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The Cool Medium. The Global Pedagogy of ePortfolio in the Foreign Language Classroom

Giulia Guarnieri
CUNY Bronx Community College

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The Cool Medium

The Global Pedagogy of ePortfolio in the Foreign Language Classroom

This article discusses the use and evaluates the effectiveness of the ePortfolio platform in Italian elementary language courses at Bronx Community College, where ePortfolio has been used in classrooms since 2009. More specifically, this study will address the advantages while underscoring the difficulties that emerge in introducing this technological medium, since it requires several adjustments in terms of teaching and language acquisition methodology. Once an instructor decides to integrate ePortfolios in a course, s/he must be able to answer several preliminary questions: How will the ePortfolio improve the learning of the subject in question? What is the added value of ePortfolio pedagogy? What does the ePortfolio help to do better? How can language instructors use conventional reflection tools if students only know a few words? What does “reflecting” in the foreign language classroom mean? To answer the first question, the instructor must bear in mind the academic objectives and align them to the potential and characteristics of the ePortfolio; this will ensure that by the end of the course, students will have advanced through various learning stages to achieve the course objectives. An accurate analysis of the ePortfolio implementation experience is conducted in light of the different theoretical approaches connected to the ePortfolio, in particular those associated with the effectiveness of its communication.

ePortfolio, as a medium reliant upon user involvement and communication, is what Marshall McLuhan classifies as a “cold” medium, meaning a medium that requires a strong interaction with its user in order to make any sense. Participants in a ePortfolio platform are called not solely to display their learning progression but also to demonstrate an awareness of their various experiences. The virtual space inside which all activities are carried out represents an extension of the student’s mind—a sort of “prosthesis which mirrors—through the created contents—personal lives and the contexts which house them” (McLuhan 123).

Based on the above premises, this essay intends to contribute pedagogical guidelines for those foreign language instructors who wish to experiment with the ePortfolio both as an instrument of assessment and learning. This study will address the role played by the autobiographic assignment, which redefines the ePortfolio as a powerful educational tool to increase personal development and social integration.

Redefining the ePortfolio reflection

Over the last twenty years, the ePortfolio has developed into a successful pedagogical environment both in colleges and K-12. Its academic implementation is supported by various theoretical studies focusing primarily on the following aspects: 1) improving learning; 2)

offering a framework of different approaches: 3) increasing student involvement (social pedagogy); 4) enhancing life-long learning; and 5) supporting integrated learning.

One of the backbones of the ePortfolio pedagogy, with which one can accomplish all of the objectives previously outlined, is its capacity to create opportunity for reflection by stimulating metacognition or "thinking about thinking." Primarily, we are referring to written reflections, but also to multimedia self-narratives where students produce various texts: "Reflective texts have taken a myriad forms—from concept maps to written texts to streaming video" (Yancey 13). To further clarify, metacognitive reflections are intended, for example, to find solution to a science problem, to argue the mechanism of an engine, and by digging deeper into an issue, students acquire a profound understanding of the subject in question. (Meichenbaum 413; Reynolds, Patton and Rhodes 119). Helen Barrett, a prominent theoretician of the pedagogy of ePortfolio, further clarifies the role of reflection within this context: "A portfolio without goals (or standards) and reflections is just a multimedia presentation, or a fancy electronic resume, or a digital scrapbook" (Barrett 2). Barrett emphasizes the fact that the great benefits of ePortfolio depend not only on its technical and multimedia features, but on its capacity to develop also a sense of awareness and life-long learning in learners. Furthermore, the ePortfolio environment revolves around students' needs, interests, and life context, allowing for auto-correction, and thus inculcating an active awareness of personal progression in learning. Self-narration and autobiographical writing, for example, emphasize the experiential-emotive aspect, which allows the individual, especially, first-generation students, to increase academic motivation, which is otherwise often hampered by personal challenges.

Therefore, in order to apply the ePortfolio environment optimally, it is essential to understand that it is pedagogy that drives technology, and not vice-versa: "The reality of learners' experience means that the authors are capable of forcing the technology to serve pedagogy, and not vice-versa." (Felix 120). In other words, technology must put itself at the service of pedagogy, which should never relinquish its role as the learning "conductor" in the entire learning process. Furthermore, ePortfolios go beyond merely showcasing academic work, instead, students who use this electronic platform are able to integrate their education with self-portrayals and display multifaceted personas to multiple audiences and for multiple purposes: "The significance for first-generation students is that they can revise their initial narratives of deficit to ones of self-efficacy, where they can envision themselves becoming the kind of persons who have college degrees and succeed beyond" (Conefrey 170).

Scientific Literature review of the use of ePortfolio in foreign language courses

When we begin to look for scientific literature on the integration of ePortfolio in L2 (Second Language) courses, we realize that this terrain is relatively unexplored by pedagogues, particularly in comparison to online learning and Web 2.0 applications, on which there have been numerous studies. Such lack of research can be attributed to several factors: 1) the time spent learning a new system; 2) lack of technical support; 3) students' resistance to learning

something new; 4) the lack of support from departments and college administrations; and 5) the uncertainty inherent in assessing student work (Cho and Brown). To such a critical list, we can add the fact that experimenting with new technology in the classroom does not carry much weight in the process of instructors' reappointment and promotion. This lack of support becomes a disincentive for academics to integrate new pedagogical methods and approaches.

Foreign language pedagogy does acknowledge few studies that tackle the various uses of ePortfolio. These few which do exist focus on the acquisition and improvement of writing abilities, the initial impact of ePortfolio on learning a foreign language, and lastly, the challenges and hurdles of introducing technology into the L2 classroom. Moreover, some of these articles (Milman 380) underline the difficulty in adopting ePortfolio given the lack of support from colleges, "while preservice teachers identified ePortfolio benefits to consider alternative view-points, reflect deeply on teaching experiences and promote goal formation and attainment, they did not anticipate using them in employment situations because of time constraints, lack of incentives and conflicting institutional interests" (Shepherd and Skrabut 35). A 2017 article focuses, instead, on the use of ePortfolio as an assessment tool in order to achieve learning outcomes and how it helps students develop their intercultural competence (Dias and Chui 60).¹ Without explicit interventions on the part of academic institutions, the use of ePortfolio will not be able to expand and as a consequence it may even decrease.

Teaching foreign languages: comparing pedagogies

A reason for resisting the integration of the ePortfolio technology in L2 courses concerns its methodology, which is linked to the specific characteristics of the subject taught. There is in fact a belief that teaching foreign languages, just like mathematics, is teaching a "skill" which requires a different approach compared to content-subjects such as, for example, history, which is often memorized. A clarification of this point is needed: In the United States there is much interest in innovative and pioneering approaches (for example, theories such as multiple intelligences, Whole Learning, Flipped Classroom, Integrative Learning, and others) applied to L2 pedagogy.² Moreover, such interest rarely corresponds to the reality of college textbooks, with few exceptions. This means that while there is much support for innovative L2 approaches, like the task-based approach or communicative method, the Italian language textbooks, as other languages, base most often their methodology on the traditional grammatical approach.³

In Europe, by contrast, the dynamic debate on best practices in the foreign language classroom exposed a clash between the "global approach" and the "analytic-synthetic-phonological methodology," resulting in textbooks which showcase both of these educational models. In the global method, the word is learned before the alphabet, and acquisition is facilitated by the relations between the word and the socio-experiential context of the learner, and is thus based on the student's interests and needs (Nadezhda 36). Consequently, the grammar is learned by assimilation and is acquired inductively by attaining the linguistic rules taught. According to the theorists of this method, put forward in the 1930s by Ovide

Decroly, with the support, among others, of Nicolas Adam and Edouard Claparède, this approach should engage the student more as it strengthens the motivation for learning. The second approach, on the other hand, is deductive, as it is based on the progressive learning of the grammatical and orthographic principles. This approach is predominant in the publishing world in the United States as far as foreign languages are concerned.

Such a context creates some difficulties for the instructor who introduces the ePortfolio in the classroom, since, on the one hand, the textbook adopts the traditional mode (analytic-synthetic-phonological) of teaching, while on the other hand the ePortfolio platform suggests the use of the global approach.⁴ The difficulty is in homogenizing the academic material in order to make it fully adaptable to the specific pedagogy of the ePortfolio, which subscribes to the global approach. This is possible thanks to the fact that ePortfolio reveals, through reflective artifacts, students' strengths and weaknesses which allows them to gain deeper insight and focus more effectively on their academic trajectory.

These undeniable advantages, however, face one more indisputable hurdle. Requiring instructors to bring the traditional and global methods of learning to the same level in the classroom negatively impacts their willingness to experiment with this new technological environment, especially if they have only elementary level language courses and students have limited capabilities with ePortfolio digital platforms. In such situations, it may appear as if the ePortfolio is itself a subject to be learned, rather than an instrument to facilitate learning. It is important, however, to emphasize that foreign language instructors are not as technophobic as portrayed, as stated by Mollaei and Riasati (9). There are many explanations for the resistance to the use of technology, which all lead to the lack of trust in its effectiveness: "If teachers choose not to use the technology provided to them, it is not because they fear technology but, rather, because they are not convinced of its usefulness"⁵ (Lam 410).

It is important to recognize that the best use of the ePortfolio is in courses where the language proficiency is at least at the intermediate level, since it becomes apparent that this tool is not used to its best effect in lower level language courses.

The formative value of the autobiography

At a theoretical level, the study of foreign languages is a progressive process based on the actualization of projects that mirror realistic contexts (ordering food at a restaurant, describing your morning routine, etc.). These tasks, which are simple to adapt to the interactive pedagogy of the ePortfolio, as identified by Fredricka Stoller (2006), revolve around four main phases: the creation of the detailed project, such as using a specific word to order in a restaurant; the advancement of students' autonomy; conquering sequential thresholds; and lastly, strengthening motivation for integrative learning.

Following the principles set by these stages, this study will consider the autobiographical assignment. Students are asked to narrate their stories in various contexts throughout the semester. It begins with the physical and emotional description (first month), and then it develops into a narration about culinary habits and the description of their favorite

recipes. The complete staged assignment ends with students expressing their own opinions and points of view on various topics. One could define this activity as a sequential diary, often supported by audio or video podcasts that redefine the written work as multimedia hypertext assignment.

The choice to create an autobiography is rather common in foreign language courses for a simple reason. Several studies (Taylor, Busse, Gagova, Marsden and Roosken and Murray, Gao, and Lamb) show that students feel appreciated and valued in narrating about themselves and begin to see the possibility of obtaining even better academic results. The activity of self-narration combined with an improving command of the subject "develop[s] their information literacy and planning skills, while fostering autonomy, [and] sustainable learning" (Taylor, Busse, Gagova, Marsden and Roosken 12). For the instructor who uses the autobiography there is another advantage: it becomes a way to get to know students better and in different ways. The exercise thus moves beyond simple content and enters into contact with the cultural context specific to each student.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that the creation of the autobiographical assignment via digital hypertext, as allowed by the ePortfolio, is particularly effective in identity construction since one begins to see the possibility of obtaining even better academic results. Through the narration of their stories, in fact, students increase awareness of their emotions, feelings, needs and desires, and uncover a world of great experiential richness. Such creative individual effort becomes an advocate of inquisitiveness and is an incentive that strengthens academic motivation.

When one uses autobiographical writing in the classroom as a way to foster self-representation and self-narration, it also helps to build self-awareness, and supports a positive relationship with "others," since it promotes autonomy and self-direction (Turkle 84).

The semiotics of ePortfolio between communication aid interactivity

The autobiographical journey is one of the most suitable projects for ePortfolio, given its ability to captivate and interact with students' creations in an academic setting. This feature is also at the core of Marshall McLuhan's 1964 classification of media as "hot" and "cool." Since it requires ample participation from the "public," in this case students and faculty, ePortfolio qualifies as a "cool" medium: "Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation" (McLuhan 4).

ePortfolio, as a hypertext, provides an opportunity to directly and concretely interact with the materials posted, such as links, texts, visual and auditory elements, and allows the user to answer questions and take tests. This evokes what Umberto Eco understood about written texts, which the public interacts with by virtue of applying personal meaning to the images and realities depicted on the written page: "Texts are the loci where sense is produced. When signs are isolated and removed from the living texture of a text, they become spectral and lifeless conventions. A text casts into doubt all of the previous signification systems and renews them: frequently it destroys them" (Eco 38). Therefore, texts have meaning thanks

to the active role played by the reader who applies meaning to them, and thus a text can have a multitude of meanings, each assigned by the reader.

However, in the case of the hypertext, the situation is different: the users leave concrete, visible, and communicative traces, which are essential for its full realization. While using ePortfolio the student can express views and interact with other fellow students inside a group or learning community by using the "conversation feature," another instrument offered by the platform. The student is thus no longer a passive agent but is able to interact inside a large relational and communicative scenario (Dijk, 20; Jenkins, 11).

The interactivity encouraged by the ePortfolio creates a multidimensional exchange, a sort of dialogue between several "parties" who are, at the same time, receivers of the messages, and who repeatedly change their communication in relation to the reactions of others inside the same court. What develops is a "leveled" relationship between all of the messengers (except for the instructor), thanks to the ePortfolio features, which demand a high volume of interaction and exchange.

In accordance to McLuhan's 1960s philosophy we can point out another consistent aspect of ePortfolios. The Canadian theorist claims that media carry messages capable of modifying the way we perceive the world, and examined within this context *the medium* functions as an extension of the mind of the student, or as fiction writer Philip K. Dick termed it, a kind of prosthetic mind (Dufty 149).

Consequently, because it connects with intimate stories and emotions (supported by photos or/and podcasts), the hypertext created by the student can be seen as an extension of his or her identity, communication and social skills. This becomes even more apparent when the ePortfolio is used by students to talk about topics they care about, particularly when students recount traumatic experiences, like chronic diseases, violence or disability, which severely impact on their lives. Since the ePortfolio can incorporate social media sharing options in each page, students can replicate their messages in perpetuity, creating a great opportunity for comments and contacts thus confirming the interpersonal potential of this digital medium. The ePortfolio is an active platform as it is dynamic and modifiable, and regularly fosters intentional communication, that is to say, because, reaching out to others, with positive repercussions for learning and student motivation (Tsotra, Janson, and Cecez-Kecmanovic 7).

Brief theoretical notes to introducing ePortfolio pedagogy

Having discussed the theoretical aspects of the ePortfolio, we must now turn our attention to the consequences of its implementation. The choice for introducing this platform as an academic tool requires several preliminary considerations. The first is to distinguish it from other course management systems or platforms such as Blackboard. The latter is teacher-centered, while ePortfolio is more student-centered, meaning that students become responsible and aware of their own cognitive and learning process. In the L2 context this implies students are able to see and hear their linguistic progress through specific assignments, as underlined by Dave Knowlton: "In student-centered classroom students are allowed to

broaden the learning arsenal by introducing things that transcend teacher control of course material—and thus teacher control of what constitutes valid knowledge” (Knowlton 8). What this means is that, in the end, it is not the grade on a test or exam that really matters, but rather the formative path taken and the creation of linguistic deliveries throughout time, which clearly make language progression visible and tangible.

The concept of innovation is also well-connected to another applicable theoretical paradigm of ePortfolio. It is related to the Meyer and Land’s (16) “threshold concept” a level of knowledge able to completely change prior information or awareness, a phenomenon similar to a “lightbulb” moment: “A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view” (15).

Meyer and Land claim that such a threshold becomes a sort of disruption that profoundly effects knowledge and logic, similar to something “foreign”: “Knowledge that is ‘alien’, or counterintuitive or even intellectually absurd at face value. It increasingly appears that a threshold concept may on its own constitute, or in its application lead to, such troublesome knowledge” (16). The main consequence of this cognitive rupture is the opportunity to create innovation throughout the curricula, for example by integrating the ePortfolio into a college foreign language course. However, the question of how to strengthen and improve the learning of the four linguistic skills in a second language remains unanswered.⁶ To attempt to answer this query we must understand who the actual users of this platform are, and how innovative pedagogy fits into the community college environment.

Academic profile of Bronx Community College students

When considering any sort of pedagogical integration, knowing the socio-economic profile of students in general is an important factor, as it impacts on the academic success of your students “Academic preparation and socioeconomic status are among the most consistent predictors of early college achievement” (Stephan, J., Davis, E., Lindsay, J., and Miller, S. 12; Pascarella and Terenzini; Pike and Kuh 5). At Bronx Community College, the graduation mandate to take a foreign language course of two semesters is limited to roughly 25% of the total college population. For some degrees it is limited to one semester only which greatly effects the opportunity to learn a language sufficiently and diminishes student eagerness and motivation to continue learning at the subsequent level.

In order to outline the academic profile of students from Bronx Community College it is useful to provide some indicators for the ethnic, social and economic composition of this population.⁷ The vast majority of students are female (57%); students of Hispanic heritage are roughly 61% of the student body, while those of African-American heritage make up 33%. Although the majority of students are employed (54%), they are still considered to be poor, since 63% of those working receive less than \$25,000 a year. Another relevant factor

is that 53% of students are first-generation college students, which means they are the first ones in their family nucleus to attend college. This data matters because it is linked to academic challenges that students face daily on an emotional, domestic, and most importantly an economic level. The socio-economic situation of Bronx Community College's students negatively impacts on academic aptitude and the ability to overcome unforeseen challenges. In addition, the lack of sound study habits, due to a lack of models to follow within the family circle, is a typical characteristic of the vast majority not only of the students at Bronx Community College, but in general, of all community colleges in the United States. Among the employed students, 47% report that working has had a negative impact on their study time and, as a consequence, they are unable to dedicate quality time to this activity.

Academic success with ePortfolio

Several studies unequivocally underline the link between the use of ePortfolio and academic success (Eynon, 62; Eynon, Gambino, Török, 96; Hakel and Smith, 134). From this literature it becomes clear that this digital environment values all of the students' experiences, from the personal to the social.

Such promising results have also been attained in L2 courses, particularly in an elementary Italian course. Data gathered by observing four Italian courses (n=4) in which the ePortfolio was introduced showed that students performed better compared to similar courses at the same level, offered in the same semester in other languages (Spanish and/or French) within the same department. For example, in Fall 2012, the Italian ITL 13 course (third semester elementary) obtained a passing rate of 78.6% and a withdrawal rate of 14.3%; while courses such as Spanish 13, (SPN 13) demonstrated more negative parameters, with a passing rate of 76.2% and a withdrawal rate of 15.9%. This can be attributed to the fact that the ePortfolio was used in the Italian classroom as a motivational tool in order to reach higher goals and to develop a higher fidelity rate, although other factors such as effective teaching, assessment and climate, among others, may have played a role in student success in this particular section.

We find a similar result in the same semester (Fall 2012) in another Italian course, Italian 12 (ITL 12), second semester elementary. This course had a pass rate of 84% while the drop out rate was 7.8%. Both Spanish and French courses show worse numbers for both parameters.⁸ In this case, the student-centered pedagogy of ePortfolio, based on autobiographical assignments and active learning, generates higher fidelity and better academic numbers. The same positive outcome was evident during the Fall 2009 semester, in which the ITL 12 course had a lower withdrawal rate compared to the same FRN and SPN 12 courses which, as in previous examples, had worse performance rates in both withdrawal and pass percentages.⁹ Another case in which there is a correlation between the use of the ePortfolio and academic success rates is an Italian 13 course taught in Spring 2011. Once again the numbers in terms of withdrawal and pass rate here are higher than the equivalent French and Spanish 13 courses.¹⁰

By directly comparing several courses in different languages we can deduce that several parameters are consistent across semesters. In courses where the ePortfolio was used, the success of students who took Italian was higher than success in those courses in the same department (offered in the same semester) in which this platform was not introduced.

This same type of observation emerged in a 2014 study which used the same parameters and which confirms that ePortfolio increases the chance for student academic progress: "At a growing number of campuses with sustained ePortfolio initiatives, student ePortfolio usage correlates with higher levels of student success, as measured by pass rates, GPA, and retention rates" (Enyon, Gambino and Török 96).

It is possible that other factors contributed to the favorable rates in all foreign language courses taught at Bronx Community College. In teaching foreign languages, for example, the stimulus-response approach becomes key, since it raises the cognitive level for students to "jump higher" in order to reach advanced language proficiency. Linguist Myriam Met emphasizes that the way content is presented in language courses can make a big difference to increasing performance: "content in content-based programs represents material that is cognitively engaging and demanding for the learner, and is material that extends beyond the target language or target culture" (Met 290).

Limits and opportunity of ePortfolio in a language course

Despite having brought to light the usefulness of ePortfolio, it is still necessary to reflect on its concrete implementation, beginning with the following question: How can foreign language instructors use this medium when students lack an appropriate language level to create reflections? A possible answer is given by the foreign language instructor who attempts to homogenize the learning objectives of the course to the ePortfolio platform. The fusion of these two elements prepares students for a type of knowledge that is life-long and that can be "transported" to other disciplines (Klein 71), knowledge recognized as integrative learning.

The addition of the ePortfolio can help students conquer their shyness inherent in using another language to communicate, and it reduces the emotional blockage associated with narrating personal stories. The ePortfolio is also particularly useful in language courses where the numbers of students prevent the instructor from speaking directly to each student while using the target language. In this way, each learner gets a chance to write and speak (via podcasts) a second language, and in return receive personal feedback each time.

When recording his/her autobiography with a focus on family, physical, social and emotional traits the student gets used to listening to the oral output in a foreign language and becomes more comfortable and confident each time. However, this activity is more complex than it initially seems: the student will have to also write what is being uttered, in order to practice the spelling.

In addition, the page dedicated to this assignment will include photos and links that support self-narration, something impossible to do on a piece of paper. This creates a much more interesting assignment for students to carry out and which values the "total" student.

The Cool Medium

Thanks to the ePortfolio tool, students are able to see themselves from outside (as a learner) through time, something that cannot be replicated by the Blackboard program or a piece of paper. The process of assessment in this case is revealed not through a reflection but through a hypertext and multimedia page. For example, the student can create a page concerning his or her childhood years which includes a recording and the use of photos that reveal several aspects of life. S/he can also highlight certain aspects or concepts by inserting pertinent links (an association or club, etc.). Other activities might revolve around the creation of a recipe with the list of the ingredients and the use of a particular tense to explain the preparation of the meal. The success of this activity is demonstrated by the fact that many students created videos in which they cook and speak in Italian for several minutes using a wide range of appropriate vocabulary. Such an assignment effects their emotional and motivational engagement, and success is measurable in such exercises as the description of their daily activity, using reflexive verbs and showcasing appropriate vocabulary related to clothing, hygiene and other topics.

At the end of the course, the instructor will be able to evaluate the linguistic progress and standards since students post on ePortfolio podcasts and videocasts over the year. These artifacts allow to monitor language acquisition by using the national instruments set forth by The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). Additionally, students will be able to use this evidence for professional reasons and to attest to their level of language proficiency. The ePortfolio, thus, encourages students to try something that goes beyond the traditional essay (on paper) because there are no models or rules for referrals to adhere to, and, consequently, creativity and willingness to try something new can take them a long way.

Using the ePortfolio to talk about yourself is a novelty for many students at Bronx Community College, who now find a different venue in which to express themselves. The emotions become "stories" that translate through writing. As a method, autobiographical writing using the ePortfolio, represents a more efficient way to learn, think and document present and past experiences through a new language.

Students' perception of ePortfolio

This survey was administered to students enrolled in the sections in which ePortfolio was introduced.

Do you find that ePortfolio is easy to use?

Yes: 78%; No: 22%

Which areas did you find most challenging?

Technical problems	10%
Time consuming	16%
Counterintuitive process	8%
Browser incompatibility	18%
"Posting" feature not user friendly	20%
Hardware	6%
Confidentiality issues	14%
Lack of feedback	4%
Other:	4%

Do you feel you got a good enough training to use ePortfolio?

Yes: 84%; No: 16%

Did you use (or are you using) ePortfolio in another class?

Yes: 21%; No: 79%

Did you find the tutor helped you to use ePortfolio? 3.4

Did you understand why ePortfolio was used in this course? 3.9

Did eP help you write better in Italian 4.2

Did eP help you speak better Italian? 4.3

Did eP help you build confidence in learning Italian? 3.9

Can the professor tell if you learned Italian by looking at your eP? 4.2

Did the eP help you organize academic content? 3.8

Do you think that using an ePortfolio can help in presenting yourself? 4.2

According to you, did eP help you become more independent in learning Italian? 4.0

Survey distributed at Bronx Community College Italian courses in which ePortfolio was used. The survey scale is 1.0–5.0 as the lowest–highest scores.

From a qualitative assessment survey (N=68) administered to students enrolled in Italian courses in which the ePortfolio was used, we examined several factors, primarily concerned with the perception and reception of this tool. Using a scale of 1.0-5.0, students evaluated various statements or answered questions about the efficacy of using ePortfolio in a language course. Among the most significant results is the important role played by the instructor, without whom the effectiveness of ePortfolio in the learning process would be diminished. This is a fundamental lesson, since students turn out to be more open to using something innovative if the instructor explains it well during the course (Bolliger and Shepherd 315). Thus, we can conclude that without strong academic and structural support provided by the faculty, ePortfolio would not have the expected impact, since it is through this medium that the instructor is able to establish concrete evidence that language acquisition and its progression has taken place.

Another significant item of data is an increase in student independence, as students acknowledge that they can self-correct and improve their language proficiency. These findings in the foreign language class are the equivalent of the standard reflection written piece (a critical and analytical pause) which is most often associated with long pieces of writing, where the student becomes aware of the mistake and corrects him/herself. This self-governing process is a staple of ePortfolio pedagogy and extremely useful in increasing autonomy in language acquisition, since it fosters critical cognition. Studies show that when students correct themselves they are rarely inclined to make the same mistake again (Amparo Lazaro Ibarrola 209). However, underscoring the centrality of the instructor to the success of the class, other studies demonstrate that error correction works better if there is feedback from the teacher (Meichenbaum 416).

The results of the survey show that ePortfolio is a useful instrument to help the teacher to assess language competency, as it is direct and transparent. Each student's site contains evidence of the early acquisition stages and can easily be compared to other "works" produced at the end of the course, which testify to the evolution of learning with each step.

It should be noted however, that the students who participated in the survey did highlight the difficulty in completing assignments using the ePortfolio, as it can be time consuming to find photos, record audio, post both audio and a written piece, and format the page despite the fact that they recognize that it is conducive to learning. Some also mentioned that they feel uncomfortable posting pieces that are too personal. The privacy gap can easily be addressed by limiting the site's visibility (within the college exclusively) which is an available feature of this platform of ePortfolio.

Conclusions

This study's aim is to contribute to the discussion of integrating the ePortfolio in foreign language courses. We highlighted the challenges and doubts about integrating a digital platform in academic courses that permeate the linguistic community. Among the most critical arguments is the persistent lack of alignment of the traditional-grammatical methodology and

the global approach of the ePortfolio. An important step that needs to be taken by educators is to pressure course book publishers to create foreign language textbooks that adopt a methodology more closely related to the global approach, which is basic for the introduction of all new technology, increasingly present in today's classrooms. It is extremely necessary for instructional technology not to be seen as something separate but to create a pedagogical approach that reveals an integrated and coordinated vision. Ideally, the future of foreign language pedagogy will embrace this integrated approach and will show itself open to change, both theoretically and pedagogically. Among the most significant changes to be hoped for is the reconfiguration of the "written" paper, now that ePortfolio (as well as other digital platforms) travels on the web. Students are increasingly more skilled in digital writing and in their ability to interact with complex computer experiences, such as multimedia pages, hypertexts with links, and audio and video. This article also underlines how the "evidence" created by the ePortfolio user encourages a personalized experience, as consumers can choose on which post to focus on. The result is the creation of a space which becomes a sort of metaspace, housing a type of independent communication.

EPortfolio is able to construct *meta-conversational* digital pages of two levels: the first level supports Type One communication (a first evaluation of the ePortfolio page); while Type Two communication yields the opportunity to activate one or more experiences through photos, podcasts, videos, etc. Consequently, the Italian elementary language student will self-identify as the editor of the site since s/he chooses and positions the content on the digital screen providing all sorts of experiences (both linguistic, visual and analytical) for the active readers who are also, in return, able to attribute (and contribute) to create meanings for the posted artifacts.

The possibility of filling ePortfolio spaces with both academic and personal artifacts increases students' self-awareness and ability to self-regulate. The importance of this aspect is confirmed by the student survey showing that ePortfolio users feel that they have the ability to communicate in various ways with this platform. In addition, they understand the environment and know how to manage its content. One could speculate that students' academic success in the Italian class is partly facilitated by the fact that their heritage or native language is Spanish, easing the learning of Italian. However, students do value the use of the ePortfolio as a positive experience, and they perceive this environment as a space that helped them in both the academic and the personal spheres.¹¹

Bronx Community College/CUNY

Giulia Guarneri

The Cool Medium

Notes

- ¹ Schenker T., Young S., Malinowski D. (2017) discuss the crucial role played by the teacher in making the ePortfolio a rich and deep academic and personal experience for students, and how ePortfolios can be best supported through coordinated efforts across the institution.
- ² CUNY has several groups which promote the study of L2. One of these is the Institute for Language Education in Transcultural Context (ILETC).
- ³ In Europe the majority of textbooks present a “spiral” type of methodology which follows modularity and presents the grammar at the end of the chapter, while contextualizing it to a specific theme. In some texts the incentive is not to correct mistakes made by students orally in order to foster a more independent and self-monitoring type of learning.
- ⁴ The grammatical sequence is essential for learning a foreign language, due to the simple fact that what was learned the day before helps to learn what comes the next day. This pre-established order cannot be improvised. In “content” subjects, for the most part, it is possible to skip ahead since this does not preclude you from learning what comes next.
- ⁵ A 2008 study commissioned by the National Education Association revealed that instructors believe in the added value of technology but they lament the lack of professional development and technical support from colleges.
- ⁶ These are reading, writing, listening and speaking.
- ⁷ This data comes from a 2015 Student Experience Survey of The City University of New York http://cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/ira/ir/surveys/student/SES_2014_Report_Final.pdf.
- ⁸ These are the numbers for other courses: SPN 12: 81.6%; (PR) 10% (W); FRN 12: 77.8% (PR), 14.3% (W).
- ⁹ The pass rate is the following: ITL 12, 98.3%, FRN 88.9% and SPN 85.5%. The withdrawal instead is the following: ITL, 1.7% FRN, 6.3% SPN, 8.1%.
- ¹⁰ The Italian course registered great success and no withdrawal rate, scored a perfect attendance, 100%, from the beginning to the end of the course; while the French course had a 19.7% withdrawal rate and for Spanish it was 23.1%. As far as the pass rate is concerned, Spanish 13 had 84.2% and French 13 had 87.5%.
- ¹¹ New studies on language acquisition on bilingual students (most of Bronx Community College’s students speak more than one language) demonstrate that bilingualism contributes to increasing language learning and proficiency.

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