From a social digital identity to an academic digital identity: Introducing ePortfolios in English language enhancement courses

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Abstract: Social digital networking is a facet of living that recognizes no national borders or social boundaries and has become a way of life. This paper investigates the social networking habits of students at Lingnan University and considers how these habits can be channelled for academic purposes by introducing an ePortfolio system into their language enhancement courses. The investigation analyzed the purpose and usage of these social profiles thus forming the basis of the need for academic profiles. After considering the attitudes and motivations of students, this paper reports on the adoption of an ePortfolio platform which best suits the academic needs of students by introducing it into two important language enhancement courses. The paper thus explores students' attitudes towards two forms of digital identities: social and academic. This process has led to arriving at an ePortfolio system that is in synch with the other digitized aspects of students' lives.

Résumé : Le réseautage social numérique est l'une des facettes de la vie qui ne connaît ni les frontières nationales, ni les démarcations sociales; cette pratique est devenue un mode de vie. Le présent article examine les habitudes de réseautage social des étudiants de l'Université Lingnan et étudie la façon dont ces habitudes peuvent être canalisées à des fins universitaires par l'introduction d'un système de portfolios électroniques dans les cours de perfectionnement des langues. L'enquête a analysé quelles fonctions ces profils sociaux remplissent et quelle est l'utilisation qui en est faite, ce qui constitue la base du besoin de profils universitaires. Après avoir examiné la réponse et la motivation des étudiants, cet article présente les résultats de l'adoption d'une plateforme de portfolios électroniques qui répond bien aux besoins des étudiants universitaires à la suite de son introduction dans deux cours importants de perfectionnement des langues. L'article utilise ainsi la réponse des étudiants à l'égard des deux formes d'identités numériques : sociale et universitaire. Ce processus a permis d'obtenir un système de portfolios électroniques qui est en phase avec les autres aspects numériques de la vie des étudiants.

Introduction

Ever since their emergence over a decade ago, social networking sites have been proliferating in number and popularity worldwide. Social digital networking is a facet of living that, like the Internet itself, recognizes no national or social boundaries. With over 100 social networking sites in existence and over a billion registered users on these sites, social networks today seem to have become a way of life. From this ever increasing number of networking sites and users

emerges a behaviour that has become a part of popular youth culture across continents and is increasingly popular amongst youth in Asia, especially Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, as in other countries around the world, individuals adopt social digital identities through social networks to communicate with friends, colleagues, families and indeed complete strangers. The recent surge in the popularity of web sites like Facebook and, in Hong Kong, Xanga, have taken digital networking to a level where, among the younger generation at least, this is fast becoming the norm rather than the exception. MySpace, one of the best-known social networking sites now has some 110 million users. Other popular sites include: Friendster (58 million); Hi5 (70 million); Linkedin (20 million); Facebook, which is now number nine in the top twenty list of web sites in the USA (hitwise.com, 2008), (over 69 million); Xanga (40 million) and; Flickr (9.6 million), to name but a few.

This paper investigates the social networking habits of students at Lingnan University and considers how these habits can be channelled for academic purposes by introducing an ePortfolio system into their English language enhancement courses thereby establishing the ground for an easy transition from a social digital identity to an academic digital identity. This study further explores how a social digital culture is being nurtured and developed into an academic digital culture through the introduction and integration of ePortfolios into the regular university curriculum and how social digital identities are being transferred into academic digital identities with the focus on English language enhancement.

Background of ePortfolios in Universities across Hong Kong

The blend of university youth culture and widespread adoption of technology in academic fields has opened up immense possibilities for innovations in teaching and learning. One such remarkable innovation is the ePortfolio. The potential for portfolio use has not gone unnoticed in a number of fields and most recently, ePortfolios have been an integral element of the curriculum for all of Hong Kong's eight tertiary institutions as well as for a significant number of universities worldwide. The UK government for example, promotes the use of 'personal on-line learning space(s)' in a recent Department for Education and Science (DfES) strategy of e-learning development (DfES, 2005, p.11). More globally, Chau (2007) reports that "the portfolio as a learning and assessment tool has been widely adopted in Europe, U.K. and U.S." (p. 145). Moreover, the falling standards of English language proficiency have been constant themes in political, business and educational circles in recent years in Hong Kong and are perceived in all quarters of the education sector, ranging from teachers to primary school pupils to university students. Compared with students in other Asian countries and in other parts of the world, the English standards of Hong Kong students are 'lagging behind' (Poon, 2000, p. 178). Partly, as a result of the perceived falling standards of English in Hong Kong, the University Grants Committee (UGC) has been encouraging the use of ePortfolios for English language development and most universities have become part of this initiative to varying degrees. The UGC's design behind the sector-wide adoption of a system was to make ePortfolios a constructive element of student learning along with a representation of the academic achievements of students. With this initiative from the UGC, the English Language Education and Assessment Centre (ELEAC) at Lingnan University of Hong Kong decided to adopt an ePortfolio system in its academic curriculum. With the adoption of ePortfolios on two key English language enhancement courses, students have been building up portfolios showcasing the

progress and attainment in their language development and learning how they can best demonstrate their learning outcomes and achievements.

Nevertheless, before introducing ePortfolios, it was vital to assess students' attitudes towards the introduction of such an innovation into their curriculum. For this purpose, we conducted an online survey with students at Lingnan who were the first cohort of potential users of ePortfolios. The resulting on-line survey of students' attitudes laid the foundation for subsequent phases of this research and the resulting data helped facilitate a relatively smooth transition from a social digital identity to an academic digital identity.

ELEAC ePortfolio Project

For the introduction of an ePortfolio platform, the ELEAC ePortfolio project was divided into different stages namely, a) The Pre-Implementation Stage, b) The Implementation Stage and c) The Post-Implementation Stage.

The Pre-implementation Stage involved the analysis of the attitudes and readiness of students towards the implementation of an ePortfolio platform. It also involved establishing a rationale for selecting a suitable ePortfolio platform for Lingnan University.

The Implementation Stage involved the introduction of electronic portfolios in three separate phases, with Phase I being implemented in Term 2, 2007-08 with a corpus of 122 ePortfolios; Phase II being implemented in Term 1, 2008-09 with a corpus of 436 ePortfolios; and Phase III being implemented in Term 2, 2008-09 with a corpus of over 600 portfolios.

Finally, the Post-implementation Stage of the project will involve the impact and effectiveness of the use of ePortfolios in English language enhancement and their potential use across various other disciplines of Lingnan University.

ELEAC On-line Survey Details

The current study focuses on the pre-implementation phase of the ELEAC ePortfolio project and primarily on analyzing students' attitudes and behaviour towards ePortfolio introduction.

Methods

The analysis was carried out by means of a survey conducted through an on-line questionnaire sent out to a group of 151 students who were the first cohort of potential ePortfolio users. These were first-year students from different disciplines such as social science, philosophy, visual studies, cultural studies and business studies taking the common English course LCE 102: English for Communication II. The on-line survey addressed three major considerations, namely, the habits and attitudes of social networkers, the need for an academic profile through an ePortfolio system, and the rationale for choosing an ePortfolio system that would meet all academic needs.

Findings

Part I: Students' Social Networking Habits

The first part of the survey explored students' needs and the motives behind their social network affiliations. The questions focused on the students' ownership of a social networking

profile, the frequency of its use and the purpose of being a part of a social community. The findings revealed a widespread use of social networks. We found that social communities on the Internet were not new to students and over 88% of students had at least one social networking account, the most popular amongst our sample being Xanga. What's more, many students conducted their social networking through more than one site which established the fact that students were quite active in digital networking and were generally competent in basic (information technology) IT skills. So far as frequency of using these social networks was concerned, most students (80%) spent about one to two hours on average per day on these sites, although 15% spent two hours or more. Also, the number of people who regularly visited their profiles was noteworthy. This information confirmed that students played active roles in social networking communities with their purpose naturally being social rather than academic (72.85% were there for friendships and 50.99% for sharing/showcasing their personal profiles.) However, a very small percentage of students (about 18.5 %) used these sites for academic or career enhancement purposes. Figure 1 below, gives an overview of the social networking habits of the students.

The degree of active participation for social reasons rather than academic reasons strengthened the grounds for the implementation of an ePortfolio system which would provide students with a chance to design an academic profile.
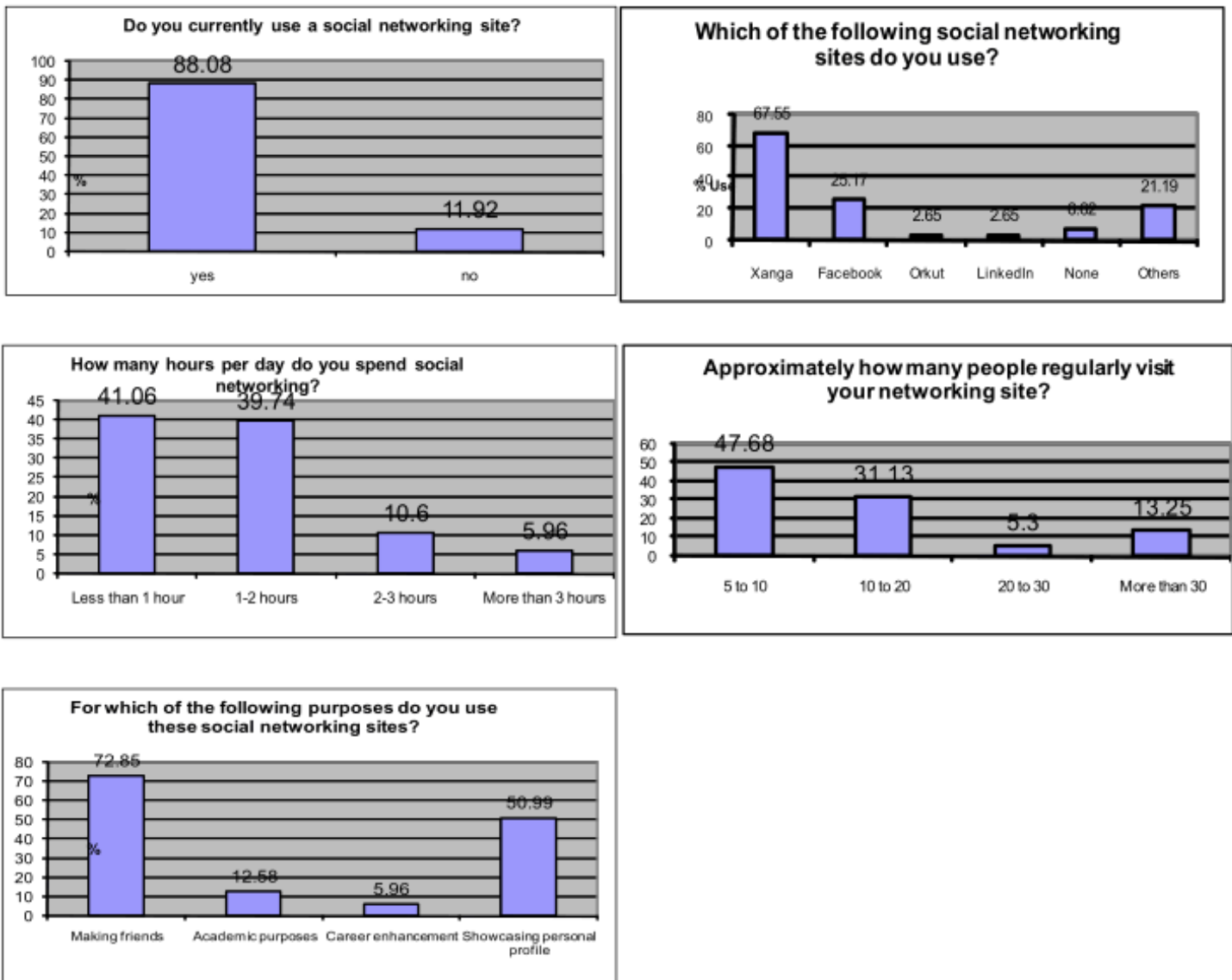
Do you currently use a social networking site?

88.08 — yes
11.92 — no

Which of the following social networking sites do you use?

Xanga 67.55, Facebook 25.17, Orkut 2.65, LinkedIn 2.65, None 0.02, Others 21.19

How many hours per day do you spend social networking?

Less than 1 hour 41.06, 1-2 hours 39.74, 2-3 hours 10.6, More than 3 hours 5.96

Approximately how many people regularly visit your networking site?

5 to 10: 47.68, 10 to 20: 31.13, 20 to 30: 5.3, More than 30: 13.25

For which of the following purposes do you use these social networking sites?

Making friends 72.85, Academic purposes 12.58, Career enhancement 5.96, Showcasing personal profile 50.99

Figure 1. Social Networking Habits of Students

Part II: Students' Readiness for implementation of ePortfolios:

The grounds for implementing an ePortfolio system were further supported by the second section of the survey which dealt with student attitudes towards the introduction of an ePortfolio system. Over 48% of the students were aware of electronic portfolios and over 80% wanted the university to provide them with an academic web site. More than 60% felt that hard copy submissions of assignments required a lot of effort and over 60% of them felt that they would prefer to submit their assignments in an electronic format. Thus, the findings establish that students were ready for the introduction of an electronic portfolio system. They were also positive about wanting the University to establish an academic networking facility since they felt that this would provide them with a good platform for showcasing their academic skills and knowledge. This, in turn, enabled educationists to channel students' social networking behaviour towards their academic development. Figure 2 gives details of students' readiness for adopting an electronic portfolio.
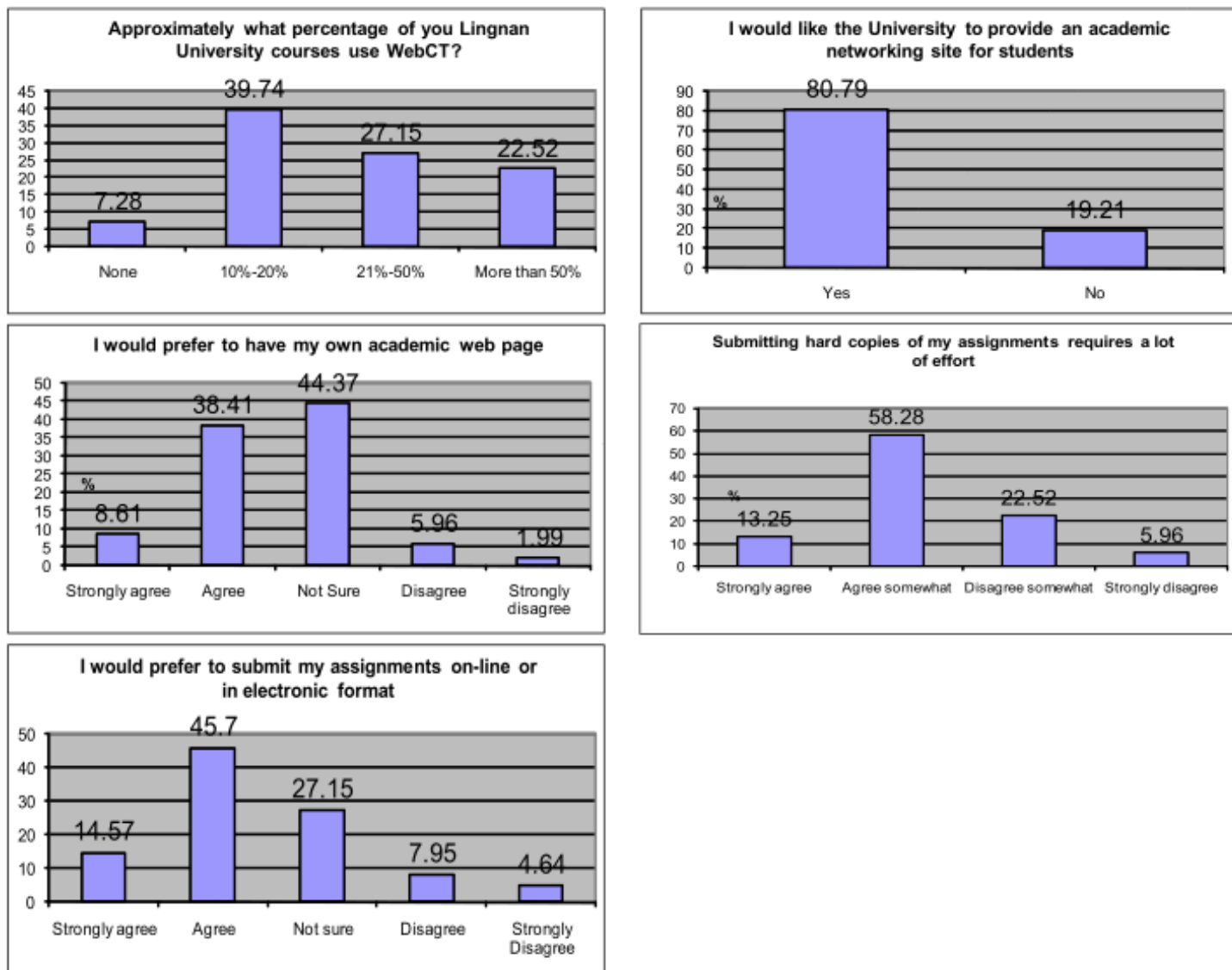
Figure 2. Students' Readiness to Implement ePortfolios

Part III: Students' Response to introduction of ePortfolios:

Finally, the survey gathered responses towards the introduction of ePortfolios in general, and specifically, in English language enhancement courses. More than 50% of students believed that an ePortfolio would provide a good platform to showcase their academic work. However, almost 40% of the students were not sure if it would be useful in their careers. Also, nearly 50% students were not sure whether an ePortfolio would offer advantages in the representation and development of their English language skills. This also raises the prospects of employing an ePortfolio system as a tool for English language enhancement. Nevertheless, more than 50% of the students agreed that ePortfolio use would be more widespread in the future. Given the positive results of the survey (above), the research team was confident that the establishment of an academic digital identity was a realistic and achievable goal. Having considered the attitudes and motivation of students, the next phase of the research design was to establish a rationale for the selection of an appropriate ePortfolio system to be incorporated into the curriculum. Figure 3 below, gives the responses from students to the introduction of ePortfolios in English language enhancement courses. Full details of the survey results can be seen in Appendix 1.
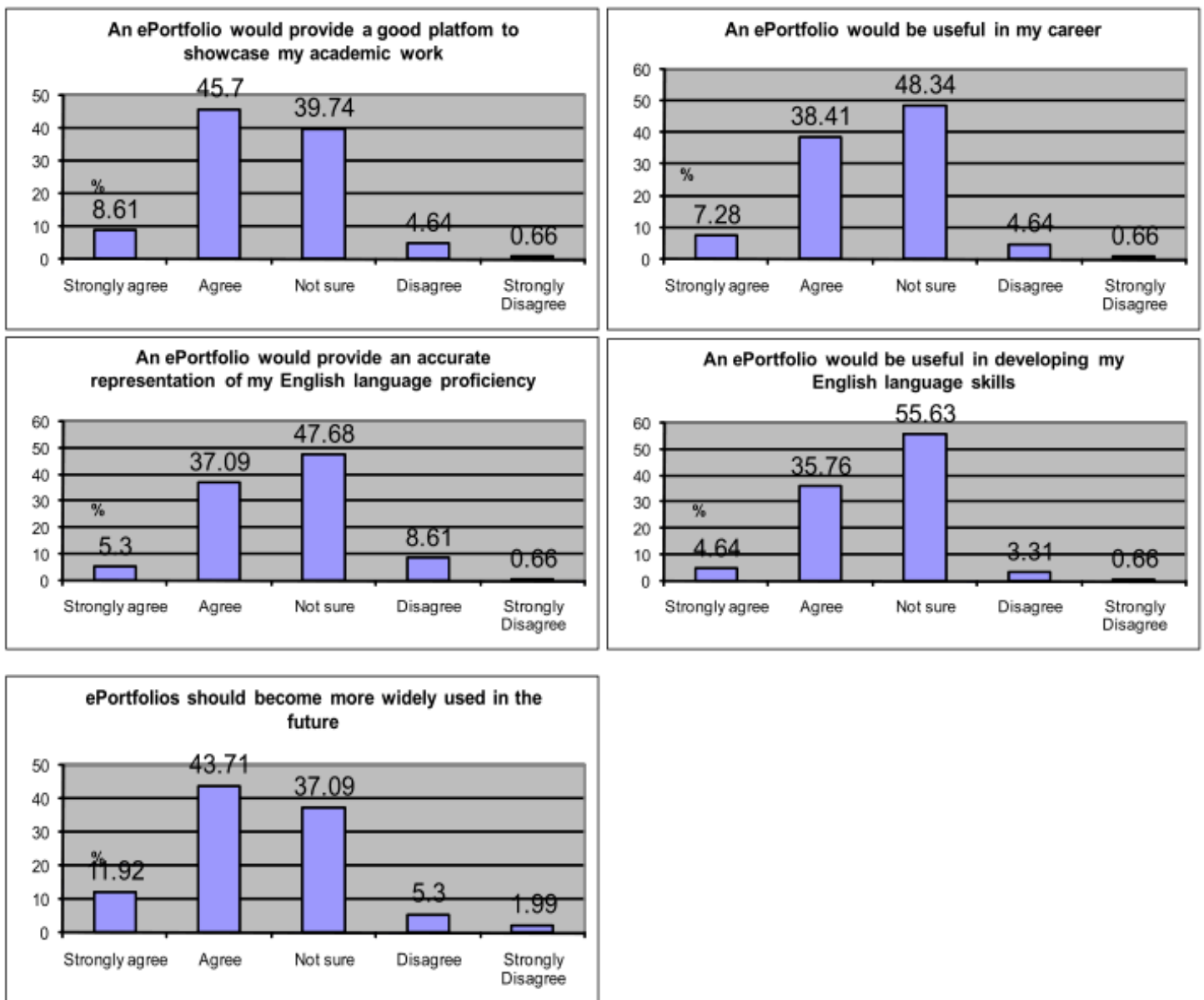
Figure 3. Responses from students on introducing ePortfolios in English language courses

Rationale for Selecting and Adopting an ePortfolio System

The selection and adoption of an ePortfolio platform for Lingnan University was a significant step in the project since the ELEAC had to select a platform that would best suit the academic needs of teachers and students alike. We needed to ensure that such an introduction would bring about the intended goals of teaching and learning. Firstly, there was the principle regarding innovations in general in education (or indeed other fields), that the innovation should not be the driving force leading to an expanded curriculum and additional workloads for students and teachers. In addition, it was essential to bear in mind that when introducing ePortfolios into the teaching-learning process, ePortfolios might not necessarily bring about positive change by themselves. It was vital for example, to consider the importance of integrating ePortfolios across the whole learning process, as reported by Kimball (2005) and Challis (2005). Another consideration, especially in Hong Kong where teachers' increasing workloads has long been the subject of keen debate, was the amount of time needed, initially, for the training of both staff and students. An innovation overlooking this consideration would most likely find successful

innovation very challenging. In addition, some writers such as Challis point to the importance of the issue of security, privacy and ownership and who has access to the portfolios. Finally, the project team considered Tosh, Light, Fleming and Haywood's (2005) points on the need for students to understand (and see) the benefits that can be gained from ePortfolio use, and the need to promote student 'buy in' and address the issue of student motivation. Bobak (2004) cites Gathercoal, Love, Bryde and Mckean's (2002) 12 critical factors for the successful introduction of ePortfolios by academic units which in the implementation of this project were a crucial consideration. Within the language centre of Lingnan University, these factors were either wholly or largely in place, suggesting that, the innovation was more likely than not to succeed. These factors, and the extent to which they were addressed, are briefly discussed below.

Information services cooperation

Clearly, an information technology (IT) innovation within an institution would need the help, collaboration and support of the institution's own IT technical section. In this project, the University's Information Technologies Services Centre (ITSC) and the project team worked together closely from the outset and identified a number of common aims. Thus, not only were technical questions resolved more easily, but the different project stages were implemented more smoothly.

Administrative support

The second of Gathercoal et al.'s (2002) 12 critical factors point to the importance of administrative support for the successful introduction of ePortfolios. In this project, the University and the University Grants Committee (UGC) supported the project from the outset. To have not only the support, but the encouragement, and in the case of the UGC, actual funding, clearly helped in the introduction of the ePortfolios.

Technology infrastructure

Basic technological questions, such as the choice of platform, storage and security, are key issues in ePortfolio implementation. In this project, the University's architecture did not at the outset fully support the choice of ePortfolio platform (Blackboard ePortfolio). However, the University had taken the decision to upgrade its teaching and learning system to WebCT Campus Edition 8 which would fully support the ePortfolio software in the future.

Portfolio culture

Hong Kong students, like many elsewhere, are familiar with the use of traditional paper and binder portfolios, which are widely used in the school system and elsewhere. More recently, many secondary schools have started to use electronic portfolios for teaching and learning English. By the time students begin tertiary education, the vast majority of them are already using social digital networks to communicate with friends and peers and thus, students involved in this project are already an established part of a portfolio culture.

Student learning-centred culture

Another factor likely to lead to the successful implementation of ePortfolios (Gathercoal et al., 2002) is the existence of a student learning-centred culture. Within the field of English language teaching, the change to student-centred approaches has been firmly established for some time and within ELEAC at Lingnan University this has been explicitly built into the Centre's documentation (for example in its mission statement and course documentation distributed to staff and students).

Implementing force and project champions

The acknowledgement of high quality work from students is another crucial factor for the successful implementation of ePortfolios. At other universities in Hong Kong, this is already taking place. For example, at City University awards have been given to students who have excelled in their ePortfolios. This is also part of the design for this project although it has yet to be implemented.

Implementation milestones

This project does indeed have clearly defined milestones that mark the successful completion of the various different stages. Clearly all stakeholders (students, teachers, and administrators) in a project of this nature need to know that the progress of the project – to which they are making an important contribution – is recognized and acknowledged. Implementation milestones are key to the success of this ePortfolio project and to others Gathercoal et al. (2002).

Training and help resources

The importance of training and help resources was identified at an early stage in this project. The University's Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) as well as the IT unit (ITSC) have played key roles in the project from the outset. In addition, the project's ePortfolio coordinator has been charged with ensuring that students and staff alike receive adequate help and support throughout the different stages. A series of initial workshops was provided for students as well as for staff. The project team has also set up an e-mail help line to assist with technical issues, and a series of on-line tutorials was made to help all parties concerned, deal with all aspects of ePortfolio management.

Faculty commitment

At the start of the current phase of this project, instructors were given the choice of either 'opting into' the ePortfolios as an integrated part of the course, or of continuing with the existing paper-and-binder portfolios. About two-thirds opted for the former, suggesting that the faculty – at least within the language centre – were not only receptive but also willing to become actively involved in the innovation. In terms of Gathercoal et al.'s (2002) 12 critical factors, it was felt that to a large extent faculty commitment was in place.

Standards or competency-based curriculum

Lingnan University, in common with other tertiary education institutions in Hong Kong, is rapidly moving towards a standards or competency-based curriculum, in response largely to this change of focus within the secondary curriculum and the move towards what is commonly known as 3-3-4 (three years of lower secondary education, three years of upper secondary and four years of undergraduate education). At the time of writing, the first cohort of students changing to 3-3-4 will complete junior secondary school this academic year and the curriculum of the new Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) is overtly competency-based and part-and-parcel of the new educational reforms in Hong Kong.

Integrated curriculum developed by teams of faculty

Within ELEAC, the English language enhancement curriculum has been constantly evolving in recent years. This on-going process frequently involves team course writing and other collaborative initiatives. The curriculum has thus increasingly involved varied and integrated modes of delivery with more emphasis recently on online modes of delivery. The development of an integrated curriculum thus not only involves teams of faculty, but also within the liberal arts culture of Lingnan University, this process has involved collaboration between and within different academic departments. This critical factor referred to by Gathercoal et al. (2002), has thus to a large extent been addressed.

Feedback provided by supervisors and mentors using the ePortfolio

One of the key features related to the implementation and use of ePortfolios in this project was the importance of academic digital networking, which in the view of the project team would include a high level of qualitative feedback to students on the content of their ePortfolios. Indeed this is a key feature of the 'guidelines to teachers' – an online document for teachers using ePortfolios on this project.

Course-specific Rationale

In addition to the general considerations from the literature outlined above, a number of more ELEAC-specific factors had to be built into the implementation design. Firstly, it was essential to understand the students' needs, perspective, and motivation. Given the rapid expansion of social communities on the Web, there was a need to establish an 'academic community' on the Web for students to effectively transfer their existing social digital networking culture into an academic one, at the heart of which would be English language enhancement. There was a clear need for a tool that would enhance students' learning experience through a technology based on their habits and motivation.

Secondly, we were looking for a system that was easy to access, manage and operate. Since technology can be complicated even to the point of being de-motivating, students may be discouraged rather than encouraged to use it (Gatlin & Jacob, 2002). It was important therefore, to introduce a system that both students and staff would find easy to operate. The system needed to be one that was easily understood and grasped and not one requiring a lot of time to learn and operate.

Thirdly, the chosen ePortfolio platform also had to meet the curricular needs of ELEAC's courses to support the development of all the four language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing). Support for language skills development was therefore a key consideration.

Finally, given the nature of ELEAC's courses, it was important that the ePortfolio system be more than a mere collection and presentation of academic work. Many researchers (e.g., Gathercoal et al., 2002) highlight the importance of interactivity, feedback, and reflection in ePortfolio implementation. ELEAC's system needed to have a reflective function through which students would able to reflect on the tasks uploaded onto their portfolio. This was important not only in terms of successful implementation, but also in helping achieve one of ELEAC's main goals of creating and developing a collaborative and supportive teaching and learning environment.

The generic rationale and specific considerations formed the basis of choosing 'Blackboard Portfolio for Windows Vista and CE' to suit the institutional as well as academic needs of students. This further led into the pilot phase of the project with its introduction into two important language enhancement courses within the existing curriculum: English for Communication II (LCE102) and English through Language Arts (LCE304).

Through these courses, students were able to create an English-specific academic identity wherein they uploaded activities, reflections on tasks, and digital stories with materials that were 'replayable and reviewable' (Ittelson, 2001). In practical terms, their academic profiles were similar to their social profiles as on Xanga or Facebook in that various multimedia files were uploaded on their individual portfolios. In this case the focus was on academic development rather than pure social networking. Students created their academic introductions, uploaded activities, and reflected on their tasks and actively communicated with their peers, just as they would do on their social networking sites. For example, the LCE 304 course, English through Language Arts, lends itself to enhancing language skills through the arts, and students were able to present their skills and abilities through digital stories of their arts assignments. What's more, students were able to comment on their peers' ePortfolio tasks which added value to the language-learning process. The adoption of an English-specific academic digital profile was thus made easy for students since they had already created social profiles on popular social networking sites.

Future Scope for ePortfolios as Academic Profiles

Finally, after exploiting students' attitudes towards two major forms of digital identities: social and academic and carefully evaluating the underlying factors for an academic digital identity, we have reached at a point at which ePortfolios have become representations of students' academic profiles. As our technical capacity continues to grow and we become more and more able to collect, store, manipulate, and share information digitally, and as students develop the skills necessary to produce their portfolios in electronic formats, ePortfolios become a potentially vital part of student's permanent academic record (Ittelson, 2001). There is thus, further scope for the expansion of ePortfolio use in other areas of the curriculum beyond language enhancement, in other words, a university-wide adoption. With the adoption of ePortfolios, the transition for students from their social digital identities to academic digital identities could be made possible without compromising the language enhancement objectives and further teaching and learning needs of the students in general. Thus, by eliciting the

attitudes of students' as social networkers and considering the rationale for the implementation of academic networking, a potential ePortfolio system has provided students with an academic digital identity that is in synch with the other digitized aspects of their lives.

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Appendix 1
ELEAC's ePortfolio Questionnaire

No. of Participants = 151

Q1 Do you currently use a social networking site?

yes	88.08%	133
no	11.92%	18

Q2 Which of the following social networking sites do you use?

Xanga	67.55%	102
Facebook	25.17%	38

Orkut	2.65%	4
LinkedIn	2.65%	4
None	6.62%	10
Others	21.19%	32

Q3 How many hours per day do you spend social networking?

Less than 1 hour	41.06%	62
1-2 hours	39.74%	60
2-3 hours	10.60%	16
More than 3 hours	5.96%	9

Q4 Approximately how many people regularly visit your networking site?

5 to 10	47.68%	72
10 to 20	31.13%	47
20 to 30	5.30%	8
More than 30	13.25%	20

Q5 For which of the following purposes do you use these social networking sites?

Making friends	72.85%	110
Academic purposes	12.58%	19
Career enhancement	5.96%	9
Showcasing personal profile	50.99%	77

Q6 Approximately what percentage of your Lingnan University courses use WebCT?

None	7.28%	11
10%-20%	39.74%	60
21%-50%	27.15%	41

Q7 I would like the University to provide an academic networking site for students.

Yes	80.79%	122
No	19.21%	29

Q8 I would prefer to have my own academic web page.

Strongly agree	8.61%	13
Agree	38.41%	58
Not Sure	44.37%	67
Disagree	5.96%	9
Strongly disagree	1.99%	3

Q9 Submitting hard copies of my assignments requires a lot of effort.

Strongly agree	13.25%	20
Agree somewhat	58.28%	88
Disagree	22.52%	34
Strongly disagree	5.96%	9

Q10 I would prefer to submit my assignments on-line or in electronic format.

Strongly agree	14.57%	22
Agree somewhat	45.70%	69
Not Sure	27.15%	41
Disagree	7.95%	12
Strongly disagree	4.64%	7

Q11 I had heard about electronic portfolios before doing this questionnaire.

Yes	48.34 %	73
No	51.66%	78

Q12 An ePortfolio would provide a good platform to showcase my academic work.

Strongly agree	8.61%	13
Agree	45.70%	69
Not sure	39.74%	60
Disagree	4.64%	7
Strongly Disagree	0.66%	1

Q13 An ePortfolio would be useful in my career (e.g., getting jobs, scholarships, etc.)

Strongly agree	7.28%	11
Agree	38.41%	58
Not sure	48.34%	73
Disagree	4.64%	7
Strongly Disagree	0.66%	1

Q14 An ePortfolio would provide an accurate representation of my English language proficiency.

Strongly agree	5.30%	8
Agree	37.09%	56
Not sure	47.68%	72
Disagree	8.61%	13
Strongly Disagree	0.66%	1

Q15 An ePortfolio would be useful in developing my English language skills.

Strongly agree	4.64%	7
Agree	35.76%	54
Not sure	55.63%	84
Disagree	3.31%	5
Strongly Disagree	0.66%	1

Q16 ePortfolios should become more widely used in the future

Strongly agree	11.92%	18
Agree	43.71%	66
Not sure	37.09%	56
Disagree	5.30%	8
Strongly Disagree	1.99%	4