VMI ePortfolio Project Changing to Enhance Learning

By Mary Price

Maj. Howard Sanborn, new director of VMI's ePortfolio Project, sees electronic portfolios as part of a mindset in which "learn" is the most active of verbs.

EPortfolios, which allow students to showcase their learning in a digital format, have been the wave of the future in higher education for the past several years. The electronic files allow students to include a variety of media forms, including video, audio, photographs, and text.

VMI has been using ePortfolios for approximately five years, and is now at a turning point for both the "why" and "how" of ePortfolio usage.

Planning for VMI's ePortfolio project began in the fall of 2008, as part of the quality enhancement plan implemented following VMI's 2007 reaccreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

That plan dictated that cadets take two courses designated as "civilizations and cultures" courses. Cadets enrolled in those courses must create ePortfolios to demonstrate their learning. Other classes may use ePortfolios, but the portfolios are only required in civilization and cultures courses.

Up to this point, said Sanborn, ePortfolios have been primarily used for assessment, and while that is a perfectly appropriate purpose, he would like to see their use broadened to put the emphasis firmly on student learning.

"Our main goal will be and has to be student reflection and the use of ePortfolio as part of a reflective pedagogy," said Sanborn, who is assistant professor of international studies.

Sanborn explained that the process of sorting, evaluating, and creating an ePortfolio encourages the development of just the kind of critical thinking skills that higher education is meant to foster.

"A lot of this stems from the philosophy of making students better democratic citizens," said Sanborn. "The more we get them to think and choose pieces of their ePortfolio, the more they're able to think critically, the better they're able to participate in their democracy. They're better able to make decisions in their own lives and they're better analytical thinkers."

Sanborn added that there's a practical side to ePortfolios, too – their creation teaches a technological fluency that is vital for future job seekers.

"Over the next 20 years, people are going to have to be comfortable working with an online persona," Sanborn noted. "The Internet's not going away."

But in order for cadets to create the sort of ePortfolio that will help them learn today and gain employment tomorrow, Sanborn feels that a change in software is needed.

At VMI, ePortfolios are now typically created within Angel, VMI's electronic classroom software, but Sanborn describes the current ePortfolios created in this manner as "a very static collection of files."

He explained that because Angel is an internal system, cadets typically leave their ePortfolios behind when they graduate. Sanborn would like to see the Institute transition to more flexible software that would allow cadets to continue building their ePortfolios as they go to graduate school, find employment, and otherwise move into the larger world.

"We're trying to find a solution, and I think we're just about there, where they create a website to house their ePortfolios and then they take it with them," Sanborn said. "We want to make it more flexible and dynamic"

The next step, he explained, will be getting faculty to use ePortfolios in more of their courses, especially writing-intensive courses and first-year courses.

"It's easy for students to be talked at," said Sanborn. "They cram everything in the night before the test and then they spit it back. This is, to me, more challenging. Show me you learned something."

Cadets Value the ePortfolio Experience

By Mary Price

Two cadets who've created ePortfolios at VMI say that the experience has enriched their learning in ways that traditional schoolwork could not have.

Cadet Johnny McDonald '15 created an ePortfolio for a Southern Literature course he took in the spring of 2012. Although he's a civil engineering major, McDonald took the course to fulfill an honors requirement and found the experience both educational and useful. He's now planning on creating an ePortfolio to demonstrate what he's learned in civil engineering.

"There is plenty of engineering coursework I could profile on a blog," said McDonald, who used popular blogging software for his ePortfolio.

McDonald said that the process of creating an ePortfolio made him slow down and take more time than he would have for a typical paper, because he knew instinctively that an online publishing format reaches a wider audience.

"It's a reflection on myself," noted McDonald. "If you do mediocre work, it's going to reflect you. If you do great work, it's going to reflect you. It can hurt as much as much as it can help."

Cadet Kayla Johnson '13 has likewise found the ePortfolio experience beneficial. Over the course of her four years at VMI, Johnson has created not one but six ePortfolios. Johnson said that now, when she looks back at her work as a 4th Class cadet, she can see how far she's come.

Johnson, who is majoring in English, came to VMI with a background in engineering, thanks to a Governor's School experience at Heritage High School in Lynchburg, Va.

"I've seen my writing evolve," said Johnson, who described her old writing style as "cold" and "research-based."

She continued, "I was taught to write scientifically. … Now, I've seen my writing change completely so I'm totally comfortable in the narrative form. I love the ePortfolio program because it has required me to not only write but to analyze my writing and keep growing."