Florida International University

FIU Digital Commons

5-19-2014

Life-Integrated Evolving Digital Diplomas

Mandayam Thirunarayanan

Life-Integrated Evolving Digital Diplomas

by **M.O. Thirunarayanan**　　　Monday, May 19, 2014

Key Takeaways

- A **digital diploma** could serve as a **record of a person's life**, organized around the awarding of different diplomas indicating various levels of educational achievement.

- The owner of the diploma could **add family and personal history**, including events, people, and places important to his or her life story.

- Publicly available digital diplomas could **inform future generations** as well as the current one, highlighting good and bad episodes in a person's life and **serving as a resource** for future research into communities and events.

Imagine seeing pictures, viewing videos, and even hearing sounds from a frame that displays a diploma. Is that crazy, or is it going to be commonplace in the future? I predict that in the not-too-distant future, universities will go where no others have gone before and start offering what I call "life-integrated evolving digital diplomas."

Why should a person's high school or college diploma only include information about the credential or the degree that a person has earned? Why should a diploma that proclaims a person's educational achievement just be printed on a piece of paper? How dull and boring this is this in a world of endless digital possibilities. Why should a

diploma not be more versatile and incorporate the graduate's life as a whole? Digital diplomas should encompass all of a person's life, including the personal, social, professional, and educational aspects. Because diplomas and degrees represent the accomplishment of one of the more significant milestones in a person's life, it makes sense to make a diploma the centerpiece of the portfolio representing the person's life. (Jon Udell proposed something like this for students in a 2007 talk, although linked to institutional systems rather than diplomas.[1])

In my opinion, a person's diploma should incorporate what has transpired in his or her life up to the time the degree was earned and after. It should include things that happen in the person's family before his or her birth and after, and until graduation from high school or college and after, ending with the death of the person — and perhaps even after death. A digital diploma can be a person's life history or life portfolio, a collection of memories from womb to tomb.

Others have proposed the idea of recording one's life activities.[2] These ideas are more about just recording a person's life activities, while the idea of digital portfolios is more about organizing information about a person's life around his or her educational accomplishments.[3]

Including information about a person's parents, grandparents, and other ancestors will provide him or her with a sense of identity and a historical awareness of the people responsible for his or her existence on this planet. Information about places where the person's parents and other ancestors lived and came from will certainly add sentimental value to the earned diploma. The graduate will have eventual control over the content that becomes a part of the digital diploma. However, parents and perhaps even grandparents can initiate the process of creating the digital diploma even before the birth of the future graduate, similar to the manner in which many parents and grandparents create funds for the future education of newborn babies. However, it is the graduate who will earn the degree. Similarly, it will be the graduate who will eventually own the digital diploma and have the right to determine the contents of the diploma.

Colleges and universities can host the digital diplomas as a service to their graduates. This could help educational institutions in their efforts to broaden their alumni base and build loyalty among a group of potential donors. Some graduates could decide to maintain their own digital diplomas using their own resources or use the services of corporate entities that provide the needed services.

The formal diploma and transcripts of completed coursework should be stored in a secure area of the digital diploma. Proper electronic safety measures should be put in place to ensure that no one, including the person who earned the diploma, can make changes to it. When a person earns additional or advanced diplomas from other colleges and universities, those institutions should be able to create their own secure areas in the graduate's personal, life-long diploma where the diplomas they have awarded can be included.

The graduate should have control over the other, non-educational parts of the diploma and be able to add materials from his or her life for others to view and comment on. The owner of the diploma should decide if the diploma is to be kept private, meaning that only those who are invited will be able to view it by logging in with a secure password, or if the contents can be viewed by anyone. The owner will also have the discretion to allow or deny access to selected information contained in the digital diploma. These capabilities and features are already available in popular web-based services designed to promote social and professional networking and communication among people.

The owner of the digital diploma can add memories in the form of audio, video, text, and multimedia until his or her death. He or she can also authorize a surviving spouse or significant other or descendants to add pictures and videos created after his or her death. Memories can include first sounds, first steps, first date, first kiss, first significant other, first job, first marriage, and other firsts that are a part of a person's life record. Extracurricular accomplishments such as wining trophies in sports, debates, writing, acting, and other life activities can also be showcased in the digital diplomas. Memories could be both happy and sad, and could include events, places, and people who were a part of the graduate's life. The person's last will and testament could also be part of the digital diploma, thus making it also a legal document enforceable in a court of law.

When high school or college graduates get married and have children, they can show their diplomas to their children. The parents can tell their kids, "Look, these are your great grandma and grandpa," "This is where your dad proposed to me," "This is where we used to live before you were born," or "This is where we got married."

By following links in the diploma, observers can learn about the graduate's friends, places visited, hobbies and skills, and other pertinent information about the graduate's life. Those who are either granted access to a digital diploma or those who

are visiting a diploma that has been made available to the general public will be able to leave comments to which other visitors can respond. Such comments will enable descendants to understand what others thought of their parents or grandparents or other ancestors.

A person's digital diploma can be electronically linked to diplomas of immediate family members, extended family members, friends, and acquaintances, and others who played significant roles in the diploma owner's life. As noted earlier, colleges and universities could take the lead in maintaining such diplomas and continue to maintain them after the death of their graduates. Descendants of the graduate could also play a role in maintaining the diplomas of graduates after they die.

Such an evolving digital diploma will be useful to descendants of the graduate because it could contain advice on life and living from their ancestors, based on information that they learned from their elders. For example a graduate could inform his descendants that their family gene pool is vulnerable to a particular disease. This information could motivate descendants of the graduate to get screened to find out how likely they are to get that disease and take preventive measures if necessary.

Future generations can learn from the successes and failures of their ancestors and learn about their talents and accomplishments. They can also understand some of the risks their ancestors took and perhaps repeat their successes and avoid their mistakes. Descendants of graduates can try to prevent undesirable history from repeating itself in various aspects of their own lives.

Through their digital diplomas graduates can teach their descendants important life lessons about the need for saving sufficient resources for retirement, the importance of pursuing higher education, and for living a happy and prosperous life in general.

The contents of these digital diplomas, if made public, could also become rich genealogical records of the communities in which the graduates lived, and provide a ripe resource for researching the past. Long-term availability, accessibility, and user acceptance are the keys to the success of all digital portfolios. If they are maintained properly, managed well, and used wisely, everyone can benefit from life-integrated, evolving digital diplomas.

Notes

1. Jon Udell proposed "coherent personal digital archives" for students in his talk (recorded as a podcast) "**The Disruptive Nature of Technology**," EDUCAUSE Seminars on Academic Computing, Snowmass, Colorado, August 7, 2007.

2. Gordon Bell developed the concept of lifelogging with his MyLifeBits projects, and others have followed his lead. See, for example, Gordon Bell and Jim Gemmell, "**A Digital Life**," *Scientific American* (March 2007); **Wikipedia's definition of a Lifelog**; Todd Wasserman, "**Startup Light Aims to Give You a Digital Record of Your Life**," Mashable, March 9, 2013; and Mark Krynsky's Lifestream Blog entry "**Lifelogging/Quantified Self**," which provides a list of resources.

3. Udell combined the concepts of educational and personal life histories in the article, "**Picture This: Hosted Lifebits in the Personal Cloud**," *Wired,* April 6, 2013. He asserted that students' personal digital archives should include more than schoolwork, ranging into photos, videos, medical records, and so forth.

🏷 **Teaching and Learning, Badges and Credentialing, Digital Learning**