Zooming In & Out

Gail Matthews-DeNatale

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Overview: Reflective Pedagogy in Action

Reflective Practice – Guiding Questions

This reflective pedagogy practice describes the use of ePortfolios within two fully online courses in a Masters-level program. The program is also fully online, and it includes an ePortfolio requirement.

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The author uses ePortfolios to help students make connections, co-construct knowledge, and gain perspective on their learning. Students use their portfolios as a space for extracting major insights from reams of text in threaded discussions and group-based wikis. The portfolio cycle of reflection, in conjunction with social pedagogy, helps students zoom in and out on their learning.

The case studies described in this piece demonstrate how the same activity can be adapted to support a similar cycle of learning in two different courses within a Master of Education program. The essential elements of course design are generalizable to other teaching contexts. When used in conjunction with other technologies such as threaded discussions and wikis, the portfolio and its process of use serve as microscope, magnifying lens, and telescope.

Northeastern University is located in Boston, Massachusetts, but the Master of Education program is fully online and therefore attracts students from a range of settings. Most of the students are professionals, early in their careers, who work in a range of K12, higher education, and non-profit educational sectors. Access to education is one of the core values of Northeastern’s College of Professional Studies, and therefore many people enrolled in the Masters programs are first generation college and/or graduate students.
This reflective pedagogy practice describes the use of ePortfolios in individual courses. However, the program in which these courses take place has an ePortfolio requirement. The courses have a cap of 30 students per section. In practice, enrollment averages 20-25 per course. Two instructors teach all sections of the courses, with the same approach to ePortfolio use. For more information and examples of the support and orientation process, please refer to the Portfolio Program Links.

High Impact Practices Associated with the Practice

Writing Intensive: Assignments include a significant writing component and iterative development of work

Collaborative Assignments: Most of the coursework is collaborative. Students view and provide feedback on peer ePortfolios. They work within wikis and threaded discussions to research, plan, and lead discussions. They also form groups to develop projects and present their work.

How Students Advance Their Learning

Reflection as a form of Connection (Integrative Learning) – Students’ ePortfolio help them with the transfer of knowledge from multiple contexts and consider the relationships between classroom and outside the class learning.

1. Make connections within a course
2. Make connections across courses and semesters
3. Make connections among academic experiences, co-curricular & lived experiences

Reflection as Systematic and Disciplined (Inquiry) – Students’ ePortfolio reflections processes embody...

1. A structured and scaffolded process
2. The Reflective Cycle

Reflection as Social Pedagogy – students’ use ePortfolio to share/peer review/discuss/collaborate/connecting around course work, reflections, plans, goals, stories etc.

1. Sharing their ePortfolio with and getting comments from faculty
2. Sharing and engaging in integrative ePortfolio commentary with other students

Reflection as a Process of Personal Change – Students use ePortfolio for inquiring into their educational and career development, integrative identity formation, etc., by...

1. Articulating their educational and career goals
2. Considering their evolving personal relationship to learning and education
3. Completing/revising a plan of study
Description of the Practice

This write-up provides case studies on ePortfolio integration in two fully online courses: *Emerging Trends in Education* and *New Directions in Adult Learning*. Both courses are offered in a six week, fully online accelerated format, with the expectation that students are working full-time and therefore only enrolled in one course at a time.

In these examples, ePortfolios are used in conjunction with threaded discussions to support a cycle of learning that transcends course boundaries. The learning design guides students through a process of “zooming in” to examine course concepts in detail, extracting salient ideas from massive online interactions, and “zooming out” to consider how the course, and the program, will inform and shape personal and professional goals. Students alternate focus between course-based in-depth discussion within the learning management system and episodic integrative reflection within individual ePortfolios. ePortfolios help students decompress and transition from the intensity of course-based learning to take a long view, integrating the experience into their larger learning landscapes and life plans.

The Program and Course Context

The assignment takes place within a larger context in which students use ePortfolios to reflect on the relationship between program-based learning and life goals. Incoming students to Northeastern’s Master of Education program receive the following vision statement, with the goal of orienting them to the importance that ePortfolios will play in their course of study:

> By pursuing a Master’s degree, you are in a process of – metaphorically speaking – writing the next chapter in the story of your life. Your courses are one part of that process. You construct meaning on your journey, considering how your program informs and shapes personal and professional goals.

> Your ePortfolio is designed to help you document this narrative of growth to see how parts relate to the whole. We believe it will help you improve the quality of your learning experience, both during and after your time in the program.

Students are provided with a flexible template for use in creating their ePortfolios that includes embedded writing prompts designed to guide inquiry, reflection, and integration (see image to the right).

**Masters Program ePortfolio Template:**
https://northeastern.digication.com/masters_template

Students are expected to make one entry for each course they complete within *My Program*, posting a work sample and written reflection about how the course influenced their development. These course-based work samples and reflections are revisited during capstone work and are required for graduation.
The Course Practices

The activities described below could be implemented within any course, but the writing prompts are sophisticated and therefore most appropriate for graduate-level students who have prior experience with written reflection. Reflective writing, and reflection in general, is challenging for most people. Some students in the M.Ed. program have prior experience with intentional reflection, but most do not.

They are designed to guide students through a process of articulating the prior experience and assumptions they bring to the course, documenting personal growth, and considering how the course learning experience has “informed and shaped personal and professional goals.”

The assignment design also helps students distinguish between course-based work within the learning management system, reflection on course work that takes place in the My Program area of the ePortfolio, and the overarching learning journey that is represented by the ePortfolio as a whole.

In the same way that a macro lens provides viewers with intimate detail and a wide-angle lens makes it possible to take in a landscape, the course management system and ePortfolio serve very different purposes in this learning process. By using the appropriate technologies strategically to zoom in and then back out during the learning journey, students have an opportunity to see both the forest and the trees.

Emerging Trends in Education

Emerging Trends in Education is a core requirement for the program. All students must take the course to obtain a degree. During the 2012 academic year it was offered seven times to approximately 200 graduate students.

The ePortfolio is worth 10% of the overall course grade. At the beginning of the course, students read about ePortfolio “Hallmarks of Excellence” and have an opportunity to view portfolios created by previous students. The instructor checks the ePortfolios at the end of the first week and provides feedback, but the work is not formally assessed until the end of the course.

In online courses students typically begin by introducing themselves within a threaded discussion and repeat this introductory exercise within each course. This practice can become tedious for students who pursue an entire degree online, particularly for those who already “met” each other in previous courses. Students in Emerging Trends can link to their ePortfolios. People who don’t already know each other can click through to read about their peers, but old friends can forgo that process. This makes it possible to focus introductory threaded discussions on what students hope to get out of the course, investigating the ways the topic connects with prior experience and interests.

The ePortfolio and threaded discussions work in tandem. Sometimes the ePortfolios provide peer background information that helps them begin threaded discussions at a deeper level; sometimes threaded discussions serve as a pre-write and sounding board for entries that students later make in their individual ePortfolios.

At the beginning of the course students use a course-based threaded discussion to assert and discuss their vision for education, using the following writing prompt to guide the conversation:
If you could reinvent our system for education starting from scratch today, how would it be different? From your vantage point as an educator (and/or as a student) ... What should be kept? What could we survive without? How would this approach to education be different from, or similar to, current model(s)? Please also include information about the educational setting in which you work so that we can get a better picture of your perspective.

This first message is a snapshot of your thinking at the beginning of the course. You'll have a chance to revisit it later to see how your thinking has changed and grown.

Students post a preliminary vision for education in their ePortfolios at the end of the first week. In weeks two through five the students are assigned to one of five course-based wiki study groups. Each week each group is given a rich set of online resources (readings, websites, and videos) that pertain to the week’s topic and related models for education.

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<tr>
<th>Weekly Topics</th>
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What Makes a Good Starter Message

The starter message goes beyond wrote report to provide a critical analysis of the group’s set of readings/videos. Ideally, it’s intriguing enough that people will want to read more and look at your wiki — so it’s fine to refer folks back to it. It should convey the meaty ideas that emerged in the wiki, make connections between your group’s readings and the whole-class work, and (most important) pose engaging and provocative questions to get a great conversation going.

Within the course-based wikis, group members do reading sets, pool notes, and co-author a starter message designed to promote discussion for the whole class. Each week one group member volunteers to lead the conversation, which takes place in a threaded discussion. In the second half of each week, all students read the five starter messages and select one discussion thread to participate in for the duration of the week.

The final project for the course is to design an exemplary school or program that addresses a specific educational need, including an 8-10 minute online presentation that describes the idea and its rationale. The designs must go beyond generalities; some students even create a name and logo for their proposed school or program. Working within the course, they post their presentations to a threaded discussion, then provide and receive peer feedback. They use a form to perform and submit a self-assessment of their work.

In the last week of the course, students revisit the vision statements that they wrote in their ePortfolios during the first week. In a threaded discussion, they consider the following questions:
How has your thinking changed or matured? What aspects of your vision remain constant?

What opportunities do you see for bringing your vision to life? Thinking about your vision, identify one thing that you intend to do differently in your life and work. It doesn’t have to be a big change, just something that is doable now, with the resources, social, and professional networks you already have in place.

After the discussion, students post revised vision statements and links to their final presentation in the My Program area of their individual ePortfolios.

The following prompt helps students “zoom out” to reflect on how course-based learning relates to the bigger picture of their growth and goals, extending the reflection process to other sections of their ePortfolios:

> Take a step back and look at the work you did for this course, reflecting on what it demonstrates. As you examine this work, ask yourself the following: What does it tell you about how your thinking has changed or expanded? What evidence does it provide about your growth in this course?

Now consider your ePortfolio as a whole, paying particular attention to the About Me, Goals, and Program sections. What do you want to say about your evolving goals, recent insights, and the next steps you plan to take in your development? Based on where you are now, what’s next for you in your learning journey? Are there resources from this and other courses that you want to save for future reference?

This assignment is the final piece of work that they complete for the course. It is designed to “close the loop” between course-based work and the larger learning arc that each student experiences within the program.

*New Directions in Adult Learning*

**Link:** Adult Learning Syllabus

*New Directions in Adult Learning* is an elective course, offered in a six week accelerated fully online format. During the 2011 academic year it was offered six times to approximately 180 graduate students.

The ePortfolio constitutes 25% of the course grade, with 10% awarded at the end of week two and 15% at the end of the course. This helps orient students to the expectations for quality and substance, with opportunities and an incentive for improvement. As with Emerging Trends, peer work in threaded discussions and individual ePortfolio reflection function in tandem.

**Weekly Topics**

- Learning, Adults, and Motivation
- Settings and Learning Climates
- Learning Experiences and Learning Design
- Facilitation and Teaching Strategies
- Technology for All

Each week students begin their thinking together in a threaded discussion, then post an individual reflection in their ePortfolios at the end of the week; social pedagogy precedes individual reflection.

For example, in week one the students begin by journaling offline to identify and author two stories, one about a childhood learning experience and another recent learning experience. The assignment reads as follows:
This assignment is a tale of two stories: you as a child, and you as an adult. Do it in two phases so as to not conflate the two views.

**First:** Imagine that you’re leafing through a scrapbook of yourself as a young learner. You don’t need to limit yourself to “in class” learning, but focus on recollections from when you were 15 or younger. What entries would be in your book? A specific teacher? Turning point in your development? Civic involvement, camping, art, dance, or sports?

Select one experience to write about, and tell the story in 200 words or less. Craft this narrative carefully, because it should be both specific and engaging.

**Second:** Fast forward into your adult years, reviewing your memories of learning experiences that have taken place since you graduated from college. For some of you, graduation happened only a few years ago, while others may have been out of school for a long time. Don’t worry about that, just look for a learning experience that took place in your adult years. What comes to mind? Workshops? Museum visits? Graduate school?

Select one experience to write about and tell this second story in 200 words or less. Once again, keep to the truth as you know it, but make it interesting.

These are your stories to tell in your own way, but here are some questions to help get your ideas flowing: Is the memory good or bad? Did the experience take place inside or outside of “school”? Who was involved? Was there a designated “teacher,” were you on your own, or were you with a group? How long did it take? What did you learn? How did you learn? Why has the memory stuck with you all of these years?

They post these stories to a threaded discussion.

They then read an article by Dee Fink on significant learning and several chapters in Raymond Wlodkowski’s book *Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn*. After this they return to the threaded discussion to compare the readings with their stories, guided by the following writing prompts:

- What common elements or characteristics do you see? Are there any differences or contradictions?
- What does this week’s work tell you about how you learn ... about how people learn?
- What features from Fink’s taxonomy of significant learning do you see in your stories?
- What about Wlodkowski ... how is the learning research he presents relevant to your real life experiences?

Following this preliminary group discussion, students go to their ePortfolios, post their memorable learning stories, and write an individual reflection in response to the following questions:

*Based on your readings and this week’s discussion, how have your ideas about adult learners changed or grown? Thinking about adult learning and motivation, what do you wonder about? Considering what you hope to get out of this course, where do you want to go from here?*
The cycle of storytelling, reading, group discussion, and ePortfolio reflection creates an opportunity for students to support each other as they find their way into course concepts and ideas. For example, a student might author a fabulous story but have difficulty identifying larger themes at play in the narrative. Invariably, a peer comment will help the student see larger value in the story. The discussion also provides an opportunity for students to see their stories as a collection that is greater than the sum of its parts, reflecting on the narratives to derive larger meaning from the body of work.

As a culminating experience, students work within teams to design and implement a module for adult learners. Modules are expected to be fully-functional, including goals and objectives, links to assigned readings and/or multimedia, a plan of work, discussion prompts, etc. The 2-3 person teams use a module planner to guide their process, updating and adding to the planner each week (see Supporting Materials for an example of the planner).

At the end of the course each team creates a 5-8 minute online presentation that explains the design and rationale for their modules. They post these presentations to a course-based threaded discussion, using the discussion as a place to provide and receive peer feedback. Following the discussion students work on an individual basis to develop and submit a self-assessment of their work and the work of their teammates. They are expected to integrate the peer feedback they received during the threaded discussion into this assessment.

As a final assignment, students post their team's module and presentation, along with an individual reflection, in the My Program area of their individual ePortfolios. The assignment reads as follows:

**Reflect on Course Learning:** Take a step back and look at the work you did for this course, reflecting on what it demonstrates. As you examine this work, ask yourself the following: What does your work tell you about how your thinking has changed, expanded, or become more refined? What evidence does it provide about your growth (e.g., in this course, in your professional capabilities, in your sense of life direction)? Use these questions as a guide in writing a final reflection that is no more than 250 words long. Post the final reflection in your ePortfolio, alongside your work samples.

*Note:* Be specific and back up your assertions by referring to your coursework, including your final module and presentation. For example, instead of saying “I worked hard” and leaving it at that, a deeper reflection would say “One of the toughest concepts for me was x, as evidenced in the posts I wrote in week y. I think my work sample z best reflects my growth in this area, because …”

**Zoom Out:** Now look at your ePortfolio as a whole, paying particular attention to the homepage, goals, and “for future reference” sections.

I’m a hiker, so that metaphor seems appropriate in this context. In the first week of this course you wrote stories to document what you already knew about learning as an adult. Then we took off into the woods.

For the past six weeks you’ve made your way through the thick of a forest, surrounded by lots of new things to see and think about. Some things you discovered on your own, but other times I pointed out specific issues that aren’t immediately visible to the untrained eye, things out that you might not yet have enough experience to notice. Hopefully this was an intellectually stimulating and engaging experience, but there are several more steps before it adds up to something that’s really meaningful.
It’s now time to zoom back out and take stock of what you’ve learned, to see the forest for the trees. The final step is to compare the Adult Learning page in your ePortfolio with the rest of the ePortfolio. How does it connect with, reinforce, complement, or diverge from your learning in other classes? How does what you’ve learned so far inform or change your life goals, plans, course selection decision-making, and what you have to say about yourself in general? What do you have to say about yourself now?

Literally speaking, revise the ePortfolio so that it reflects your new understanding as a whole. As they say in science, data are not the same as understanding. Understanding is what happens when you step back, discern larger patterns in the data, and derive meaning. Even though you’ve done a LOT of meaning-making on a week-by-week basis for Adult Learning, our work in this course is in many ways the “raw data” you have gathered to help you progress in your program, and the ePortfolio is the place where you turn that data into meaning that you can use to increase your capacity for bigger and better life experiences, including the achievement of professional goals.

After posting the work samples and reflection, students use the same prompt as described above in Emerging Trends to view and revise their ePortfolios as a whole, incorporating recent experience into the larger arc of their “learning journey.”

Role of Inquiry, Reflection, and Integration

Inquiry

Inquiry is at the heart of these two courses. Each module is structured around guiding questions. For example:

Week One, Adult Learning: What do we know about how people learn? What does the term “learning” mean? What are the unique characteristics of adult learners? What motivates adults to learn?

Week Two, Emerging Trends: What are the possibilities and calls for change in education? How does change happen?

In each example, students begin by surfacing the experiences and assumptions that they bring to the course. This is self-inquiry.

Students in Adult Learning begin by recalling significant learning experiences from their childhood and recent experience as adults. This storytelling experience allows them to draw on their personal experience as a form of data. In comparing their stories with the readings, they also have an opportunity to look for commonalities and reconcile differences in perspective.

Students in Emerging Trends begin by articulating their hopes and visions for the future of education. This allows the class to benefit from the richness of incoming student perspectives, but it also provides a baseline that they can revisit at the end of the course to reflect on what they have learned.

Reflection
Each module in the course is patterned on Kolb’s cycle of reflective learning. Students begin by engaging in an experience that draws on their personal interest and prior experience. They are then introduced to readings and other resources designed to augment and/or challenge their ideas. The follow-through discussions are designed to help students reconcile the readings and other course materials with their ideas. Sometimes the new information causes them to reconsider or change their stance; other times the learning experience adds to and enhances prior notions.

Integration

“Making connections” involves a process of zooming in and out on the learning experience: detailing, extrapolating, applying, and projecting. These two courses are designed to guide students through a process of viewing their learning from multiple vantage points, and then using what they see to chart, revise, and refine directions.

In fully online programs, students may find it difficult to distinguish between work done within the learning management system (LMS) and that done in the ePortfolio. This distinction goes beyond technical semantics; it is pedagogically significant. Each of the two tools has a different set of limitations and capabilities. When used in conjunction, they can function synergistically or work at cross purposes. In online programs most learning takes place through writing within one tool or the other, so understanding how the relationship between “medium” and “message” is particularly important.

The limitation of learning management systems is that they tend to partition work, creating artificial boundaries between courses. But the threaded discussion tool within a LMS is very effective for promoting a certain type of social learning: lengthy discussions during which knowledge is collaboratively constructed. In online discussions, no one person “owns” the work. When collected as a body of work, the discussions in an average online class can add up to 80-160 pages of text per week. People who are new to online learning can become easily overwhelmed, but most learn the art of skimming. Faculty who teach online often comment that they know more about what all of their students are thinking than they do when they teach face-to-face.

ePortfolios are designed to help students “own” their learning, making connections across coursework and life experience. Most ePortfolios include comment and tagging features that allow others to enter into the ePortfolio “owner’s” space, but these features are not designed to accommodate lengthy discussion among groups of people.

Students need to be guided through the process of transitioning between course-based incremental discussion within the LMS and episodic integrative reflection within their individual ePortfolios. This process helps students extract salient ideas from a massive number of online written interactions to “write the next chapter” of their learning and life planning.

Connections to Other Sectors of the Catalyst

The reflective pedagogy practice in these two courses exists within a larger context that touches on all sectors of the Catalyst framework.
Within the Northeastern model, faculty professional learning regarding ePortfolios is embedded in the work of program design, course development, student engagement, and outcomes assessment. It is an extended conversation.

**Technology:** The Graduate School of Education has worked with Academic Technology to create a comprehensive set of ePortfolio tutorials that are contextualized with the program’s use scenario. These tutorials are embedded in the gateway course. Students work within their ePortfolios every other week. In the even weeks, students focus on the coursework. In the odd weeks, students integrate recent learning into their ePortfolios. They develop proficiency with the technology alongside proficiency in “portfolio thinking.” This prepares them to engage in portfolio documentation, inquiry, reflection, and integration in other courses for the duration of the program.

**Outcomes Assessment:** Students’ ePortfolio self-depictions informed the recent redesign of the Masters program. The program includes signature assignments that students embed in their ePortfolios. These assignments are assessed in relationship to program-level and concentration-level outcomes.

**Scaling Up:** The Masters program has already taken ePortfolios to scale. The College as a whole is beginning to scale the use of ePortfolios for assessment of student proficiencies in relationship to VALUE rubrics, and in support of experiential learning within a number of programs.

**Supporting Materials**

**Student and Faculty Orientation Resources**

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<td>- tinyurl.com/eP-orientation-module-w-audio</td>
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**Syllabi**

- **Emerging Trends Syllabus Winter2012**
- **New Directions Syllabus Winter2012**

**Excerpt**

You each have goals and hopes for the future, and the degree you are pursuing at Northeastern is one part of that plan. Your ePortfolio is an online place to save and evaluate your work, make connections (across things you learn from course-to-course, at work, and in day-to-day life), and showcase accomplishments.

**Additional Course Materials**

- **Emerging Trends**

**Rubrics and Self/Peer-Assessment**

- **Discussion Excellence Criteria**
- **How to Read and View Course Material**
Student Reflections and ePortfolio Examples

Because students can control the level of access to their ePortfolios, the following examples are provided in PDF format (with author permission).

**New Directions in Adult Learning: Michael Boyle**

*On Learning*: During this class I figured we would talk about new trends in curriculum for adults. We certainly covered that topic, but we also delved into the more fundamental questions of motivation — specifically, what motivates adult learners and how is that motivation leveraged. As a teacher of adult learners, the answers to those questions are extremely important.

*On Goals*: My goals have changed and the reason is that six years ago I discovered teaching. I immediately took to it, so much so that I wonder why I didn’t think of it sooner. But for many people that’s the way it works — we try different roads, we make wrong turns, we come upon unexpected, alarmingly beautiful or dreary scenery, and all the time we feel our way along. And then the road opens up and the way is clear. I suppose people call this finding your calling.
On Learning: Reflecting on what I’ve accomplished, it’s entertaining to see my progression. I sensed the innovative thinking this course would bring. [At first] I viewed interesting theories that I merely agreed with. I waited for the radical moment when my thoughts [would be] amplified and this happened in Session Three: Technology Changes Everything … I originally objected to the use of technology in education. I thought traditional models held more value … [When I saw] how technology provides endless possibilities for global interaction and communications, it clicked. I get it. Technology in education and using all resources will make the not so possible.

On Goals: My company focuses on enhancing American school curricula by way of helping teachers get their students outside of the classroom. My personal and professional passions lie within just that: educational travel and experiential learning. I am in the Higher Ed program with the ambition to expand global training into our education system today. I am most eager to learn new and innovative ways to evaluate students’ capabilities, as well as to make information they learn stay with them … I look forward to recreating my thinking to learn new skills and capabilities, influence my goals, and raise new questions.

Claire Weiss
Emerging Trends in Education: Claire Weiss
On Learning: I came into this course excited to learn about emerging trends in education. I thought the final outcome would be a clear picture of the future of our education system — modern, technologically advanced, and global … My excitement to learn about future models quickly turned to fear as I began to realize that existing issues in education are not being addressed, yet many schools, politicians, and communities are turning a blind eye and powering forward with new ideas. It was actually very difficult for me to focus on future trends in education because all I could think about was our current issues. I have learned that the key to the future of education is proper analysis of the past and being honest about issues in our present. If these two things are accomplished, then there is hope for [the success of] future models.

On Goals: I am the Financial Aid Coordinator at Tufts University School of Medicine and have over three years of experience working in education at the elementary, proprietary and university level. What drew me to Higher Education is the opportunity to make a positive impact on the student experience outside of the classroom … I may not be a teacher, but I absolutely consider myself to be an educator … This degree will not only strengthen my interaction with students, but will help me become a better leader for my fellow employees (especially future direct reports).