De-Coursing a Course:
Promoting Student Reflection and Initiative Via ePortfolios

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Abstract

A goal of any college course in any field is to promote both student reflection and initiative in learning. Yet we often design the learning environment of online courses in a way that contradicts these goals, dividing information and learning activities into specific, discrete, assignments which are the same for all students, and not providing a discussion of, or space for, reflection. This presentation will look at course design initiatives that give students more control over their learning, initiatives which involve using ePortfolios as workshop and reflective spaces, both within an online course housed in a traditional learning management system as well as a course that is housed completely within the Mahara ePortfolio system. As John Zubizaretta states in The Learning Portfolio (2004), the main purpose of portfolios is "to improve student learning by providing a structure for students to reflect systematically over time on the learning process and to develop the aptitudes, skills, and habits that come from critical reflection."[1] Helen Barrett, in "Balancing the Two Faces of ePortfolios," emphasizes that effective eportfolios "create an environment that makes people feel good about participating, give[s] users autonomy, [and] keep[s] the system as open as possible." [2] Both Zubizaretta and Barrett emphasize the processes that eportfolios encourage – documentation, reflection, integration, publication – processes that engage students and make them more aware of themselves as learners. And both emphasize the importance of carefully aiding students through those processes.

This presentation will address current course design projects in the State University of New York, Empire State College's online program, all of which are focused on creating environments that promote student reflection and learner control via eportfolios. It will identify issues we are confronting, such as how to present, integrate, and scaffold reflective spaces; how to deal with student expectations for courses and, in some cases, student fear of using ePortfolios; and how to respond to student reflections and help students move to their personal next steps. We will discuss works in progress, including a resource/course currently in design that focuses on learning through ePortfolios. Using the examples of 2-3 courses, we will examine how they have been "de-coursed" by implementing ePortfolio strategies that promote student reflection and initiative in learning, in our attempt to change a traditional course experience into discourse.

[1] Zubizaretta, John. The Learning Portfolio: Reflective Practice for Improving Student Learning. Bolton MA: Anker Publishing, pg. 15.

[2] Barrett, Helen. "Balancing the Two Faces of ePortfolios."
http://electronicportfolios.org/balance/Balancing2.htm

1. Introduction

For the purposes of this paper, eportfolios are defined from a constructivist viewpoint, using Barrett's (2005) definition, which she quotes from Pearl and Paulson: "The portfolio is a learning environment in which the learner constructs meaning. It assumes that meaning varies with individuals, over time, and with purpose. The portfolio presents process, a record of the processes associated with learning itself." [1]

Eportfolios can support student reflection and initiative in online courses, as shown in various research studies. Kirkpatrick (2007) found that students who use eportfolios "feel connected to their learning" [2], a finding confirmed by other researchers, as noted in an article by Abrami et al.(2008). [3] Buzzetto-More (2010) verifies that eportfolios "encourage greater student involvement in the learning process." [4] Our

objectives for eportfolios were the same: 1) to foster students' reflection on their performance and, as a result, 2) to foster students' engagement in and motivation for learning.

2. EPortfolios to Reflect on Course Content

A desire to help students reflect on their performance was key to an initial implementation of eportfolios in an introductory writing course. Leise (2010) draws a distinction among types of reflection; "reflection on performance" focuses on assessing and developing skills in a particular context "in which outcomes are being pursued with others and have real-world results." [5] To emphasize the ongoing processes of writing and reflecting, the course was changed from a linear module structure to larger, more flexible spaces that housed ongoing reading, discussions, and personal writing workshops.

Students were asked to read the same background concepts during the first two weeks of the semester, but then were able to choose the type of college writing they wanted to do in each three-week block of time, doing the reading appropriate to that type of writing. A personalized writing workshop portfolio space was created for students to post their ideas for writing and thoughts about their writing processes. Students could invite the instructor into this space for dialogue and feedback. An additional communal space entitled "Thoughts on Writing" offered students another venue to reflect on writing and compare processes over time. They were prompted to reflect with specific questions (e.g., Have you changed your process this time, and why? Do changes relate to the type of writing you're doing?), but any and all reflections were encouraged in both the individual and communal portfolio spaces.

Given the space, time, prompts, and flexibility, students responded with reflections such as this:

"One big thing that I've been confronted with so far is that I really need to spend a little more time or use more wording to discuss a particular idea or thought. I've noticed, and it's been pointed out, that I tend to jump from thought to thought pretty quickly, when there are better ways that I can tie things together."[6]

The college writing course structure inserted portfolio spaces into a traditional learning management system which did not have an easily-usable portfolio option. Because the structure deviated from the traditional LMS that students were used to, we included instructions and discussed the flexibility inherent in the course. In general, during the years this structure has been used, students have seriously engaged in reflecting on their performance, and many have shown initiative by offering multiple drafts of the same writing for feedback, even revising and resubmitting formal assignments. The traditional learning management system was successfully "de-coursed" by applying eportfolio concepts of ongoing, developing learning spaces and spaces for reflection.

While instructors evaluated final written products, most of the course time was devoted to individual and communal facilitative dialogue with students. As Zubizarreta (2008) states, "meaningful reflection is facilitated best not by leaving students to their own devices in thinking about their learning, but by utilizing the advantages of collaboration and mentoring in making learning community property." [7]

3. EPortfolios to Reflect on Self as Student

Another experiment with eportfolios instituted a portfolio system (Mahara) in a course in which faculty traditionally mentor students designing their academic degrees. Students often had difficulty applying abstract degree design information to their own situations; sustained engagement was a recurring problem. We wanted to create customizable spaces for students to reflect and discuss their thoughts, based on Kirkpatrick et al.'s (2007) findings that students who create their eportfolios are more motivated and engaged. [8] In other words, we wanted to see if blending form and purpose – housing the course in an environment that students themselves could create – would support fuller student reflection about and initiative toward creating their degrees.

Our early experiment moved all course activities into Mahara in a way that visually emphasized the flexibility inherent in the system. Like the writing course, students could choose what to work on within certain blocks of time, structuring their work in consultation with their faculty mentor. We included initial activities to help students become comfortable with the eportfolio environment, providing video and text

instructions on creating journals, pages, calendars, friending others, and discussing topics. We asked students to keep a running reflective journal to record their thoughts and questions about degree design.

Although some students engaged with the eportfolio system immediately, many students had difficulty deciding what to do when. Marjanovic (2006), who researched student experience with flexible course structure, found that students working in a new field wanted fuller structure. [9] In our second semester, we provided a more prominent visual timeline for the course, and are finding that students are engaging with the course more easily.

In its initial semester, students also did not fully engage in reflection activities. We found that we needed to offer sample structures and content for reflections, verifying what Kerka (2002) writes: "although mental reflection may occur spontaneously, 'written reflection is not a natural process, but has to be learned and practiced.' (Jasper 1999, p. 459) There is disagreement over whether reflection can be taught, but structured techniques may help prepare learners (ibid)." [10] In our second semester, we asked students to read/view information on reflection and write reflections using a What? – So What? – Now What? sequence oriented toward applying insights to personal action. [11]

Students were asked to reflect on their prior learning, knowledge and skills expected in their academic fields and professions, and their learning processes, all of which related directly to the purpose and product of the course. Additional and differently-organized reflections were encouraged as well. Open discussion spaces were created to encourage students to share their thoughts.

We are starting to receive reflections such as the following, which show a developing awareness and application of degree design concepts to "self."

"I think I may need additional math to strengthen my 'quantitative reasoning'… to meet the 'currency'…guideline I may need a refresher course and possibly higher level math. Also…I must be careful to demonstrate my currency using courses that were taken more than fifteen years ago. I can show how that knowledge has been a foundation of what I have learned as well as what I will continue to learn and develop." [12]

Overall, we have had some promising results. Reflections have strengthened dialogue between students and mentors and among students. Some students fully engaged in personalizing their portfolios for the course and beyond, filling them with additional writings, work history, multimedia, and more. Our task, as we move into our third semester offering the course, is how to capture that excitement while creating a balance between flexibility and structure, to help all students feel secure in knowing what to expect in the learning environment while at the same time emphasizing their own creativity and agency in creating that learning environment.

4. EPortfolios to Reflect on Self as Learner

The difference between the writing course, where the reflective eportfolio elements are working well, and the degree planning course, where we still have work to do, may have to do with the narrower vs. broader contexts in which students were asked to reflect. Reflections in the writing course dealt only with writing experiences and skills. Reflections in the degree planning course span contexts, and might focus on academic/professional skills, learning processes, prior learning, and more. Given that one goal of using eportfolios is to embed reflection in the student's learning process, we felt that we needed resources to address that goal.

We are developing "Learning through EPortfolios" simultaneously as a course and a "de-coursed" open resource for students, scaffolding activities that students can do as a group during a semester or engage in individually or communally as appropriate. Activities start with the personal and broaden out, from creating a profile and personal reflective journal, to looking at eportfolios as public and professional communication. Students can research and create personal learning environments, research portfolios and learning, create a communal resource page, create a page showcasing professional and/or acquired skills/knowledge. We offer reflective journal prompts throughout. The value of portfolios, as Yancey (2009) states, is a "translation effect, occurring as a function of students seeing their work in multiple contexts." [13] We hope to reinforce what Chen and Light (2010) call "folio thinking," which "emphasizes the need for structured opportunities to create portfolios as well as opportunities for reflection on the

purposes of creating coherence and making meaning (Chen and Mazow 2002; Chen et al. 2005). E-portfolios offer a framework within which students can personalize their learning experiences…and create different representations of their learning experiences for different audiences." [14]

5. Final Thoughts

George Siemens explains connectivism as an appropriate learning theory for the 21st century, as it emphasizes the processes of learning by connecting resources in a constantly changing environment: "value lies in our ability to reflect on, dialogue about, and internalize content in order to learn." [15]
Eportfolio strategies can offer a way to foster reflection and initiative if we:
- emphasize the usefulness of portfolios within many contexts
- make eportfolio resources easily available and offer activities for their use
- provide students with concrete examples to start an abstract process
- create an environment that supports individual experimentation and sharing

As we move away from traditional course structures and faculty roles, toward integrating eportfolios more fully in courses, we have learned that we need to work continually to achieve a balance between structure and flexibility to foster the reflection, discourse, and sharing that help students take their next steps as learners.

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