

## The Electronic Language Portfolio as a Tool for Lifelong Learning

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### Abstract

*This article intends to make evident that the electronic language portfolio can be an excellent tool for lifelong learning. The language portfolio is well recognized internationally, both by all the members of the European Council, Russia, Georgia, Turkey, the United States as well as in Canada, and has been the impetus behind various projects. An electronic portfolio is a digital version of a paper portfolio promoted by the European Council and serves present and former students of a foreign language as a means to present information related to their linguistic skills. It consists of three parts: a language passport, a language biography, and a dossier.*

*The electronic version of language portfolio offers great advantages in comparison with the paper portfolio. It is easy to update, print and transport. Students can have access to their portfolio and see their progress via Internet. It allows to conduct an ongoing evaluation of the learning process, promotes a quick feedback and motivation. It is easier to fill out and modify than a paper portfolio. It shows progress on short and long term objectives and makes success evident. It offers a low-cost and cutting-edge tool to evaluate and keep track of students' learning process.*

*It can be used as a digital multimedia curriculum vitae or resume since it contains information on linguistic and cultural experiences, skill levels and authentic samples of students' linguistic knowledge. This paper will demonstrate that the electronic language portfolio can be considered a very useful and efficient tool that promotes lifelong learning and mobility.*

### 1. Introduction

An electronic language portfolio is an electronic document which serves students of a foreign language as a means to present information related to their linguistic skills. It documents any experiences and skills gained in the foreign language, whether obtained in a formal educational setting or through extra-curricular contact. It is owned by students. It consists of three parts: a language passport, a language biography, and a dossier. The language passport provides a general overview of students' linguistic skills in one or more languages, as well as information on the results of the language tests, diplomas, and certificates that the students included in the language dossier. The language biography helps students to set and evaluate their goals related to language learning and reflect on their intercultural and educational experiences. The language dossier contains digitized copies of diplomas, certificates, as well as documents written by the student in the foreign languages studied. Audio and video files can also be included so as to demonstrate oral production and further establish the student's linguistic skills and achievements.

### 2. European and American Language Portfolios

An electronic portfolio is a digital version of a paper portfolio promoted by the European Council. The European Language Portfolio (ELP) was created and piloted between 1998 and 2000 by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. It was launched as a support tool to promote multilingualism and multiculturalism during the European Year of Languages. The ELP is based on the Common European Framework for Languages and includes six levels of reference for the organization of language learning and public recognition.

The European Language Portfolio stirred great interest in the United States. In 2003 members of the National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL) were invited to Germany to learn more about the Common European Frame of Reference for the Languages and the European Language Portfolio. Between 2004 and 2007 two interesting pilot projects were executed as a result of that visit and were aimed at adapting the European Language Portfolio to the American standards, in particular to the 5 C's of Language Learning (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities) and the levels of linguistic skills of the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages).

This is how the Linguafolio of Virginia and the LinguaFolio of four other states (North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Kentucky) began. These two portfolios were a starting point for the Global



Language Portfolio at Virginia Commonwealth University which was designed specifically for university students and has served as a model to numerous colleges and universities. Its electronic version was inspired by the Dutch electronic portfolio and EAQUALS-ALTE ePortfolio approved by the Validation Committee of the Council of Europe.

### 3. Electronic Language Portfolio

The electronic version of language portfolio offers great advantages in comparison with the paper portfolio. It is easy to update, print and transport. All the information that it contains can be downloaded and can be used by teachers and educational institutions in order to be carefully studied and researched. Students have access to their portfolio and see their progress via Internet. Its digital structure allows the coexistence of many languages and the uploading of numerous images. It also permits storing multimedia documents. Therefore, students can upload not only hardcopies or scanned copies of their work but also videos and audios.

Cummins and Davesne (2009) observe that “what makes electronic language portfolio different from paper-based portfolios is the type of *artifacts* that the EP can contain and the interactivity that digital portfolios allow. Unlike paper-based portfolios, EPs are capable of storing a wide variety of media files (e.g., audio files, video files, movies, photos, text files, PowerPoint) in a single location, organized chronologically, thematically, or according to a specific purpose.” [4]

A digital language portfolio is easy to send via mail as an attachment or as a link. It is easier to fill out and modify than a paper portfolio. It allows the student to conduct an ongoing evaluation of the learning process and promotes quick feedback and motivation. It shows progress on short and long term objectives and makes success evident. It offers a low-cost and cutting-edge tool for lifelong learning. It allows its users to create portfolios that can serve as multimedia resume and be sent out to future employers.

### 4. Lifelong Learning and the Language ePortfolio

It is worth mentioning that UNESCO and OECD identify lifelong learning as one of the basic factors of “economic prosperity and social stability” (Watson, 2003:1). [13] UNESCO also stresses the importance and need of both skills and knowledge development, as well as continuous learning throughout one's lifetime. Delors (1996:100) adds that it is an “imperative for democracy.” [5] There is no doubt that lifelong learning as a part of continuing education in formal and informal training, as well as workplace learning are mandatory in times of globalization and rapid technological change.

Apart from that, the electronic language portfolio can be used as an excellent learning strategy. Oxford and Nyikos (1989: 291) define learning strategies as “operations used by learners to aid the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information.” [8] The electronic language portfolio can be classified as a metacognitive learning strategy according to Rubin (1987), O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) and Oxford (1990), as well as a management and planning strategy following Stern's classification (1992). [9, 14, 6, 7, 11] According to Rubin (1987) metacognitive strategies include planning, prioritizing, and setting goals. [9, 14] Oxford (1990) offers similar classification and mentions: centering your learning, arranging and planning your learning, as well as evaluating your learning. [7] Therefore, a language portfolio, either paper or digital can be considered as a metacognitive learning strategy, since it teaches students how to evaluate their own knowledge, organize better the material that they wish to acquire, determine their long and short term objectives, as well as identify strategies to reach those goals.

Calderon & Hernandez (2006:2) believe that ePortfolios help students to reflect on their experiences and “create a linkage between theory and practice.” [1] Candy (1995) states that reflective activity and critical self-awareness foster lifelong learning. [2] Observing one's progress boosts motivation and encourages students to continue to learn and put more effort into it. It also promotes short and long term planning. According to Sutherland (2005) ePortfolio should not only be taught as an assignment or a course, but as a tool for professional development and lifelong learning. [12] It should involve a personal decision, and form part of one's personal development; in other words, it should become “myLearning” instead of just “eLearning.”

### 5. Conclusion

The language eportfolio is a great tool that promotes lifelong learning and autonomy, and also encourages active participation and taking responsibility of one's learning. It includes both formal, as well as incidental, informal, unintentional, and unplanned learning which Smith (2000:681) defines as “eclecticism of lifelong learning.” [10] It shows one's achievements, qualifications, experiences, and it



should be continually updated. The language ePortfolio is a very flexible and adaptable tool that embraces the complex nature of lifelong learning and different manifestations of acquisition of knowledge.

The electronic language portfolio makes the success of students, teachers and educational institutions more evident, more visible easier to measure and to document. Numerous educational institutions use it to assess their students; however, it should also be thought of, used, and taught as as lifelong learning tool. The fact that the countries of the European Union as well as Georgia, Russia, Turkey, the United States, and Canada have adopted the Electronic Language Portfolio shows that there is great interest and recognition on an international scale in this valuable tool.

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