

## **Reflections on Using the Digital Portfolio in Academic Writing in a Philippine University: Problems and Possibilities**

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### **Abstract**

This case study reports the use of social networking sites as a means to create digital portfolios for an academic reading and writing class in a tertiary level institution in the Philippines. Three aspects are highlighted in this case study. First, the use of digital portfolios documents the growth of students as writers, working for a particular audience and purpose. Second, since the institution in which the study was conducted advocates the use of technology in teaching and learning, this case study imparts reflections in improving the teaching of writing as seen in the context of a transformative form of education. Third, the case study also shares the upcoming projects to be pursued by the department wherein the author is part of. The data from the digital portfolios are rich areas for exploration in different strands in applied linguistics and technology which can be used for future research.

**Key words:** digital portfolio, virtual learning environments

### **Introduction**

Similar to other countries, educational institutions in the Philippines have acknowledged the potentials of using technology in the classroom. For instance, universities have used virtual learning environments (VLE) as a supplemental means in course delivery. Since technology's application cuts across the curriculum, language teachers are empowered to take advantage of benefits. For instance, aside from integrating process approaches to teaching writing, language teachers can use the internet as a means to publish students' work (Williams, 2003). As Alexander (2002) points out: [M]any composition instructors have begun taking advantage of the publication possibilities of the Internet to provide students with a

greater sense of audience by constructing web sites showcasing student writing. And because the Web is also a very public forum and anyone with access can read and potentially respond to the writing they encounter in their searches or surfing, students writing for Web publication may be able to reach the kinds of engaged and active audiences that we often have them envision. (p. 388)

Hence, composition teachers should not only concentrate on developing tasks for idea generation, organization and mechanics but also for expanding the role of student writers to meet the demands of different audiences that they may encounter when they publish their work in the internet.

### **Context of the Project**

This case study was conducted at De La Salle University-Manila (DLSU), Philippines. Established in 1911, De La Salle University offers different courses in the graduate and undergraduate level and has emerged as one of the top institutions in the Philippines with its level of accreditation and numerous awards in academics, research and extension programs. The university's goal is to develop students that are not only academically excellent, but socially responsive as well. Guided by the Transformative Learning (TL) framework, the teacher's role has shifted from a source of information to a facilitator of learning. Following the principles of the learner centered curriculum (Richards, 2005), teachers prepare students to engage in tasks that foster critical thinking in the hope that the skills learned can be applied in real life situations to promote progress and social transformation in their respective communities.

In the case of English language teaching in the university, ENGLCOM is a 6-unit academic reading and writing course offered to all first year students. Due to the diverse reading and writing tasks given in other courses, ENGLCOM's thrust is that students are tasked to engage in meaningful reading and writing tasks in order to cope with the demands of academic coursework. Specifically, teachers are empowered to use varying approaches in teaching the different reading strategies and rhetorical patterns needed for writing different essays. As earlier mentioned, ENGLCOM espouses the process approach to teaching writing. Therefore, stages such as pre-writing,

drafting, revising, editing and publication are observed (Hinkel, 2002).

A final requirement for this course is a portfolio containing several pieces of their work. Following Hyland's typology of writing portfolios, the one required for ENGLCOM is a genre portfolio that contains the following:

1. Six essays using different rhetorical patterns namely;
  - 1.1 Static Description
  - 1.2 Process Description
  - 1.3 Cause and Effect
  - 1.4 Comparison and Contrast
  - 1.5 Extended Definition
  - 1.6 Argumentative
2. One revised essay (Students may choose among the six.)
3. Reflective essays (before taking the course and after taking the course)
4. Process Requirements (drafts, outlines and other outputs)

However, there are two problems commonly voiced out by faculty and students regarding these portfolios. First, the essays and portfolios do not seem to have a particular audience where meaningful and authentic feedback can be solicited since their classmates and teacher are the only ones who read their work. Though the second problem may be a minor one, teacher often complain that portfolios have become voluminous that each term ends with several piles of papers and compilations that have no use once these portfolios are graded.

### **Rationale of the Project/Teaching and Learning Aims of the Project**

This case study investigates the use of digital portfolios in academic writing at De La Salle University-Manila. Since the case study is exploratory in nature, it initially examines the procedures employed in developing digital portfolios and proceeds with examining particular benefits and advantages and difficulties encountered in implementing such practice in teaching ENGLCOM.

## **Respondents and Sources of Data**

The project was conducted during the 1<sup>st</sup> (May-September) and 2<sup>nd</sup> (September-December) terms of school year 2009-2010 at DLSU-Manila. The participants in the study are 24 first year Biology majors and 19 accountancy majors with ages ranging from 16-18. Most come from middle-upper class families and have acquired their secondary education from private schools. Due to the rigid entry requirements of their course, the students seem to have excellent written and oral communication skills. However, since their inclination to the sciences seems to have made them view learning as a mechanical process in which they are expected to read, memorize and write texts since these are required of them.

Preliminary interviews with the respondents suggest that the students simply view ENGLCOM as a required course in order to complete the academic requirements of the particular term. Most of them stated that the subject appears to be an important course in order for them read and write effectively. Such views may seem to be problematic since the students appear to view language learning devoid of social connections.

As regards sources of data, the digital portfolios were examined and personal and online interviews were conducted with selected students. Students' reflection papers were also analyzed.

The researcher assumed a double identity in implementing the use of digital portfolios in his class and in documenting the benefits, advantages and limitations of such practice.

## **Procedures/ Technology Infrastructure**

In order to understand the development of digital portfolios in ENGLCOM classes, there is a need to describe the procedures employed in implementing such practice. First, students are tasked to write six different essays observing the different rhetorical patterns in academic writing. Since the process approach is implemented, the following steps are observed:

1. Reading of Texts/Discussion of Rhetorical Patterns
2. Assigning of Prompts/Idea Generation/Outlining
3. Drafting

#### 4. Conferencing/Revising

The different essays and process requirements are compiled which leads to the second phase of the project-portfolio preparation. Taking Yancey's (1996) definition, the digital portfolio is a collection of works selected by the student that reflects his/her development as a writer. In addition, the writer is free to include different pieces of works integral to the overall concept of his/her portfolio. In terms of technology integration in developing the digital portfolio, two options were given. First, the students were tasked to transfer softcopies of their finalized essays and other process requirements using CDs. Similar to digital storybooks, the students are also encouraged to present their works using different programs such as powerpoint, multimedia flash and others.

Another option is that they were allowed to use social networking sites to develop their portfolios. Social networking sites such as Blogspot and Multiply were the suggested sites since these have the blog feature where they can upload their work. Lamy and Hampel (2007) emphasize that in composition pedagogy, using blogs provides a rich avenue for learners to interact with a wider audience (usually friends who are part of their network) and other users. Also, the use of these social networking sites provides a venue for students to integrate other forms of media enriching the presentation of their digital portfolio. For example, Multiply has options for uploading pictures, podcasts or music, videos and even comments for other users.

#### **Evaluation and Assessment Criteria Used**

With regard to assessment of the portfolios, a teacher-developed rubric was devised (See Appendix A for the instrument and guidelines) in consultation with other teachers of ENGLCOM and the researcher's students. Since the digital portfolio requirement had several components, allotment of points were given based on:

1. completeness of the digital portfolio in terms of works included;
2. logical presentation of the pieces;
3. inclusion of revised essay and;

4. integration of other media to enhance presentation of the digital portfolio.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **A. Benefits/Advantages of Using Digital Portfolio**

**Documentation of Growth as Writers.** As evidenced in their digital portfolios, the students were able to document their growth as writers as they progressed in the course. Specifically, the students' growth as writers was seen in terms of the range of topics covered in the different essays, their adjustment in terms of dealing with feedback and revision and approximating the needs of the potential audience for their papers.

In terms of the range of topics for writing papers, the students departed from personal preferences to issues that concern them and society. As one student emphasizes, "since the essays will be read by other people, I might as well choose topics which may attract more readers and stimulate interaction with my audience". Also, the range of tasks given to the students influenced them in terms of adjusting their role as writers. This was done by carefully structuring their outlines, selecting sources for supporting points for their thesis and selecting appropriate language to fit their purposes.

On the other hand, the use of social networking sites has allowed students to widen their scope of interaction since readers of their work are not only confined to their peers and teacher. Rather, other people's comments have been posted in the students' blogs. As reported by the students, two apparent benefits are experienced. First, the students receive 'authentic' feedback such that much of the focus of comments is regarding issues related to the topics of the blogs. For instance, dealing with university students organizations, other readers would comment on the pros and cons of restructuring the student government; hence, real-life interaction ensues. Instead of focusing on writing conventions such as writing style, grammar and mechanics, the students are able to adjust their styles based on the task and feedback given to them by the readers of their work.

Second, the use of the digital portfolio affords the students a sense of anonymity in terms of avoiding face threatening situations.

In the Philippines, computer mediated interaction appears to be a viable option for people to directly express strong opinion. This may be attributed to the Filipino's high regard to self-image or face; therefore, avoidance to criticism may be mitigated through the use of technology in expressing thoughts and opinion (Pertierra, 2001). Since the social networking sites allow private and public posting of comments, the writers and readers are allowed to interact regarding the different blog posts without direct confrontation; minimizing frustration on the part of the learners.

More importantly, the varying writing prompts given to the students have allowed them to be conscious of their writing style to approximate the needs of the audience. Since different topics may be covered in their essays, a potential influence on their choice of language, organization and presentation is the audience since these are the main consumers of their work.

**Fusion of Different Media.** Unlike a paper-based portfolio, the digital portfolio allows the learners to use different forms of media to enhance the presentation of their essays. Though a regular portfolio permits variety in terms of including different items to document the writer's growth in the process, the digital portfolio's inclusion of video streaming from actual interviews, podcasts of lectures/ insights from experts and even pictures/art pieces done by the students can be interpreted as a multimedia experience on the part of the viewers of the blog. This is supported by the notion that the essays are not mere products of students' academic work but is also shaped by the contexts and history surrounding the production of texts.

## **B. Difficulties Encountered**

**Resistance to Use Digital Portfolios.** One problem encountered in implementing the project is the apparent resistance of students to use digital portfolios. Students have expressed reservations as regards using social networking sites in uploading their work for the course. Several explanations may be attributed to the students' non-acceptance of the practice. First, students have pointed out that preparing a digital portfolio takes time and

additional effort but has minimal impact on their grades. One student mentioned:

*“ I really don't need to do a lot because I've already done the output and simply compiling them in digital format isn't my thing considering the small percentage it contributes to grades.”*

Since the syllabus stipulates that the portfolio amounts to twenty percent of the total grade, some students have expressed reservations as to exerting great effort in coming up with a digital portfolio.

Another source of resistance among students is their notion of ownership in their work. All of the respondents have admitted of having an account in social networking sites such as friendster, multiply and facebook. However, when asked about their willingness to integrate their outputs in ENGLCOM in their personal sites, students have opted to establish new accounts in these social networking sites for their digital portfolio. This may be attributed to Herrington's (2009) belief that students feel strongly about their inherent copyright as owners of their work. Also, it has been observed that there is a need for students to separate their online persona in terms of their personal activities online and accomplishments at school. Another possible reason why students hesitate to use their existing accounts as a platform for their digital portfolio is privacy issues since most of their contacts are friends and family members which may critique their work differently. Hence, creating a new account for their digital portfolio allows them to choose their contacts closely.

### **Problems with Technology**

Perhaps one debilitating problem faced in the implementation of the project is the problems encountered with regard to technology. As mentioned earlier, students who participated in the case study come from financially capable families. However, their access to computers and online connection has been problematic due to several reasons such as weak internet connection at home, limited availability of computer terminals at school and competing requirements in other courses. Though majority of them have laptops and desktop computers, their capacity to use social networking sites also vary



depending on their familiarity of these sites. Students have expressed problems as regards using the different social networking sites to its full potential.

### **Implications of the Findings**

**Department Initiatives.** The concerned department intends to encourage teachers to employ a paperless practice of developing portfolios through a digital format. Though the department believes that using technology will help minimize the workload, some teachers have expressed resistance as regards the use of the digital portfolio due to training and equipment issues. For instance, the limited number of computer slots available for use by teachers and students remains to be a pressing concern. Also, the familiarity of teachers and students with the use social-networking sites is a primary concern of the department in the implementation of such practice. The department aims to prioritize the training of teachers with the use of technology and social networking in order to provide a viable option for teachers to implement the portfolio assessment system through another means.

**Institutional Initiatives.** Though the project remains to be confined to selected faculty under the department, the university has also provided potential opportunities for teachers to enhance their skills in using technology to improve teaching and learning. For instance the university's ASIST (Academic Support for Instructional Services and Technology) regularly provides training sessions on web-page design, design and assessment of online courses and the use of IVLE. Also, the institution has invested on expanding its virtual learning environment by providing faculty members particular web-page to develop and to customize their own web pages for teaching and learning.

### **Conclusions and Reflections**

Amidst problems on teacher resistance on the use of online modes of teaching and limitations in technology, this case study/project demonstrated the potential of the use of social networking sites in

developing a digital portfolio in an academic reading and writing course for college students. The use of social networking sites as digital portfolios has clearly shown that similar to traditional process approaches to writing, it has documented the students' growth as writers. However, two strengths are realized in this practice. First, the use of the digital portfolio has provided more options for students to use other forms of media such as visual and audio media to enhance their presentations, giving greater control/autonomy on the part of the students' choice of portfolio pieces.

Second, the greatest strength of using digital portfolios is actualizing the sense of audience among the student writers. Considering the vast virtual environment of the internet, students receive authentic feedback from different members of the online community. This in turn maximizes opportunities for interaction, improvement and growth of students as writers.

This project has also yielded several interesting avenues for research and development. First, with regard to teacher training, the use of social networking needs to be integrated in course design for teacher preparation to provide ample opportunities for teachers to explore the internet as a potential resource for teaching and learning. Second, since process approaches to writing continue to dominate in language classrooms, other issues such as writer identity, feedback and learner autonomy need to be re-examined when these approaches are applied in the context of an online environment.

Finally, this project has created more space for further explorations in terms of the role of technology in reshaping the teaching of writing in the Philippine context.

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