Four Ways of Looking at My Learning: Encouraging and Deepening Reflective Practice

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Students in Hunter’s Master’s in Literacy Program are asked to create growth ePortfolios throughout their time in the program. After two semesters of uploading course based-artifacts and writing reflections about these artifacts in their ePortfolios, students complete a mid-program benchmark. This benchmark includes a reflection, where students are invited to provide an organized response to reflection prompts that ask them to look in four different directions: backward, inward, outward and forward.

The Context: Master’s in Literacy Program

The Master’s in Literacy Program in Hunter’s School of Education currently serves approximately 160 graduate students who are in-service teachers in PreK-12 schools in New York City and tri-state area. The program leads to a New York State professional certificate in literacy education. A portfolio has long been a graduation requirement for students to demonstrate that they have met professional standards. Initially, this portfolio was a paper portfolio. Over the past few years, the portfolio has evolved into a growth ePortfolio that students begin working on when they finish their first semester in the program. The revised ePortfolio includes the new professional standards, allows for formative assessment of student progress, and contains evidence of students’ achievements. Students are now able to use their ePortfolios to make connections between learning in different courses, and to consider their growth and development in a more meaningful context.

The Practice

Our goal is to help students in our program benefit from reflection so that they can be more sure-footed in their work as teachers. Our portfolio is designed to enable teachers to view both their own practice and themselves as learners. The ePortfolio is initially introduced during new student orientation, and we have scheduled several benchmarks to help students progress with their work.
1. **Initial ePortfolio workshop**
   After the completion of the first semester in the program (early Jan. or June), we invite students to an ePortfolio workshop intended to introduce the ePortfolio platform and to reinforce the idea of reflection. We begin with community building exercises, followed by a session in which students reflect on their learning during their first semester at Hunter. Students are also introduced to their faculty advisors, as well as to fellow students in their advisory group. We spend time discussing the ePortfolio processes and procedures and introducing the Digication platform, which students will use to create their ePortfolios.

2. **Students complete initial ePortfolio entries**
   Students are encouraged to complete their initial entries during the remainder of their first winter or summer break, including:
   - Welcome Page
   - About Me
   - Progress Artifacts from each course they took during their first semester and align them to professional standards
   - Artifact Tags (context and reflection for each artifact)

3. **Faculty advisors review ePortfolios**
   Within the first three weeks of the following semester, faculty advisors leave comments on student portfolios in order to initiate intellectual dialogue and to scaffold students’ learning and reflection.

4. **Students continue to upload Progress Artifacts and Artifact Tags at the conclusion of each subsequent semester**
   Students share their ePortfolios with the other students in their cohort and leave observations and reflections in the discussion section of their peers’ ePortfolios. The faculty advisors also continue to review and comment on ePortfolios within the first three weeks of each semester.
5. Students complete Benchmark 1
At the midpoint of the program, students complete the first benchmark. In this benchmark, they articulate their philosophy of literacy education, using the following prompts:

**Philosophy–My philosophy of Literacy Education**
A statement of who you are as a literacy teacher, rooted in what you believe about literacy teaching and learning. Your goals for your students, your understanding of your role as a literacy teacher, and concrete examples of your teaching and assessment methods are appropriate in a philosophy statement. Essentially, a philosophy statement is the why, what, and how of your teaching. Consider addressing:

- Why is literacy important for students? (beliefs, objectives)
- Why do you teach literacy? (beliefs, objectives)
- How do you put your beliefs into action? (methods)
- What examples/evidence do you have? (assessment)

**Characteristics of a well-written philosophy of literacy education:**

- Narrative, engaging and rhetorically effective text, in the first-person
- Brief and concise, 1-2 pages
- Provides specific supporting evidence, either from personal teaching experience or relevant teaching literature
- Teaching and assessment are grounded in theory and/or experience

**Reflection–Four ways of looking at myself as a learner/literacy educator**
Provide an integrated and reflective discussion of your learning, as evidenced by your progress artifacts so far, by looking in four different directions described below.

- **Looking backwards**–How did I learn in each course and across courses? Is there a common thread that runs through my learning in different courses so far?

- **Looking inward**–How have I grown and changed as a learner? Is there a most significant/influential experience that changed the way I think about myself as a learner?

- **Looking outward**–How has my learning at Hunter impacted my teaching and my students’ learning? Is there a most significant/influential experience that changed the way I think about my teaching and my students’ learning?

- **Looking forward**–What short-term and long-term goals do I set for my continued professional growth?
Final ePortfolio workshop

Just before students enter their final semester, they attend a workshop at which they reflect on their learning thus far. Students also review their Benchmark 1 and discuss their growth and changes since Benchmark 1 was written. They are encouraged to complete their final entries during the remainder of their final winter or summer break, including Benchmark 2; a revised version of Benchmark 1; and three showcase artifacts to demonstrate students’ achievements as a learner, teacher and literacy educator in the following areas:

- Growth in competency and effectiveness as a literacy educator or literacy leader
- Impact of student learning at Hunter College on students’ teaching and their own students’ learning
- Innovation, creativity, and imagination in literacy education

The Role of Reflection

As described in the above practice, reflection, inquiry and integration are infused throughout the ePortfolio construction process. Reflective prompts are embedded in each page in the portfolio template, with the “four ways of looking” at the center. We strategically ask students to complete Benchmark 1 at midpoint of their program in order to encourage students to ask themselves,

“How did I learn in each course and across courses? Is there a common thread that runs through my learning in different courses so far?”

The second reflection prompt invites students to look inward, asking themselves,

“How have I grown and changed as a learner? Is there a most significant/influential experience that changed the way I think about myself as a learner?”

Students revisit these questions at the end of the program.

As students enter the program and take the courses required, it is not immediately apparent to them that connections can be made between courses, or that there are conceptual strands, such as such as “teaching all students,” “teacher research,” “infusing the arts in literacy education,” and “literacy leadership,” that run across courses. Reflecting in an ePortfolio can encourage students to learn more integratively, making connections across courses. For example, the third reflection prompt in the benchmarks invites students to look outward and consider these questions:

“How has my learning at Hunter impacted my teaching and my students’ learning? Is there a most significant/influential experience that changed the way I think about my teaching and my students’ learning?”

The last reflection prompt in the benchmarks encourages students to look forward, asking themselves,
After reflecting back on their learning, their own growth and change as learners, and the impact their learning has had on their teaching and their own students’ learning, it is now time for students to set new goals for themselves, for the remainder of the program, as well as for their future professional development. Describing their future goals in an ePortfolio helps students sharpen their focus to advance their learning.

**Evidence of Impact**

Students are beginning to make connections between courses in their ePortfolio reflections. For example, students are able to pick a baseline artifact from an earlier course and compare it with a post-baseline artifact later in the program. Students are able to talk about their growth and change, and the learning across these courses that impacted their growth. Most notably, as they reflect on their growth as learners, we see an increasing number of students develop confidence, knowledge, and skills as literacy leaders. Most of our students are new teachers when they enter the program. At the end of the program, it is remarkable to read their “looking forward” reflections and see how much confidence they have gained in setting their career goals.

**Conclusion**

“A portfolio is only as effective as the pedagogies that support it” (Gale, 2006). By the same token, integrative and reflective learning is only as effective as the faculty who provide support and feedback. Our program ePortfolio would not have been successful without the support of the faculty members in the Literacy Program. The program ePortfolio enable us to create a learning community, with a collective interest in documenting the learning progress, as well as reflecting on learning; on ourselves as learners; and on the impact of our learning on our own teaching practice. An effective program ePortfolio demands curriculum coherence as well as teamwork. In addition, it requires a ePortfolio management plan, strong leadership, and supportive faculty.

**Author**

Yang Hu, program coordinator of Masters in Literacy Program at Hunter College School of Education, has been a member of Hunter’s ePortfolio leadership team since 2010.