My ePortfolio Journey: Reflections on Praxis
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My journey began approximately seven years ago, in the midst of the third decade of my career teaching modern language and literature at LaGuardia Community College. LaGuardia’s ePortfolio project inaugurated this journey. An electronic portfolio is a multimedia collection of artifacts, assembled over several semesters, that shows student learning together with personal and professional development. ePortfolio has the feel of published text; therefore, it engenders dedication, skill development, and creativity. It has a central theme that emerges as students reflect about their own identities and their professional and career goals. Furthermore, its public nature addresses important questions about the selection of materials and the connections that exist between learning and the acquisition and generation of useful knowledge. The ePortfolio has become the engine behind a transformational experience which has benefited students and my teaching in ways I did not anticipate.

The decision to integrate ePortfolio into my classes occasioned the reevaluation of three courses I teach every year: The Puerto Rican Community: A Minority Group Experience (ELN194); Introduction to Bilingualism (ELN101); and Humanism, Science, and Technology (LIB200), a capstone course for Liberal Arts majors. I needed to determine where and how I might incorporate ePortfolio in my sections, while remaining faithful to the subject matter and goals of these courses, a task that took several semesters. The reevaluation of the course syllabi, assignments, and class projects in a digital environment led me to subscribe to a new mantra, less is more. Creating a venue for students to consider their own educational process, the ePortfolio promotes reflective thinking and academic growth in ways that are immediate and tangible.

As I learned to incorporate new technologies into my pedagogy, I reflected upon which assignments might be more suitable for the ePortfolio and considered ways to redesign and create new ones for my courses. In a typical semester in which I teach three sections and work with seventy-five to ninety students, redesigning and/or creating new assignments is a formidable task that requires reviewing weekly assignments in these writing-intensive urban studies and capstone courses. The prospect of reconsidering some assignments forced me to rethink assumptions about my own teaching practice and its relationship to the subject matter.

The process of rethinking my courses made me aware that an element missing from my pedagogy was a rubric describing the criteria by which student work would be evaluated thereby drawing a relationship between a grade and demonstrations of learning. The public nature of the ePortfolio helped to crystallize the need for more transparency in the classroom. At this point, I discovered a new conceptual frame that permits students and instructors to agree on the rules of engagement before the work begins.

The emphasis on transparency brought me to a slippery slope. After many years developing my teaching practice, I felt some insecurity. Fortunately, I was joined and supported in my exploration by the LaGuardia ePortfolio team, as well as members of a faculty seminar that focused on best practices in the development of ePortfolios. My colleagues were very supportive and encouraging every time I shared with them a new or modified assignment. During this time, I realized not only the value, but also the necessity of having a professional learning community to validate or negate my ideas. Discussions about what worked and did not work with particular assignments became essential to my ability to revise them. I had formerly approached teaching as a solitary enterprise, subscribing to the standard that professors work with students in their classrooms, plan lessons, and grade exams and papers by
themselves. Membership in a professional learning community empowered me to try new ideas, dispel the angst failure sometimes brought about, and stimulated me to continue to explore ways to enhance my practice.¹

As I worked with students on the development of their ePortfolios, I observed important changes in student learning. I realized that students were not only grasping concepts that had been difficult for previous individuals but they were retaining them far longer than in previous semesters. That observation steered me to question the reason for my students’ apparent new gains. Upon further investigation, students reported spending more time completing writing assignments and thinking about how each lesson was part of a larger whole; their ePortfolio now included work from other courses they were taking that semester and courses they had recently completed.

The experience of one student in The Puerto Rican Community: A Minority Group Experience is characteristic of the learning process engendered by the use of ePortfolios. Juxtaposing familiar material with readings and class discussions prompted her to write:

“The subject matter of the class would otherwise not intrigue me, mainly because history is not a topic I choose to explore for entertainment, but once I began to add to previous knowledge and to explore the topic in more detail I became more and more interested.”

This student felt engaged and eager to further explore topics in the course because the ePortfolio allowed her to connect areas of knowledge in a new way, helping her and others to see course work as part of a larger opus. The ePortfolio also makes student learning more visible, motivating learners to be more thoughtful about assignments that they may expect to be viewed by a larger Web audience of peers, professionals, and faculty. An awareness of target readers also helps students to shape their voices.

Most profoundly, the ePortfolio project increased my regard for the role of reflection in learning. Miles Kimball points out that “...neither collection nor selection [of artifacts] are worthwhile learning tasks without a basis in reflection” (451). A student in Humanism, Science, and Technology, in which we explore the concept of discovery, made the following comment in her reflection essay about course content and use of the ePortfolio:

“For me, this course is like a prism, which joins together and reflects different fields of knowledge, thus enabling me to see separate pieces of information as a whole. It offers a synthetic point of view that helps to develop a large picture of the world we live in. I think that it is crucial, at this stage of my education, to be able to perceive things in a wider perspective and not be closed-minded about the surrounding reality.”

Reflecting on an assignment after its completion gave students an opportunity to state, in their own words, their understanding of a concept, its application, and its relationship to some other concept or idea with which they were already familiar.

Through the act of creating ePortfolios, my students became active participants in their own learning. As Judith Brown’s research on the effects of the electronic portfolio on student learning suggests, my students came to understand how their learning takes place in the academic environment (228). The comments of a student in Introduction to Bilingualism show this understanding:

“Each day as I learn new things, I am also learning to own everything about me (the good, and the not-so-good), and to always be conscious of the boundless possibilities of my thinking mind. Therefore, my college learning process continually gives me a chance to reinvent myself.”
In sum, the integration of knowledge, heightened student visibility, and reflection on learning have become part of the daily routine in my classroom. In the end, LaGuardia’s ePortfolio project has helped my practice to be more reflective as well, expanding my pedagogy to include digital media and reflection as tools for acquiring and retaining new knowledge.

The ePortfolio is not a panacea; there remain many questions to be asked and many issues to be resolved, for example, the institution’s commitment to continuing this project in light of cost and value-added issues. Will the electronic ePortfolio continue to demonstrate over time that it is an accurate measure of what students have learned in the process of acquiring a two-year college degree?

For me, the most pressing questions concern the impact of changes in my teaching on students’ futures. How does the shift in my pedagogy affect students’ chosen career paths? How does the electronic portfolio help students to be competitive in a job market dominated by multinational corporations? Does the electronic portfolio help students narrow the divide between the urban working-class and middle-class students? These questions suggest new directions for the continuation of my journey.

Note
1. From 2002 through 2004, the ePortfolio team consisted of Assistant Dean Bret Eynon and Professors Maureen Doyle, J. Elizabeth Clark, Phyllis van Slyck and Paula Nesoff.

Works Cited