



Student Learning WOES (The 'Wishes', 'Opportunities', 'Expedition' and 'Sustenance')

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Abstract

This paper reports on an investigation into the relationship between web-folios and English language acquisition at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU). The project involved a cohort of Year 1 Engineering Students in 2005/2006 enrolled on an English course run by the English Language Centre (ELC) of the HKPU, with web-folio activities as an assessed component. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions provided the main source of data, from which ten themes emerged, including the role of web-folio activities in language learning and in developing autonomy, and factors influencing web-folio implementation at university. It is hoped that the findings of this project can contribute to the on-going dialogue about web-folio-oriented pedagogical practices and curricular considerations.

Keywords: Web-folios, Assessment, Language learning, Curriculum

1. Introduction

Web-folios, also referred to as digital portfolios, e-Portfolios or electronic portfolios, serve three general purposes in education: first, as a tool for learning, which is formative in nature, focusing on personal development through the use of self-evaluation and reflection; second, as an assessment tool to demonstrate development of skills and knowledge; and third, as a showcase of professional attributes for employment (Barrett, 2001). In this connection, a growing body of research (Markham, 2004; Woodward & Nanlohy, 2004; Beck, Livne & Bear, 2005) has investigated the effects of web-folios on learning and teaching. Of the many issues discussed, two emerge as most relevant to this project. The first relates to the claim about students' enhanced ability to think critically as a result of teacher-student communication which entails both parties to reflect upon learning, assessments and feedback (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005). The second involves the role of web-folios in English, or second language acquisition (Chau, 2007).

In Hong Kong, as elsewhere, the catalyst for curricular change can come from multiple but overlapping arenas: not just from within the institution or the government, but also from changing perceptions of education in the community as well as rising influence of digital culture (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Raschke, 2003; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). It was against this backdrop of shifting landscape and sentiments that the project was instigated.

The project is titled '*Student learning WOES (the 'wishes', 'opportunities', 'expedition' and 'sustenance') in undertaking web-folios*'. It focused on reviewing the introduction of web-folio activities on an English language course (ELC3501) which was an initiative for developing students' independent learning in the new curriculum. Since ELC3501 has been replaced by other English courses, this study concentrated only on the feedback of the students who studied ELC3501 in 2006/2007. The project team understands that the findings in the investigation can only act as a starting point for discussion on the approach to using web-folios in a curriculum.

2. The subject ELC3501

ELC3501 English for Engineering Students was first introduced in the academic year 2005/2006. The subject was a 28-hour course over two terms of 28 weeks and was designed to introduce students to the oral and written communication skills that may be required in their future professions. Class meetings of 2 hours each were held

biweekly. In order to sustain students' motivation throughout two terms, a bonus scheme had been implemented to encourage students to take up individual learning through completing web-folio activities. All these web-folio activities were directly related to the learning focus of each unit in the student course book. An upward adjustment of half a grade would be awarded to those students who had completed a prescribed number of web-folio activities at designated times on the course. There were five web-folio activities for each of the four units on the course for students to choose from. Students were required to complete only 10 activities -- 5 for the first two units in the first term, another five for the next two units in the second term. To facilitate independent learning, each web-folio activity was accompanied by the focused 'elements' of that activity to help students focus their attention on the key learning aspects in the completion of the activity. Students were asked to complete a self-evaluation form before submitting the completed activity for teacher's feedback. If the teacher was not satisfied with the student's performance, s/he would ask the student to improve the work and resubmit it. At the end of the academic year 2006/2007, 247 out of 655 students had fulfilled the requirements and received the bonus of half a grade.

3. Method

76 interviews were conducted from May 14 2007 to June 26 2007. 8 of the interviewees did not complete the required number of web-folio activities -- five had attempted to complete the activities but failed, while the other three had not thought about attempting to complete the activities. The interviews were semi-structured with the following questions running through most of the interviews:

- (a) Do you find the web-folio activities helpful in improving your English?
- (b) How do you find the web-folio activities?
- (c) Do you find the criteria under each task useful for task completion?
- (d) Do you need any help from teachers to complete the activity?
- (e) Do you find the self-assessing component of the web-folio activities helpful in improving your English?
- (f) How do you find the feedback mechanism used in the web-folio activities?
- (g) Which part of English learning do you think is best suited for the web-folio activities? Why?
- (h) How do you find the bonus point system?
- (i) Which type of web-folio activities do you prefer: individual work or group work?
- (j) Which one do you prefer: web-folio activities that reward you with a half grade up, regardless of the quality of your work; or assessment that is solely based upon the performance of your assignment?
- (k) Have you ever encountered any technical problem in doing the web-folio activities?
- (l) Do you have any comments or suggestions for improving the web-folio activities?

2 focus group discussions were also conducted: one on June 20, 2007, in which 8 students were present; and the other one on June 22, 2007, in which 6 students were present. As most interviewees turned down the invitations to attend the focus group discussions because of reasons ranging from commitments to part-time jobs to traveling abroad in the month of June, all the students in the focus groups, except for 2 students in the first focus group, had not been invited to any interviews. The purpose of holding focus group meetings was to further explore the themes that were discovered in the interviews.

4. Findings

The themes that emerged from both the interviews and focus group discussions include:

- (a) role of web-folio activities in language acquisition
- (b) role of web-folio activities in developing autonomy
- (c) motivation to learn
- (d) competing demands and control over time
- (e) web-folio implementation
- (f) feedback mechanisms
- (g) perception of feedback
- (h) role of teachers
- (i) self-evaluation
- (j) technical knowledge

4.1 Role of web-folio activities in language acquisition

59 out of 76 interviewees found the web-folio activities helpful or even very helpful in improving their English as the web-folio activities provided them with extra exercises on writing, grammar and oral presentation. 49 of the 59 students who found the activities helpful believed doing exercises was crucial in language learning and 15 of them thought that these activities motivated them to do more revision in order to complete the activities.

4.2 Role of web-folio activities in developing autonomy

68 interviewees who completed the web-folio activities, and 5 who tried but failed to complete the activities, agreed that the web-folio activities provided them with more opportunities to learn and practise on their own. Of the 73 interviewees, 54 of them agreed that the activities were useful because they could not think of any other approaches to independent learning apart from doing exercises. They found that the web environment had provided a convenient platform for exercise completion and submission.

4.3 Motivation to learn

6 interviewees found that the activities were not very helpful because the web-folio activities did not provide them with enough guidance to complete the exercises. Yet, they completed the activities in order to get the bonus of half a grade. 34 interviewees said they would complete the web-folio activities with or without the bonus point.

4.4 Competing demands and control over time

The 8 interviewees who did not complete the activities said that they were already overloaded with assignments from their own department or with work in extra-curricular activities. 23 interviewees (including the 8 interviewees who did not attempt any web-folio activities) found the activities time-consuming. The rest, however, admitted that since mere completion of the activities would be adequate for an upward adjustment of the overall grade, there did not seem to be any pressure or reason for them to devote too much time or effort to the web-folio activities.

4.5 Web-folio implementation

4.5.1 Type of activities

64 out of the 68 interviewees preferred individual work to group work. They found it difficult to carry out group work as scheduling meetings with group members was not easy given the tight university timetable and heavy workload. Those exercises that required collaboration with fellow students were considered very time-consuming.

4.5.2 Reward system

63 of the 68 interviewees were entirely in favour of the reward system as they believed it was important to emphasize the learning process. The remaining 5 interviewees thought that assessments that were based on one's performance in an assignment, e.g. in a test, should be fairer.

4.5.3 Criteria for activity completion

50 out of those 68 interviewees who had completed the activities said the criteria were useful; 7 of them regarded the criteria as part of the question while the remaining 11 did not understand the presence of criteria in each activity.

4.6 Feedback mechanism and perception of feedback

57 out of the 73 students interviewed thought that the activities could have been made more useful for them in English learning if more comments and feedback had been given to each activity. However, 23 out of the 68 interviewees admitted that they did not even check the feedback of their completed activities as they would get the bonus any way as long as they had submitted the required number of activities. 9 interviewees were unaware of the fact that they might be required to re-submit their activities if their performance did not meet the expected standard. 45 interviewees complained that the feedback was not adequate most of the time. They preferred longer and more detailed comments, like the ones they usually received for their essays.

4.7 Role of teacher/peers

64 out of 68 interviewees found they could handle the web-folio activities independently without any help from their class teachers although 4 of them said they sought help from classmates.

4.8 Self-evaluation

All 68 interviewees found the self-assessing component of the web-folio activities rather confusing. The basic contention was that they felt embarrassed when asked to conduct self-assessment. Therefore, they tended to steer a middle course by claiming their own performance as neither good nor poor.

4.9 Technical knowledge

No interviewees had problems with completing all activities on the web. However, most of them agreed that completing oral activities had been a hassle as the whole system did not provide a more user-friendly mechanism for video-recording and uploading.

4.10 Students' comments and suggestions for improving web-folio activities

The main comments and suggestions are:

- (a) There should be more feedback from teachers
- (b) There should be more complete guidance for completing the activities
- (c) More support is needed for oral work in web-folio activities

5. Discussion of the findings

Web-folio activities were introduced because of the introduction of a new subject, the syllabus of which underlines the importance of 'a considerable amount of individual self-access learning' in the teaching and learning approach. To a certain extent, it is quite clear that there are a number of issues regarding the 'wishes', 'opportunities', 'expedition' and 'sustenance' of student independent learning. Since the data were collected from students, all the findings were related to students' perceptions and the assumptions they made about learning.

5.1 'Wishes'

It seems that most of the students who completed the web-folio activities claimed that they did not just take up the activities for the sake of obtaining an upward adjustment of half a grade of the overall score at the end of the programme. Most of them stated they hoped to improve their English through more practice. It is quite obvious that the students believed in hard work and that English is a subject that should be dealt with seriously. Most students would like to ask for more close guidance and teacher feedback on their performance in web-folio activities. This reflects their serious attitude towards learning through completing web-folio activities or, for that matter, learning on their own outside class. To them, feedback is important. Some students' comments on the inadequacy of the system to grant a bonus point to students who completed the required number of activities disregarding the different performance levels has once again stressed the importance of ability recognition and differentiation. This could suggest the students' belief in the importance of understanding their own achievement level and of obtaining advice on improvement in the process of learning.

5.2 'Opportunities'

Many students in this project agreed that the bonus-point system has driven home the importance of the process in learning. It seems that they were beginning to realize learning is not just about a final product (e.g. a letter or a report) but is also about the continual effort made in the process of producing a final product, such as in honing relevant skills for a particular written task. To them, web-folio activities provided them with extra opportunities to make an effort to practise and revise grammar, writing and presentation skills. Most of them thought that the web environment had provided them with a good opportunity to make continual attempts to improve on certain skills and to study independently. However, some students found completing web-folio activities rather time-consuming. Since they were already overloaded with assignments from other courses, they did not tend to view optional web-folio activities in a positive light. In other words, instead of regarding web-folio activities as opportunity for further language enhancement, these students treated the activities as a chore -- another piece of work to be completed on a programme though it was optional. It is quite clear that there were mixed reactions to the web-folio activities. It seems that to a large extent students' reactions depended much on the compatibility of the type of web-folio activities and the learning approach or style adopted by students. If students found the activities compatible with their style or approach of learning, they would believe they could learn through completing the activities. In short, students' assumptions of learning could play an important role in students' reaction to web-folio work.

5.3 'Expedition'

'Expedition' refers to the learning 'journey' that the students embarked on when they engaged themselves in web-folio activities. Two issues emerged in the learning 'expedition' or the learning process in the completion of web-folio activities.

5.3.1 Challenges faced by students

There were two distinct challenges: time management and dealing with problems independently.

Time-management: There were deadlines for submission of web-folio activities at different stages. To sustain effort in meeting web-folio activities deadlines over one whole academic year could be a feat to most students who very often found themselves swarmed with projects, tests and essays. Completing web-folio activities successfully was in fact a demonstration of one's sense of responsibility in the learning process, dedication and commitment to learning. The remark that the web-folio activities were time-consuming could be interpreted as a reflection of the students' experience in working hard at managing their work within a certain time-frame. It seems that in order to sustain effort in completing the web-folio activities, students need some assistance in managing time.

Dealing with problems: It is clear from the data collected that during the course of completing web-folio activities on the web, sometimes students encountered problems but seldom did they approach teachers or peers for assistance. They thought that closer guidance or clearer guidelines should have been provided and that more in-depth feedback on their work should have been given by their teacher apart from the official feedback sheet that accompanied each activity on the web. Some students quoted the inadequacy of guidance and guidelines as a reason for failing to complete web-folio activities. Most students would prefer teachers volunteering more information or opinions on their work. This phenomenon somehow reflects the teach-and-test approach that some students may have experienced in the past. In the teach-and-test approach, students learn mainly from instructions given by teachers, not from interaction with teachers or peers. That may help explain why some students hoped that teachers could give more in-depth feedback on their work, but they themselves did not initiate any questions about the activity or their own performance. Instead of readily engaging themselves in looking for solutions to problems in the learning process, some students tended to assume there would not have been problems in the first place with better guidelines or guidance. Harboring negative views about or aversion to having to deal with problems in the process of learning, and having the general tendency to learn only from teacher input may have an adverse impact on some students' development as independent learners.

5.3.2 Student self-assessment

Incorporated into each of the web-folio activities is a page on the student's self-assessment, which is placed alongside Teacher's feedback. Criteria for assessing performance are given in each web-folio activity. (Refer to Appendix I.) Students are asked to give comments on their own performance or to write down any questions that they might have on each of the performance criterion of the activity. It was found that some students were not very comfortable with assessing one's own performance. Some students even found it rather embarrassing to compliment themselves on their own work even when they believed that their performance was quite good, which explained why they just indicated their work only as satisfactory most of the time. To most students, assessment seems to be the job of a teacher not a student as the teacher should know more and better than a student and therefore s/he is in a position to evaluate a student's performance.

The above findings point to the importance of preparing students for independent learning in web-folio activities. Completing web-folio activities is a learning process. The skills that are required on the process such as time-management, self-reflection in the self-assessment process, taking the initiative to ask for assistance and to embrace or deal with problems proactively in the learning process should be highlighted to students. Different learning strategies are required in different learning modes.

5.4 'Sustenance'

If technology is the delivery mechanism in learning, a different set of learning strategies would be required of those students who are only used to face-to-face classroom teaching and learning. To nurture and sustain changes in students' learning habits resulting from involvement in web-folio activities should be part and parcel of the training in learning how to learn independently on the web. The findings of this study have shed light on three points about ensuring sustenance of the system of web-folio activities:

5.4.1 Resources to meet individual needs

As students were engaged in independent learning in completing web-folio activities, resources (material or human) should be in place to cope with students' specific needs and requests. Students' technical knowledge know-how should also be considered. This involves careful resource planning.

5.4.2 Students' management of learning on the web

Students are used to learning in the classroom but they may not be able to fully utilize the web environment to learn. Students should find clear guidelines on how to manage learning independently on the web useful. These guidelines can also help students to understand the roles of both teachers and students in web-folio activities.

5.4.3 Institute's policies and commitments

With support from the institute, web-folio activities can gain better acceptance from students. In the course ELC3501, web-folio activities were optional activities. Students might have perceived them as unimportant. This might also have explained the lukewarm responses among some students to the introduction of web-folio activities on the course -- only a quarter and a third of the students completed web-folio activities in the first and second running of the course respectively.

6. Conclusion

An analysis of the findings of the investigation into the web-folio activities on the course English for Engineering Students (ELC3501) has provided some insight into the use of web-folio in learning. A few useful pointers about using web-folio activities have also been included in the discussion. Although the course ELC3501 is not included in the current curriculum, it is believed that the issues that have been explored in this study could be relevant to web-folio

activities in other courses and language learning initiatives. Of note are: a UGC-funded inter-institutional web-folio project for language development and employment currently piloted on credited and non-credited courses at the ELC, and a student learning web-folio component of the Study Skills course proposed by the ELC to meet the Language and Communication requirements as stipulated under the University's 4-year undergraduate degree structure.

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Appendix I

Unit 1

Web-folio activity 2:

Define a concept or a product or a technology and include brief examples of application in about 150 words.

(Submit your work on a Microsoft Word)

Notes on Levels of Competence

3 = outcome achieved well

2 = outcome satisfactorily achieved

1 = in need of further work

Criterion 1:	Sequencing of ideas in extended definition			
Performance:	3	2	1	
Good	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Poor
Criterion 2:	Providing relevant examples			
Performance:	3	2	1	
Good	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Poor
Criterion 3:	Use of passive voice			
Performance:	3	2	1	
Good	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Poor

If you have received a '3' for any outcome, congratulations! Keep up your good work.

If you have received a '2' for any outcome, you should

- read your teacher's comments carefully to understand the strong and weak points of your performance
- read up relevant materials, ask your peers or visit CILL for help to improve the weak areas

c) try to revise your work, incorporating your teacher's suggestions

If you have problems with c), please let your teacher know..

If you have received a '1' for any outcome, you should

a) revise any web tasks you have already done

b)do any web tasks you have not already done

c)revise the relevant sections of the course book

d)check the relevant resources in CILL

If you have completed the above and still have questions, ask your teacher for help. You are strongly advised to re-do the task if you have obtained '1's for all the learning outcomes.

N.B. Do not forget the language enhancement facilities in CILL, such as the Writing Assistance Programme (WAP), Supplementary English Programme (SEP), English for Language Enhance Programmes (ELEP), assistance at Help Desk and a wide array of English learning materia