Co-op, Reflection, and Professional Identity: An Experiential Education Approach

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We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.

John Dewey

A theme common to the lives of most students is the need for in-class professional preparation and cultural knowledge that support a transition from campus to workplace. At LaGuardia Community College, the mission of familiarizing students with professional life and its language and expectations is undertaken primarily by the department of Cooperative Education (Co-op). Since the 1970s, Co-op has guided students in experiential learning, or the process of learning by doing. But, as Dewey warned, learning from action may have negative or “mis-educative” effects that are often the result of unexamined experiences (Experience 25). Over the last forty years, Co-op courses have met this challenge by combining internship opportunities with critical reflection in the classroom. More recently, these opportunities have been revitalized by the use of ePortfolios – with their inherent capacity to guide the practice of reflection – and by the construction of career identity in a new sequence of courses: the first-year Fundamentals of Professional Advancement course (CEP121) and the second-year full-time internship experience (CEP201), and accompanying discipline-specific Internship Seminars (CPA041, CPB041, CPC041).

Overview: Connecting Students, Connecting Classrooms

In 2008–09, twenty LaGuardia faculty participated in the Center for Teaching and Learning’s interdisciplinary professional development seminar, “Connecting Students, Connecting Classrooms: ePortfolio and the Power of Engagement” (CSCC). The goal of the seminar was to clarify the meanings and uses of reflection within the context of ePortfolio. The nucleus of an integrative learning dynamic, ePortfolio fuses technology, disciplinary learning, reflective practice, and assessment (ePortfolio). The interdisciplinary advantages of ePortfolio are multiple, and it encourages cohesiveness of learning by bringing
together evolving and visible expressions of student work from across disciplines and semesters into a single website. Most important to the focus of this paper is ePortfolio’s “Collect, Select, Connect, and Reflect” pedagogy, which encourages intentional teaching and learning in faculty and students alike (ePortfolio).

Theories of Reflective Practice
In the literature on reflection and ePortfolio, Jennifer Moon’s study of Dewey, Kolb, and Schön is essential to mapping the ways that ePortfolio pedagogy can incorporate reflective practice and thus expand student self-awareness and professional knowledge. In A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice, Moon proposes an academic view of reflection as:

likely to involve a conscious and stated purpose ... with an outcome specified in terms of learning, action or clarification.... The process and outcome of reflective work are most likely to be in a represented (e.g., written) form, to be seen by others and to be assessed. (83, emphasis added)

Identifying conscious intention, outcomes, and visibility as essential properties of reflection, Moon refers to Dewey’s stress on the significance of reflection and experiential knowledge throughout the formal educational process (Moon, Reflection 12). Summarizing Kolb, she suggests that his experiential four-sector learning cycle – concrete experience (feeling), reflective observation (watching), abstract conceptualization (thinking), and active experimentation (doing) – has implications for college-wide general education learning initiatives (Moon, Reflection 24–26). Through the experiential learning cycle, the student learns to connect classroom knowledge and life experience, reflect upon that connection, and establish educational and professional goals to keep pace with an evolving identity. Moon concludes her synthesis with an exploration of Donald A. Schön’s “theories in use” and his ideas of reflection which, firmly grounded in professional workplace practice, elaborate on four critical elements: self-knowledge, organizational dynamics, professional development, and workplace culture (Moon, Reflection 40).

Classroom Applications of Reflective Practice
The value of ePortfolio as a support for the practice of reflection presents itself to Co-op faculty most clearly in the artifacts of learning
(essays, images, multimedia presentations, etc.) that students select and post, thereby providing an evolving electronic record of their academic, professional, and social acculturation. Prompts, scaffolding, and activities that mine students’ life experiences are of particular importance in reinforcing the connection between career exploration, workplace experience, and reflection. Throughout Co-op curricula, students are guided to evaluate acts of learning, describe the conditions under which these occurred, and compare and document stages of conceptual development.

Along the way, supported by the interactive design of ePortfolio, students engage in a variety of forms of self-reflection that can free learners from the unidirectional limits of the traditional classroom. The template design of ePortfolio consists of a set of five interrelated modifiable sections (“Welcome,” “About Me,” “Educational Goals,” “Classes and Projects,” and “Links”). This design reinforces recursive narration about life experiences and classroom learning by encouraging students to revisit significant learning experiences and their impact upon present decision-making processes. ePortfolio also offers a flexible alternative to more static written formats in its capacity to display visual and audio files – for example, digital stories and oral presentations. Anticipating the workplace, the ePortfolio template and pedagogy draw upon and develop skills in independent documentation, organization, interactivity, and self-evaluation, all especially meaningful to “the highly motivated, self-directed learner,” who wishes to “approach the workplace as a continual classroom from which to learn” (McNamara).

My Fundamentals of Professional Advancement (FPA) course stimulates professional knowledge and familiarity with workplace discourse and culture by tasks that require students to research employment trends and opportunities, identify realistic educational options, and design resumes. To expand their knowledge and to increase their motivation to create comprehensive and reflective ePortfolios, students write a series of narratives that describe their skills, abilities, interests, and personalities; assess motivations, competencies, and relevant experience; and clarify future goals. Such assignments prepare students for internship interviews in the short term and, at the same time, they help to develop a long-term professional identity. Clearly articulated reflective questions provide a fresh approach for students who struggle to reflect upon classroom learning and experience: “What did I learn from this project and why is it important?” “How will this product of learn-
ing prepare me for my next steps?” “What are my accomplishments?” “In what areas do I need assistance?” Responding to questions such as these helps generate the clarity of self-knowledge, beliefs, and perceptions that contributes to professional readiness and the realization of one’s goals.

For example, in response to the FPA career exploration assignment, Paul, who arrived in the United States with limited English proficiency, selected political science as the topic of his research paper and learned that interning for a political campaign could lead to a job. As demonstrated in two posts excerpted below, Paul’s reflective exploration both clarifies his goals and captures his evolution. The first excerpt is from his ePortfolio “Educational Goals” page created in FPA during Spring I 2008:

When I first came to New York the only idea that I had in mind was to learn English. However as I started at LaGuardia new ideas came to my mind. I decided to continue my education at a senior college and if everything goes as I hope I will go to a Law school, since I’m volunteering in a school in Manhattan and I’m working with lawyers and legal assistants. Law school has become the biggest goal.

In Fall II 2008, Paul interned in the Office of New York State Assembly Member Jose Peralta in Corona, Queens. His Internship Seminar essay acknowledges the effect of his experience on his view of the workplace, his evolving educational and career goals, and his future plans:

In my case the internship was a helpful key to clarify my career goals. Although I still have some doubts about my final career goals, what I know so far is that this internship helped me to accomplish some of my goals. Now I have a sense of how a political office works.

But Paul’s final reflection goes beyond a statement of goals to express a deeper awareness of how to create meaning in his life:

Any politician has the responsibility to look after their community. For me it is not only a responsibility but an obligation to make sure that people are getting what they deserve. During my internship I saw many constituents walking into the office
or calling with a variety of problems and even though the office was not able to help all of them, I noticed the effort everybody made to address the problem. I am interested in a similar job where I can interact with people, help them and enjoy and feel good about what I do.

If ePortfolio reflective activities are to have value, then they must have the capacity to move students toward visible introspection. That is, as readers of Paul’s ePortfolio, his peers, teachers, and perhaps a wider community of prospective employers can participate in his growth toward a clear and realistic professional identity, anticipate with him the ongoing challenges of the workplace and society, and experience his desire to serve his community. Ideally, as reflection contributes to the deepening of personal meaning, it also helps in defining educational and professional goals. In Paul’s words:

Although as I stated before, I am not sure of my final career goals I know that I want to get my bachelor’s degree and also go for my master’s degree. I also have been volunteering for the specials elections for City Council in my district. I want to be sure that when I choose my career, I choose the right one. There is still a lot of work that I have to do and a lot of decisions to make but I will not hesitate. I want to enjoy my student life for now but also work for my future.

As students reflect on past choices, they may also describe redirection of career goals and their learning achievement plan. For example, highlighting unanticipated changes, Jocelyn Perez’s “Educational Goals” page, created in Fall I 2008, reveals a new calling:

I’m currently a candidate for an Associate of Arts and have a GPA of 3.7, which I hope may be higher by the time I graduate. I originally started off as a Veterinary Tech major but switched over when I realized that that career did not seem as appealing as it once did. I realized that my calling was environmentalism and wildlife conservation, a field I hope to break into soon.

The opportunity to reflect in ePortfolio allows Jocelyn to present a coherent narrative of change during her Fall II internship:
My internship experience offered me insight into how important a zoo can be, not in an economic respect, but for wildlife as a whole. The zoos play a major part in wildlife conservation, the career path I have chosen for myself, by raising awareness through educational means and interactive exercises.

Readers of Jocelyn’s reflection follow a narrative of professional development that chronicles her successful internship, her high evaluation ratings in every category, and her acceptance of an invitation to volunteer at the Queens Zoo. Her final posts reflect upon her future goals, and the power of ePortfolio to facilitate self-inquiry:

Once in my senior college, I hope to pursue a Masters in Developmental Biology and the Environmental Sciences, and possibly minor in Anthropology. I had then planned to move abroad to Costa Rica and work in one of their reptile or avian sanctuaries, but my stay at the Queens Zoo has made me question my original plan...I believe that the type of writing required for the EPortfolio forced me to truly look into myself, evaluate my achievements and experiences, as well as examine their relevance to my future.

Conclusion
The above examples suggest that reflection on experience helps students like Paul and Jocelyn to recognize their abilities, accomplishments, values, and interests. As in other community colleges, particularly those in urban environments, LaGuardia’s student population represents individuals at various stages in their lives and decision-making processes. Some of the students know exactly what they want to do in their chosen professions; others are still searching for professional identity. Co-op faculty require each student, regardless of major or prior experience, to think with intention and purpose about their interests, skills, and motivations. To promote this process, Co-op incorporates ePortfolio as a tool for narrating change over time, supporting professional inquiry, and presenting evidence of learning. Acquired in the classroom and deepened by the internship experience, the knowledge collected and made visible in ePortfolio reflects our students’ evolving personal and professional identities and their growing capacity to meet the challenges of the workplace and future academic studies.
Works Consulted


*ePortfolio @ LaGuardia Community College*. LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d. Web. 16 Nov. 2009.


