

# Mentoring Professional Identity Development Through Media Assignments

**Michele Strano Clark**  
Bridgewater College

Online portfolios are educational requirements used to encourage self-reflection and to assess competency in various disciplines. These ePortfolios focus on student self-presentation without emphasizing the social construction of self and the opportunities that online spaces provide to enact an authentic professional public persona. Structured appropriately, online portfolios afford an opportunity for faculty to mentor students in effective impression management throughout their careers by strategically sharing high-quality multimedia texts that meet audience needs and expectations. Students need guidance in analyzing online environments and producing effective messages. This paper relates how the professional identity development potential of ePortfolios have been explored in three case studies: (1) a graduate digital analytics course, (2) an undergraduate public speaking course, and (3) an undergraduate travel course. Mentors and teachers are offered frameworks that encourage robust articulations of self and more advanced impression management skills in public online portfolios. These approaches can be employed across the curriculum in senior capstone courses or as ongoing projects that scaffold evolving student identities throughout their college development.

**Keywords:** mentoring, impression management, eportfolio, media assignment, online identity

## Introduction

This paper builds on helping students envision themselves as *future* professionals by instead encouraging them to enact roles as *current* young professionals and emerging experts. Rather than framing online portfolios as displays of competency that can be evaluated by others with the power to grade, admit, or employ, mentors can encourage students to think about offering something of value to those who visit their site and, thus, authentically connecting with other professionals both within and outside their field. These ideas have been developed in three courses: (1) a digital media graduate course that is primarily focused on teaching students to measure user engagement with online content and (2) an undergraduate public speaking course taken primarily by first-year students, and (3) an undergraduate travel course focused on the film and television production system. The pedagogical strategies used and results observed for each course are outlined below.

## Literature Review

Goffman (1959) influentially introduced the concept of self-presentation using a stage metaphor to argue that we strategically perform identities in various contexts based on our perception of what our audience will find desirable. The notion of performance has been applied to social media contexts with researchers observing that users often present an “ideal self” or a “hoped for self” (Ellison et. al., 2006; Yurchisin et. al., 2005) or an

“ought self” that one believes is acceptable to other users (Siibak, 2009). It is easy to misunderstand online performances as inauthentic fabrications that simply project a personal vision to advance individual goals. However, the fact that we often interact with social media connections in everyday life limits our ability to completely fabricate online identity (Zhao et. al. 2008; Ellison et. al., 2007; Zarghooni, 2007). In addition, social media connections comment on user posts or post their own content that may interfere with the user’s intended image (Mazer, 2007). Online identity management involves strategic projection of an image, but also strategic negotiation of counter-messages that may arise (Strano & Queen, 2012).

While young people are accustomed to managing identity on social networks, they are often less aware of the challenges, constraints, and opportunities of presenting themselves professionally in virtual spaces. As employers increasingly use social media in the hiring process (Hartwell & Campion, 2019), mentors need to explicitly teach students how to construct identities that serve them in professional spheres. College ePortfolios have the potential to serve as effective online tools to communicate professional identity. In a survey conducted of Spanish (77%), Latin American (13%) and European (10%) Human Resource directors, Ciesielkiewicz et. al. (2020) found that 83% would use ePortfolios to select a job candidate at some point in the hiring process. However, ePortfolios developed primarily as assessment tools that allow educational institutions to measure if they are achieving their learning outcomes and as pedagogical tools that help students to develop

an academic identity. As Light et. al.(2012) state in a text used to frame work done by the Association of American Colleges & Universities Institute on ePortfolios (<https://www.aacu.org/events/2022-institute-eportfolios>), “the focus of the ePortfolio is to document the development of an intellectual identity, not a social identity” (p. 74). However, in the same text, Light et. al. argue that ePortfolios encourage students to reflect on “how their knowledge, skills and abilities will allow them to contribute to the world,” but that institutions of higher education “spend far too little time focusing on this important aspect of learning” (p. 17). Likewise, Impedovo et. al. (2018) claim that “supporting learners to take up professional identities is thus a critical but under-interrogated role played by tertiary institutions” (p. 755).

Jones & Levernz (2017) contend that “when ePortfolio creation is motivated by students’ desire to showcase their capabilities for potential employers, graduate school admission counselors, or some external audience, students respond much more enthusiastically” (p. 67). To that end, teachers and mentors are employing various strategies for helping students connect college learning with professional identities such as using visual images as metaphorical representations of self (Munday et. al., 2017), designing peer feedback structures and opportunities for conversation (Impedovo, 2018; Nguyen, 2013), assigning team rather than individual ePortfolios (Andrade, 2019), and using a “personal branding” framing (Jones & Levernz, 2017).

## Methodology

### Case Study 1: Graduate Analytics Course

In developing the curriculum for a graduate program in digital media strategy (established in 2019), we envisioned a personal online portfolio that could be used as a platform for several courses in the program and serve as a resource for students as they entered the job market. However, over the past two years, we discovered that the word “portfolio” hindered student development of an effective website because they became self-focused and failed to consider the needs of their website visitors. In their final project reports, most of the six students in the analytics seminar in the spring of 2021 commented on their previous failure to fully consider audience. Here is one student’s articulation:

One of the hardest lessons I learned in this class was that the website I had created would not be beneficial to anyone other than myself and that it was very unlikely anyone would feel a need to visit my website.

As the course pushed the student to think authentically about the needs of those who might visit their site, they found themselves rearticulating their goals:

I reimagined my professional portfolio website as a place where people could come to learn a new creative or marketing skill directly from me. Instead of simply showing off my own creative skills, I would be able to teach those skills to others.

This student acknowledged that online image is enhanced by thinking about the needs of others in addition to personal goals. They recognized that others become more persuaded of our skills and expertise when we demonstrate knowledge and provide benefit, rather than listing skills and showing off work.

I tried talking about the sites as “personal websites” and “online portfolios with a blog,” but the “aha” moment happened for most students when I started talking about their websites as “media sites” like an online newspaper or blog. This articulation seemed to help focus students on the idea of providing something of value to visitors. I met with each student to discuss their websites, pushing them to find their own passion within the digital communication field. These meetings also provided an opportunity to vet their content ideas and push them to avoid clickbait that sensationally promises readers content but does not meaningfully deliver.

Once the websites were reframed as media sites, students were asked to come up with Objectives, Key Results (OKR), and Key Performance Indicators (KPI), concepts used in digital media strategy, as defined in Zokri (2021). This structure helped students further envision how their sites might serve both their own professional image goals as well as visitor needs. The objectives were focused on what they, as content creators, hoped to achieve with their sites. Media sites often have an objective of attracting advertisers. While students could have envisioned an objective of building enough traffic to their site to monetize it, they all settled on more attainable short-term objectives for their fledgling sites. Here are some examples: (1) “Build my reputation as a professional storyteller,” (2) “Develop a reputation as an expert in event marketing and digital media by providing useful content to the visitors on my website,” and (3) “Build an engaged audience to support my future freelance business.”

Notice how the language the students used focused on connections to build a reputation or engage with an audience. The Key Results pushed them to think even more specifically about audience, since Key Results are the signs that they are achieving their objectives. They identified things like increased website traffic, more engagement with content, and direct communication from website visitors. Finally, KPI are the specific measurements that show visitors are engaging in the actions you desire. These measurements might include the number of weekly unique visitors, the average time spent on the website, the percentage of visitors who scrolled halfway down a page while spending at least 30

seconds on the page, or the percentage of visitors who submitted a comment on a blog post. The OKR framework helped students see their online presence as social, interactive, and useful, rather than a static profile placeholder.

From my perspective, the emphasis on audience, articulating the websites as “media sites,” and the OKR framework helped shift the student websites from boring, predictable generic pages to unique representations of the specific interests of the student. Students were encouraged to choose topics that aligned with their personal passions, resulting in website themes such as effective storytelling, interactive math games, creating horror films, and managing performance anxiety. Instead of communicating “look I did this stuff,” their sites started to communicate “look at this interesting stuff I want to share with you.”

In college-deployed course evaluations, students were positive about the assignment, although they found it to be challenging or even “hard.” This is an unusual juxtaposition in student evaluations; I see it as a sign that the assignment was meaningful to them. While the challenge came in part from learning new tools and strategies for analytics, it was clear that students found it difficult to identify a passion and narrow their professional focus. In our individual meetings, I often had to point out to them the patterns in the interests they had and how those interests were related to their strengths. Students seemed to find it rewarding to create an online persona and see people interact with their work. One student wrote: “Overall, I loved this course and it pushed me to learn areas about website design that I either didn’t know before or had misunderstood. I stepped up my website game a lot.”

### **Case Study 2: Undergraduate Oral Communication Course**

I began using online websites as part of an oral communication course in 2017. The course is focused on public speaking with an emphasis on finding and using effective evidence to back up claims and articulating clear positions on topics of interest. One of the problems I noticed with the course was that students would often choose topics for their informative and persuasive speeches in which they were not invested. They saw the assignments as tasks to complete, rather than opportunities to think about and practice articulating anything of importance to them. In 2017, I decided to link together an informative, persuasive, and multimedia presentation by asking students to link all three assignments to their intended career goal and presenting these speeches on a personal website. I have tried several different articulations of this structure with both an honors and a non-honors version of the course. The case study described below is the version used in two Fall 2020 honors sections (23 students total).

The course was taught during the COVID-19

pandemic to a hybrid class that was a mix of in-person and synchronous online learners. Since this environment challenged the live, in-person speech structure usually used in the course, the course capitalized on the opportunity to help students think more critically about online speaking environments by requiring them to create edited vlogs for most of the assignments.

The first assignment the students completed was a special occasion speech that asked them to use stories to support claims about the person the speech honored. The remaining assignments in the class included an informative vlog, a persuasive vlog, and a personal pitch all incorporated into a WordPress site that students were told in the syllabus “will act as an online portfolio for you as you move through college, showcasing your work for potential employers and for your senior FILA 450 portfolio” (a college graduation requirement). This series of assignments was framed as practice in thinking about themselves as young professionals:

This website will be part of your journey to figure out your identity as an intellectual in your field. You should think of your vlogs as showcases for your abilities as well as useful communication for an intended audience.

This oral communication course is an ideal setting for teaching about online identity management because it focuses on (1) rhetorical context analysis and (2) the use of effective analysis. Teaching students to adapt to various speaking contexts already focuses attention on adapting communication to the needs of a particular audience. Teaching about establishing speaker credibility is focused not only on showing how you care about the audience’s needs, but also on using good evidence that supports your claims. While speaker charisma, as demonstrated through nonverbal delivery, is important, so is logical evidence. The course already teaches that effective communication rests on the classic trilogy of ethos, logos and pathos.

In contrast to the graduate class, the undergraduate students need more mentoring in considering online identities. While they may have spent a lot of time on social media, most of them have not given much analysis to how they or others present themselves. Much of their attention has been focused on looking good and displaying an idealized, hoped-for, or ought self (Ellison et. al., 2006; Yurchisin et. al., 2005, Siibak, 2009). Blum and Barger’s (2017) CASPA model (Consume, Analyze, Scaffold, Produce and Assess) was used to help students recognize the effectiveness of the authentic messages of others, identify key attributes of successful messages, and create their own messages based on their analyses of effective online communication.

In the Consume step, students gathered examples of the type of media the assignment asked them to produce (an informative or persuasive vlog). Having the students provide their own examples

increases investment in the project and encouraged discussion about the boundaries of the media form identified. Having examples of good and bad vlogs can be helpful at this point to help students see the differences. Students posted their examples on an online discussion board and were instructed to review the examples before class.

In the Analyze step, the class discussed the various examples, identifying communication strategies that are particularly effective and those that fail. They were divided into groups of three to four people and instructed to post to a group Google doc a list of five characteristics of good informational vlogs. During class, the groups met and discussed their observations and designed a grading rubric for the assignment. I compiled the ideas from the small groups into one document which we discussed during the next class session. The students argued for changes and the class voted on whether the version I compiled should be changed.

After developing the rubric, the students collaborated with me to design smaller assignments that would help them learn skills they needed for the final project. This Scaffolding step of CASPA is meant to break the project into more manageable components and create opportunities for the instructor and peers to provide learning support throughout the project. For example, one interesting conversation that recurred throughout the semester centered on the perceived tension between the role of personality, humor, and delivery in making a vlog entertaining (thus keeping audience attention) versus the role of good evidence and examples to make a vlog useful and credible. Students specifically asked to practice presenting research evidence to each other to get peer feedback on whether their summaries were engaging to people from outside their field. Here is a scaffolding assignment that specifically addressed the use of research:

Record yourself TWICE telling the story of a research study to be shared in class for feedback from peers. Tell the story about the research first as if you are talking to people in your field and then as if you are talking to a third grader.

This exercise helped students think about how to explain research in accessible terms for a wide audience. Other scaffolding assignments included practice talking about graphics, presenting a counterargument, gaining viewer attention, or explaining what the audience will gain if they follow speaker recommendations.

During the Produce step, students create their multimedia projects, capturing images, video, and sound as well as writing copy. During this stage, the instructor provided resources and guidance on the technical aspects of making multimodal texts. This was a challenging step since students had different laptops, phones (on which they recorded audio and video) and lighting options. As an instructor,

it was necessary to set up some common spaces and shared equipment in the library that students could access if they chose. It was also necessary to teach some basic editing skills in class and set reasonable boundaries about acceptable visual and sound quality. While students may regularly create media texts appropriate for social media contexts, few students seem skilled at recognizing or producing professional-quality audio-visual material.

Finally, students Assess their projects. This step was effectively completed as a presentation to the class, where questions and discussion pushed the students to think about how they might expand on the work they have done. This part of the assignment asked students to:

- Explain the goals of their vlog and the audience they hoped it would reach, including how the vlog might (1) help them as a professional and (2) be beneficial to the audience.
- Play their vlog and comment on their challenges and accomplishments for three of the criteria the class elected to put on the assignment rubric.
- Discuss the two most important pieces of advice they would give to future students completing this assignment.

Student advice to future students reflects some of the lessons they learned from this assignment. Some of the advice was about learning how much time it takes to create quality multimodal texts; they recommended allowing enough time to complete the project. They also had specific advice about lighting, backgrounds and framing that worked best. They recommended covering less information in more depth to make the vlog more interesting. Sources cited orally were identified as more effective than links appearing at the bottom of the screen, but only if the source was a credible source and not simply another website. They recognized the value of quality visual aids to help make their arguments.

The final assignment included on the student websites was a personal pitch, explained this way:

A pitch is a brief speech in which you try to “sell” yourself to your intended audience. For this assignment, you will record a 30-second to 1-minute pitch to a potential employer for a job or internship in your intended career field. Imagine that a potential employer looks at your personal website. Your pitch is intended to get them to look through your website and contact you.

The students were asked to include an attention device, an introduction, three defining personal traits with stories or examples to back up these claims about themselves, and a specific request

that the audience act (look at the website, contact them, interview them, etc.). This assignment helped them cull what they learned about their interests and talents over the semester into one cohesive statement.

One of the teaching strategies that worked effectively was to consistently remind students that they were practicing articulations, not irrevocably defining themselves. For example, the pitch assignment included:

Be specific about your major, your career path, and the specific part of your field that intrigues you. Be specific and definitive, even if you are not ready to commit to the path for rest of your life (who is?).

Encouraging a developmental approach to professional identity seemed to help students relax into trying on different persona and working towards their ultimate identity. Goals and skill articulation changed over the course of the semester and students became noticeably more confident in the articulation of their identities. As with the graduate course, the students responded on evaluations that the course was challenging and rewarding.

### Case Study 3: Undergraduate Travel Course

In the spring of 2024, my colleague Benjamin Erickson and I revived a travel course we had not taught since before the COVID-19 pandemic entitled *The Film and Television Studio System*. The course met for an hour once a week throughout the semester and, over spring break, we traveled with the students for nine days to Los Angeles, California. While in Los Angeles, students worked the Film Independent Spirit Awards as volunteer broadcast rehearsal stand-ins, visited all the major studios, and attended tapings of shows such as *The Jennifer Hudson Show*, *Bob Hearts Abishola*, and *The Price is Right*. The goal of the course is to teach students the professional practices behind-the-scenes of major media productions.

At our institution, travel courses often use journals to encourage student reflection on their experiences and to help them articulate the lessons they have learned. In previous versions of this travel course, students handed in paper journals to instructors as they got on the plane to return home, and instructors graded the journals for completeness and depth on the ride home. By 2013, students posted typed journal entries instead of the paper journals. Students would then use the journals to help them write a reflective essay about their travel experience.

In 2019, Erickson and I decided to shift the way we evaluated student learning from the travel experience. The standard journal and essay assessments were essentially communication between the students and us as professors. We found reflections to be somewhat standardized across students as they all tried to write what

they thought we wanted to hear as the audience with the power to grade their work. While a full e-portfolio did not seem appropriate in this course, we thought that an outward-facing digital product that could be part of student senior portfolios (required by the college) might help us improve the course. We decided to try using Blum and Barger's (2017) CASPA model (used in the public speaking course described above) in this course to scaffold students through making travel vlogs about the trip, forcing them to envision a broader audience for their reflections.

Instead of individual vlogs, this course required students to work in groups of 3-4 people. There are practical reasons to use group projects since this assignment requires them to capture more and varied original footage than the public speaking assignment described above. Everyone was required to show up on screen at some point, but we did not require the amount of time on screen to be equal. This allowed students to strategize about their professional skills, allowing them to capitalize on individual differences in camera, lighting, writing, and delivery skills to enhance the quality of their collective vlog.

The students began by collecting good and bad travel vlogs to analyze. Once again, students recognized the need to balance personality, humor, and delivery to make a vlog entertaining with good evidence and examples to make a vlog useful and credible. The framing of the assignment as a "travel vlog" rather than an "informative vlog" seemed to heighten the perception that having an engaging personality was important. Yet, when the students made rubric suggestions, they translated the role of personality into "good storytelling." In addition, they identified content areas they appreciated in a vlog (like the cost of activities and when to do activities) and emphasized the importance of cultural appreciation ("not disrespecting a city").

The first scaffolding assignment we use in this course focuses on the idea of individual impression management. We learned in past trips that students were often unprepared at moments when they met industry professionals to interact in professional ways and take advantage of the networking opportunities we were setting up. Therefore, we began by asking them to record individual 30-second videos in which they introduced themselves and their professional interests. This also allowed the groups to practice their recording skills and routines.

The impact of this emphasis on teaching students to present themselves professionally was seen most clearly on the trip one night as we waited for a taping of *After Midnight*. While we were in line, the students struck up conversations with the Paramount pages, asking them about their jobs and sharing their own career aspirations. The work we had them do recording themselves before we left for the trip prepared them for this interaction.

Of course, a travel vlog assignment can also result in messages that are aimed at pleasing the instructors grading the assignment. The assignment

needs to push students to think of unique ways to target their messages to audiences with different interests. We have tried two different approaches to helping them find unique approaches. In 2019, we assigned each group one of the studios to cover in their blog. While this approach resulted in vlogs that were different, this content-focused approach did not produce the type of student investment and personal expression we desired. In 2024, we added a scaffolding activity that asked students to plan for a particular focus and assign group members to oversee capturing footage in particular locations. When we returned from the trip, we asked the students to:

Start thinking about a thesis/moral/narrative/point of your Vlog. Identify the main idea(s) that you want to convey to viewers about Los Angeles. It should be more than a chronological recap of the trip. The best vlogs will draw on other sources and record new studio footage to connect the footage you captured on the trip.

We had to push the students to move beyond simple trip recaps, but eventually they landed on foci such as rating the studio tours, non-studio activities in LA, the diverse topography of LA as it related to things to do, food, and famous landmarks. These vlogs were of higher quality and allowed the students to combine their personal interests and opinions with factual knowledge about the film and studio industry more effectively. One piece of advice the students wanted to leave for future classes was to develop a more specific focus before leaving on the trip, so that they can more strategically gather footage when they are in Los Angeles. They also advised future students to take more footage than you think you will need. This is one of the things we will better scaffold next time we teach the course.

Since many in this course were upper class students who had already developed recording skills in their majors (such as Communication and Digital Media Arts), we did not include as many scaffolding exercises in this course as in the public speaking course. We did require a storyboard for their vlog after we returned from the trip. They workshoped their storyboards with another group during class and then had to submit at least 5 changes they would make based on the comments of the other group.

During the final exam period the students presented their vlogs to each other and assessed the strengths of their finished products and the challenges they faced. We got food to share and fostered a celebratory atmosphere as they shared their work. We have found that having this type of group sharing is key for this type of project since it emphasizes the public-facing nature of the vlogs. Students are sometimes nervous to be “on stage” in this way, but we believe they gain confidence from this impression-management activity.

Our experience with this class reinforces the idea

that assignments requiring the development of online materials can mentor students in impression management, even when a full portfolio is not required within the parameters of the course. This is especially true if the institution requires a senior portfolio. Then, the work in the classroom can contribute to institutional goals to improve the way students engage in online impression management.

Finally, the next time we teach the course, there is work to do in thinking through how we talk about the interaction of personal impression management and group impression management. Intuitively, the vlogs seem to reflect a “group identity,” but we did not overtly ask the students to think about how they were managing an impression of themselves as a group. Perhaps it would be interesting to require a 30-second group video in the beginning of the course that characterizes the strengths they have as a group. This might help students see how their individual identity intersects with the types of work groups they may encounter when they graduate.

## Conclusion

These three case studies demonstrate the benefits of pushing students to take themselves seriously as current young professionals (rather than students who will become professionals) and requiring them to genuinely offer something to the audience of their online portfolios. Actions that mentors can take to encourage students in this direction include:

1. Focusing student attention on an audience beyond a potential employer. While the online portfolio may include a resumé or a collection of completed projects, creating media content that is useful to a larger audience of professionals helps students see that they already have specialized knowledge that others may find useful.
2. Providing a framework that helps students understand the needs and expectations of online media audiences. In the undergraduate courses, Blum and Barger's (2017) CASPA model provided a useful structure. In the graduate course, the OKR model framed the way students thought about audience behavior on their websites.
3. Designing opportunities for students to get meaningful feedback on their media texts. Graduate students gathered analytics data that helped them understand how their audience was reacting to their content. Undergraduates engaged in scaffolding exercises and final assessment presentations that solicited feedback from their peers as proxies for their intended audiences.
4. Encouraging discussions about using valid

evidence in their media texts and avoiding clickbait or superficial content. While class discussion can help students pay attention to this issue, individual conferences or in-class workshops often provide the best opportunities to teach this lesson since the instructor and peers can ask for evidence about specific points that are not well-supported.

5. Helping students see their professional identities as evolving and developmental. Pitch assignments, writing website objectives, and requiring storyboards help students to recognize their current goals and adapt as their interests, perspectives, and knowledge change.

Mentoring students to develop their online personas can be done in a variety of educational contexts. This type of activity fits nicely into capstone courses within a major or as part of a general education program. In addition to helping students create a resource that they can use in job searches, public online portfolios provide a mechanism for students to reflect on and enact their professional identities.

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### **Author Biographical Sketch**

**Michele Strano Clark, PhD**, is an associate professor of communication studies at Bridgewater College, Virginia. She teaches media history, research methods, news writing, and public speaking. Her research focuses on the use of images to create and maintain identity, including investigations of wedding photography, social media networking practices, and media depictions of gender.