in a drama course that reflect on archival production photos to "re-produce" historical theatrical performances students have never seen alongside ones that they have experienced first-hand.

Digital "Forum Theatre" and Cooperative Learning

When students operate through a muliticentric teaching and learning dynamic, ePortfolio may be utilized as an interactive forum to imagine different responses and outcomes to conflicts explored in their writing. ePortfolio pages provide a canvas on which to manipulate and explore resources during the initial phase of research. Students may, for example, connect their writing directly to their resources by hyperlinking to electronic texts. My students and I have termed this practice *hypercitation*. By hyperciting sources, juxtaposing texts with images, and digitizing primary materials, each student may generate multimedia portfolio pages that might feature snapshots, videotaped interviews, oral histories, and scanned archival documents. ePortfolio allows students to "stage"
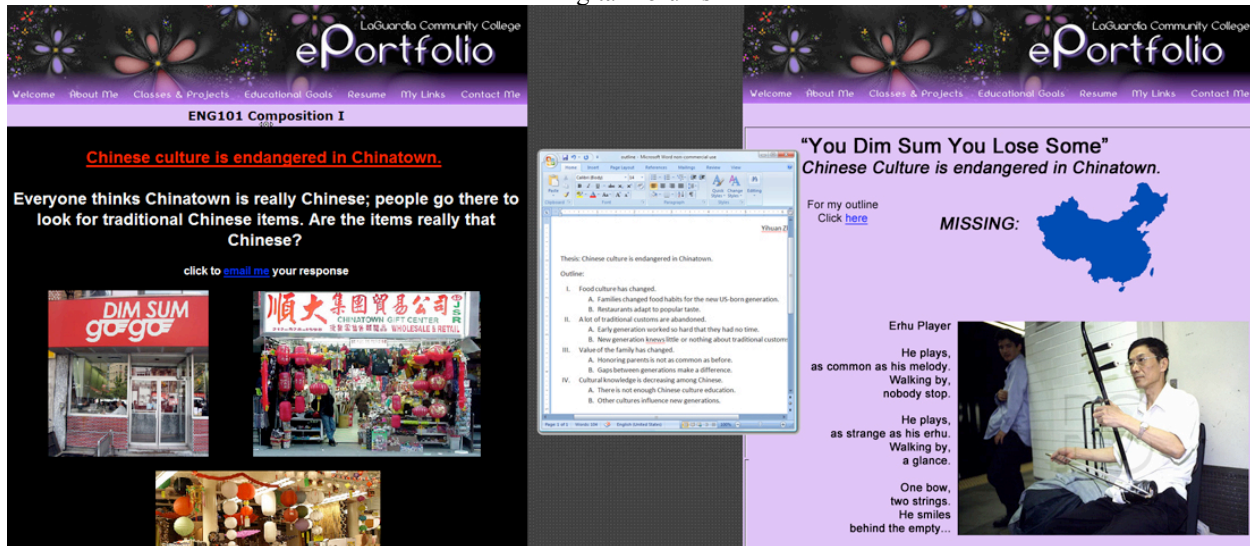
Figure 3
Digital Forums

Figure 3: A student poses a research question to her portfolio audience in gathering evidence for a thesis about the preservation of Chinese culture in Manhattan's Chinatown. Respondents effectively served as collaborators as the student crafted an outline and paper title that incorporated others' impressions of the neighborhood in response to her own.

scenes across media, beyond the constraints of the traditional text-based research process. By uniting artifacts they have both located and created into the same environment, students dialogue more confidently with their sources. After an initial analysis of resources is complete, students move forward to craft a thesis question, publishing possibilities as unresolved "plots" for classmates to review. ePortfolio allows students to "rehearse" and "perform" solutions and test how they will be received by a potential "audience." The class-audience responds by creating a digital forum, an electronic cousin of the "forum theatre" that Augusto Boal popularized through his "Theatre of the Oppressed" for social action. Navigators of classmates' ePortfolios behave as simultaneously spectators and actors (or what Boal calls "Spect-Actors"), posting possible "resolutions" for solving each other's research-based plots. Much like Boal's technique, the class-audience is transformed from passive observers into dynamic participants as they perform productive exchanges and comparisons of their writing through this interactive forum.

Signficantly, Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979) was inspired by his mentor Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). Friere's pedagogical practice proposed a more cooperative approach to teaching and learning in reaction to what he characterized as "banking" methods of education, in which instructors seek merely to "deposit" knowledge in students. The traditional lecture-to-examination based classroom, for example, requires that students acquire and process information passively, through note-taking, memorization, or regurgitation. Conversely, "through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teacher. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" (Freire, 1968, p. 80). Boal's Spect-Actor poses a dramatic equivalent to Freire's students-teacher, proposing new collaborative audiences of teachers and learners. Passive spectators are liberated, transformed into influential participants with agency to plot and determine courses of action. When students involve themselves in each other's research during the initial stages of composition, a productive dialogue, a discourse, is activated from the beginning, allowing each writer to better anticipate and respond to the audience for which s/he writes. Additionally, students may better reflect on their own writing process after reacting critically to others'. Because ePortfolio interactivity facilitates a community-based learning practice through which intellectual property is shared, students function like Spect-Actors and students-teachers, as co-generators of meaning.

Undergraduates who crave conversations instead of lectures often experience a flat learning curve with peer review conducted via ePortfolio because computer-based social networking is common practice for most "net-geners" or internet-generation students (Barnes, Marateo, & Ferris, 2007, p. 3). When encouraged to conduct digital peer-to-peer exchanges, students seize opportunities to share and circulate methods of learning

Figure 4
Interactive Archives

Figure 4: Students juxtapose modern day snapshots of their New York City neighborhoods with archival photographs, contributing to the archive while fostering its development through digital interactions.

that have proved successful for them. For example, one student assembled a multitude of links to archival videos that informed her understanding of class readings and grouped them on her ePortfolio, granting visitors access to a catalogue of historical background information in support of select literary works. Another student developed a gallery of portraits of Latino authors, formulating a "hall-of-fame" and interactive "click-and-name" game for neglected American poets, playwrights, novelists, and short story writers—foregrounding faces that may not be as recognizable as their canonized counterparts. Several students have also posed visual-textual inquiries, juxtaposed in an active, multimedia field enabled for digital exchange, as a strategy for gathering evidence. In Figure 3, a student enrolled in a writing, sociology, and urban studies learning community poses a research question about the preservation of Chinese culture in Manhattan's Chinatown. The student incorporated audience responses from both inside and outside of the learning community into her own reflections as she moved forward to craft a thesis and outline for her research paper.

The use of ePortfolio in such "learning communities"—or "clusters" of classes taken together by a group of first-year college students—allows for an immediate and obvious synthesis to occur in reflecting on their experienced curriculum. Once the first semester is complete, students may continue piloting their own connections as they select separate courses and build and follow particular major curriculums. In the case of the writing, sociology, and urban studies cluster, students were responsible for isolating and exploring conflicts relative to their own New York City

neighborhoods. While students were asked to review published and credible resources in developing their research, they are simultaneously recognized as credible sources, since they actively inhabit the neighborhoods they investigate. On their ePortfolios, they furnished links to particular Google Maps, enabling users to explore the territory, and to Social Explorer in citing statistical data related to neighborhood demographics. They uploaded digitized primary materials from the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, an in-house repository of resources relating to the sociopolitical life of New York City. After locating archival photographs of city street corners and landmarks, they dispatched themselves into their own neighborhoods to photograph the same street corners today while interviewing citizens who can testify to such transformations. By recording and presenting the new evidence they generate on their ePortfolios, they add to existing discourses and archives as active urban observers and sociologists (see Figure 4). The roles they play as "students" are real, so are their social and historical contributions, as are the collaborative audiences to whom they become accessible.

Curtain

It is the powerful intersection of multiple modes of performance that establishes the ePortfolio medium as an elastic, ultra-accessible theatrical arena in which students may create, rehearse, and present themselves. By recognizing that they are not only at the center of learning, but that they are one of many centers, students activate the discourse of which their work is already a part. A multicentric learning dynamic stimulates

productive interactivity with audiences who actively influence process, content, and outcomes, displacing classroom hierarchies and discouraging the passive absorption of predetermined material. ePerformers dialogue as Spect-Actors, mutually aware, witnessing as their own audience as well as behaving as an audience for others, reacting as students-teachers.

Through collaborative, forum-style exchanges and the incorporation of multimedia such as audiovisual matter and hypercitations, resulting work cannot translate to static print mediums; it will not be possible for student to simply print out "hard copy" of their papers and "turn them in." Multimedia research, writing, and other ePortfolio creations will come to exist only in the digital realm, as enduring, interactive performances. Asynchronous absorption of these performances protracts time and expands exchanges, enriching the reflective experience for both ePortfolio creators and spectators. The constructive self-estrangement that ePortfolio affords also permits greater reflection, as a staging area is supplied for students to formulate, communicate, and evaluate their own performances. In a technologically enhanced world where everyone and everything performs, reviving and digitizing long-established folio practices prompts learners to set their stage, select props, and consider their audience. Interactive ePortfolio exchanges with peers further sensitize students to the fact that, in school and in everyday life, each player simultaneously perceives as many performances as s/he gives.

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