Reflective Thinking and Writing as Systematic Practice at Pace University

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Summary

What is outlined here documents how reflection may be fully integrated throughout a course, with the use of blogs, post writes, short descriptions or discussion starters, and longer reflective essays that are posted on students’ ePortfolios.

Author

This polished practice was developed by Professor Linda Anstendig, Professor of English and co-Director of the ePortfolio program. Based on her many years of experience as Director of WEC (Writing Enhanced Courses) and Director of Writing, Professor Anstendig has developed a strong set of pedagogical practices to foster reflection. In addition to her work in her own writing and literature courses, she has also spent considerable time helping colleagues create and implement reflective practices of their own. And in the true spirit of reflection, Dr. Anstendig continues to revise these practices.

Practice Identifiers

This practice takes place in ENG 201—Writing in the Disciplines—one of the required writing courses of our Core Curriculum. Students must be sophomores or above to register. The focus of this course is the research process, and the objective is for students to learn to write and research inside their discipline—business, psychology, humanities etc.

The Course Catalog Description: This course is an upper level writing requirement. Its focus will be on writing effective essays and research papers in disciplinary modes and students’ field of interests. It may include reviews, analysis of journal articles, and appropriate documentation style. This course is an upper-level writing requirement.

These practices have been used in a free standing English 201 course as well as in Eng 201 Learning Communities, paired with an Introduction to Marketing course. A few Writing Instructors within our Pleasantville, NY English department have followed this model, and starting in Fall, 2013 all Writing Professors will be adapting this Reflective Practice and using ePortfolio Assessment.

In 2013-2014, Dr. Anstendig and a former student from an English 201 course pursued an internally grant-funded Undergraduate Research project to explore the ways learning could be captured in the ePortfolio experience, looking closely at student reflections.

Where Is the Practice Used?

The practice takes place in one gen ed course, ENG 201 (see description above).

Scale

Our writing program has used portfolio assessment (hard copy), essay post-writes and final reflective statements as part of the curriculum for about 10 years. All Writing Faculty, starting in Fall, 2013 will be using a variation of this reflective practice, within a new departmental ePortfolio template, that will be used for end-of-semester assessment and for tracking progress of students through all of the required writing courses.
High Impact Practices:

As a writing course, ENG 201 is Writing Intensive. Also, Linda Anstendig and Jemma York, a former ENG 201 student and ePortfolio etern, obtained a Provost funded grant to pursue a year-long Student-Faculty Undergraduate Research Project. The title of the project is "Capturing Student Learning with EPortfolios," and the focus is looking closely at reflective practice.

**Reflection as a form of Connection (Integrative Learning)**

Students’ ePortfolio reflections are designed to help them:

- Make connections within a course
- Make connections across courses and semesters
- Make connections among academic experiences, co-curricular & lived experiences
- Connect college experiences to prior learning, especially in first reflective blog of semester
- Connect college coursework to a sense of identity as a learner: create personal vision statement; digital stories
Connect the learning in that course to the larger college experience, and to the development of a stronger sense of one’s learning strategies; Final Reflective Statement

Reflect on how pieces of work relate to each other, and/or to the larger norms of the discipline

Connect to earlier artifacts and reflections, evaluating growth and change: Final Reflective Statement

These practices were based on years of using Portfolio Assessment and learning about reflection as a key feature of a learning experience; involvement in the C2L projects—doing and discussing the readings (especially Rogers and Dewey), and learning from others’ best practices through online jams has helped to revise and extend these assignments and set up more explicit expectations for students.

Reflection as Systematic & Disciplined (Inquiry)

Students’ ePortfolio reflection processes embody:

- A structured & scaffolded process
- Connecting their learning to Gen Ed or programmatic competencies

Having students develop the “habit” of reflecting on their writing and reading throughout the semester enables them to practice reflective thinking, and deepen their learning. Scholarship in this area (Rogers, Yancey, Chafee et al) as well as findings from our faculty-student undergraduate research project shows that students need time and practice to become more reflective learners, enhance their self-awareness, and make connections between the course assignments and their own attitudes as students. Because students do at least 3 post write blogs, in addition to their initial course reflection, their final reflective statements are stronger.

Helen Chen at Stanford University coined the term “folio thinking” and demonstrated how ePortfolio pedagogy and technology contribute and support a vision of lifelong learning. In her study, she tracked the progress of thirty undergraduate students for a four year time period. After four years the students displayed a greater proficiency in self-assessment, a key component of lifelong learning. Both Chen (2009), Yancy (2009), and Ring and Ramirez (2012) noted that self-assessment is a knowledge-making activity and acts as a means of education and personal development when selecting artifacts to display. As ePortfolios allow students to showcase and reflect on their learning experiences, it emerges as a “valuable resource in guiding this process over time.

As part of the research project, we placed a specific focus on student reflections, developing a rubric (Reflective Blog Rubric–rev) that could be used throughout the university to code and analyze student reflections and other ePortfolio artifacts.

This ePortfolio study took place within the context of Pace University’s Undergraduate Student-Faculty research program. Throughout the year-long study we analyzed student reflections, the types of projects and papers uploaded, and conducted interviews with student ePortfolio users, in order to uncover evidence of student learning.
While reading through student blog posts, (30 for purposes of study) we searched for common themes and shared traits. Ultimately, more than seventy-five percent of the students demonstrated growth in their ability to reflect. The reflective blog posts improved not only in length as the semester progressed, but in the level of detail they incorporated. Although the number of words a student writes is not relative to the quality of the post, it did demonstrate a heightened level of engagement and seriousness in completing the reflection. This finding directly coincides with the leading ePortfolio research, that reflection must be learned and fostered. Bret Eynon (2012) has noted that when students “engage in a sustained, self-guided inquiry into their own learning…[they] become engaged in the examination of learning…take a new stance towards their learning, explicitly connecting past, present, and future.”

“As part of the study, we conducted a number of interviews. A few students commented on the benefits of reflection: “Reflecting on other people’s responses opens up the discussion instead of just in class, but also through writing.” Another mentioned, by using ePortfolios to write a reflection on my progress, “It helped [me] learn what progress [I] have made and it helped [me] reflect and use what [I] have learned.”

Certainly, reading these reflections enables a professor to appreciate students concerns and challenges, and often the authentic voice that comes through in the blogs is quite strong. The reflective prompt questions are important to consider as well in helping students to inquire more deeply into their skills as critical writers and readers. Students in addressing these prompts show that they are making certain choices, and engaging with their work in meaningful ways. As they examine their learning process-not only the how but the why, students also begin to better understand their mistakes and successes.

Reflection as Social Pedagogy

Students use ePortfolio to share/peer review/discuss/collaborate, connecting around course work, reflections, plans, goals, stories, etc.

- Sharing their ePortfolios w/ & getting comments from faculty
- Sharing & engaging in interactive ePortfolio commentary w/ other students

Students are asked to provide peer feedback on another’s ePortfolio reflections throughout the semester. For example, they are asked to comment on what another student’s reflection shows about her writing and research process. One student noted in her feedback:

“You have given me great insight into your writing and researching skills through reading your reflection. Specific examples are very important in writing, and it is good you reflected that you needed to incorporate them in your essay. I am sure you will reach your goal of becoming a more eloquent writer by the end of this course! Keep up the good work!”

The professor also provides feedback and highlights outstanding student reflections for the class. Students present their ePortfolio and digital stories to the class on the last day as part of our celebration of writing. During the presentations of digital stories, students provide feedback on the Digital Story/Video Presentation Guide Form (see attached form). They provide oral feedback about students’ ePortfolios as well.

Please see our Social Pedagogy Practice to see how Professor Andrew Wier also users reflective practices in his microbiology course.
Reflection as a Process of Guiding Personal Change

Students use ePortfolios for educational and career development, identity formation, by …

- Articulating their educational and career goals
- Considering their evolving personal relationship to learning and education
- Preparing ePortfolio to showcase to potential employers

In addition to their reflective statements throughout the semester, students are required to state their goals, upload a personal vision statement in sentence and wordle form, and upload an updated resume. Students may decide to send their ePortfolio to a prospective employer.

Students create digital stories as the culminating project of their research projects and upload those along with a descriptive/reflective statement to their ePortfolios. They present these stories and their ePortfolios to the class on the last day of the semester.

Here is a sample digital story from Alexis Leahy:

This is an excerpt from Alexis’s reflective blog:

“A digital story is a brilliant way to present a concept, message, or point of view. I was able to portray a complicated process in a simple form using pictures, diagrams, and narration. Not only did I appreciate the opportunity to display my research in a creative manner, but I really enjoyed watching other students stories as well.”

Description

Part 1: Practice Step-By-Step:
Reflective blogs—During the first week of the semester students are introduced to the ePortfolio. A student etern (usually a former student from Eng 201) comes to class and students do hands-on work, creating an introduction page.

When essays are due, students post a blog on ePortfolio about themselves as writers, researchers and learners. Throughout the semester they reflect on their writing process and what they learned (questions are distributed to help prompt reflections); 6 blog posts are required—as part of their ePortfolio (Introductory reflection; post-writes; a midterm and one final reflective statement).

Prompts for Students:

- Some questions addressed in introductory reflective blog:
  - What assignments or activities look familiar and manageable and why? What assignments or activities look most challenging or difficult for you and why?
  - What parts of your reading, writing, research background and skills make you confident about some parts of the course and hesitant about others?
  - How do you see yourself as a reader, writer, researcher? Use a metaphor, simile or analogy in describing yourself as reader, writer, and/or researcher
  - What questions do you have about any of the materials? What questions would you like to address in this course?
  - What are your first thoughts about the themes and essay topics?
Some questions to address in first “post write” blog:

- What did you accomplish so far as a critical reader and writer?
- What did you learn in process of writing your essay?
- What challenges did you face and how did you solve them?
- What kinds of revision did you undertake?

Instructions for ENG 201 ePortfolio:

Final ePortfolio— The ePortfolio should include:

- Introduction—goals and skills; about me statement
- Reflection blogs—Final Reflection and Midterm Reflection – your Final Reflection blog on your ePortfolio can combine some of your previous reflections (you can combine and remove past post writes that may prove redundant, but keep your midterm reflection up on your ePortfolio). Please address the following points:
  - What have you learned about writing, reading, and research in this course?
  - What have you accomplished as a writer and learner?
  - What activities, kinds of feedback, and other support have helped you the most?
  - How have your writing and research skills changed and improved?
  - What kinds of research and revision strategies did you learn and use?
  - What does this portfolio demonstrate about you as a writer, researcher, and learner? Use an analogy, simile, and/or metaphor to describe yourself as one of these.
  - What are your future goals as a writer, researcher, and learner in your discipline and beyond?
- Digital Story, and reflection about this story and process of creating it, which is the culminating part of students’ research project.

Digital Story Assignment: you will create a 2-5 minute video that tells a story/ presents a critical issue about your research; you may focus on a key feature, make an argument, or show how and/or why this topic is significant for you. Did you learn any lessons? Have a dramatic epiphany about topic? Your video must include some written narrative and voice-over. You will present this video to the class on 4/19 or 4/24, and upload it to your final ePortfolio along with a Reflective Blog about your process and accomplishment. You will hand in your script and storyboard when you present. See Additional Handouts about Digital Storytelling.

Part II: The Role of Reflection in Advancing Student Learning:
Inquiry and self-assessment becomes a habitual practice in this course as students write their weekly reflections and become more engaged with the process. It is especially gratifying to appreciate the “whole student” whose final ePortfolio reveals his or her identity at this point in time. Many of the students take the time to build a coherent snapshot, with their wordle, reflections, photos, images, and projects reinforcing their holistic view of the world and themselves.
Description of My Digital Story

My digital story presentation focuses on a procedure called pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD). PGD uses reproductive technologies such as in-vitro fertilization in combination with DNA analysis to screen embryos for specific genes. My digital story briefly explains the process of PGD, and outlines a few of its positive and negative consequences.

Med/Vet Summer Leadership Academy at St. George’s University, Grenada, West Indies

A fellow student and I at a suture clinic.

My Digital Story Reflective Blog

Creating my first digital story was a magnificent learning experience. I was quite intimidated when I first received this assignment, but with the guidance of the Windows Live Movie Maker tutorial I quickly caught on. Although it was certainly a challenge, I found that putting together a digital story is very similar to making a power point presentation, so I did not have too much trouble. Using a voice over narration with background music was not possible on Windows Live Movie Maker. However, after I downloaded an outside music program called "Audacity" I was able to record my narration with music and then export it into Windows Live Movie Maker. Once my project began to make progress I actually enjoyed working on it. A digital story is a brilliant way to present a concept, message, or point of view. I was able to portray a complicated process in a simple form using pictures, diagrams, and narration. Not only did I appreciate the opportunity to display my research in a creative manner, but I really enjoyed watching other students stories as well.

Posted by Alexis Leahy on 30 April 2012, 9:44 PM | Comments (0)
According to the findings from our Undergraduate Faculty-Student research project, ten percent of the students whose blogs we analyzed discussed ePortfolios. One student wrote “ePortfolio makes an excellent tool for students who wish to show their well-rounded qualities prior to a formal interview. It has given me the opportunity to express my professional potential while also portraying my creativity, extracurricular involvement and hobbies that shape who I am as an individual.” Another student also stated how ePortfolios encourage students to recognize their skills. She wrote, “The ePortfolio also shows me my strengths and weaknesses. I look at my academic page and extracurricular activities and am very proud with my accomplishments.”
A glimpse of the undergraduate research project. To see more click here.

Theoretical Underpinning for this Reflective Practice

Carol Rodgers, in “Defining Reflection: Another Look at John Dewey and Reflective Thinking,“, reinterpreted Dewey’s theories as a 4 phase reflective cycle that helped to better understand what we are asking students to do in their reflections:

• Students need to continuously make meaning of their experiences in the course, so practicing reflection from the first days of the semester, may enable them to see their own growth, change and development

• Reflection is a developmental process and by describing and analyzing their writing, research and learning process each time they write a draft, they may be better able to articulate their own thinking; the ePortfolio then also serves as a dynamic learning space for students to practice this thinking
• Students make their reflections public, writing for an audience of their peers, as well as for their professor, so that they not only test out their own thinking and connections but see others’ perspectives and learn from them.

• Students, by the end of the semester, may be better able to take charge of their own learning and enhance those attitudes that will ensure future academic and career success—open mindedness, curiosity, and a sense of inquiry.

A mantra often repeated in class is from Socrates; “An unexamined life is not worth living.

Through creating ePortfolios, students self-reflect as they select projects/papers to incorporate. Thus, they partake in a critical reflection of their learning experience in choosing the works to showcase. In compiling their evidence and examining their own learning and development, they build their own academic story. As one participating professor noted, as students “are putting [ePortfolios] together [they] become the teachers. There is no better way to learn a subject than to have to teach it; [thus] ePortfolio forces [students to] engage with the material”.

Part III: Evidence of Impact on the Student Learning Experience

The following evidence associated with this and other similar practices has been collected:

• # of students
• Student engagement through surveys/interviews
• We have conducted six Assessment Pilots since Spring 2011 – an interdisciplinary pilot, and a Writing Class. The ENG 201 course that uses the Reflective Practice described here is included in these assessment pilots.
• The interdisciplinary assessment pilot enables us to review student ePortfolios from a selection of classes in a number of disciplines to evaluate for one or more of the following Core Curriculum outcomes: written communication, information literacy, and analysis. Faculty and staff reviewers attend a training session to review how to use rubrics to review student work and determine levels of competency, and one week in early June is set aside to conduct the review. In the future, we would like to explore having reviewers examine reflection statements, using a rubric, to see if we can find evidence of enhanced learning. The following rubrics are used: written communication and info literacy rubrics; Analysis pilot rubric.
• The results of the assessment pilot rubric reviews have been mixed: valuable information about Core outcomes is offset by a limit sample of student work. When reviewers’ eP evaluations are compiled, student competency in the written communication and information literacy outcomes is fair-to-good, and competency in analysis show that more guidance for student writing is needed.
• ePortfolio grades by rubric (four-point scale)
• The chart below shows data from the Spring 2013 Interdisciplinary Pilot. This assessment is based on the work of 110 students out of 165 on the rosters. Compared to the Spring 2011 and 2012 review sessions, student work was more accessible to reviewers—approximately two-thirds were available versus less than half in previous years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Information Literacy</th>
<th>Written Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>count</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>count 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>Determine extent info 2.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The chart below shows data from the Spring 2012 Writing Department Pilot:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.[1]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content and development</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[1] The standard deviation of the total grade set is not equal to the average of the standard deviations for each dimension due to the differences in sample size of all grades (n=116) versus each dimension (n=29), and because different formulae are used. The formula used for the calculation of standard deviation of the dimensions is MS Excel’s STDEV.S, while the formula for calculating the standard deviation of the total grade set is STDEV.P.

**Student Work/ePortfolio Examples**

**Sample Midterm Reflections:** ExamplesofmidtermEpblogs

**Student Sample:**

Nelly Zorilla, accounting major:

An excerpt from her reflection blog:
An excerpt from her reflection blog:

“*My E-portfolio demonstrates my journey through writing; it is like the metamorphosis of a butterfly. It has not been the easiest journey, but in the end it was rewarding and it has changed me. As a writer my future hopes are to inspire people to see that writing can be something fun and exciting, that it can change the way you think, the way you express yourself, and the way you view the world.*”

Click here to download Nelly's complete Academic Materials page: nelly-zorilla-ep

**Connections to Other Sectors of the Catalyst**

**Professional Development**

Faculty and staff using this practice engage in the following ePortfolio-related professional development.

We have had ePortfolio Teaching Circles, where we read about and discussed ePortfolios and reflective practice. Over a number of years we have had English Department workshops, where we learned about reflective practices, such as having students write “post writes” for every draft and essay, and using ePortfolio Assessment Review in partnership with Instructional Librarians

Support is also provided to faculty members via a number of “Groups” within our ePortfolio platform. Faculty support Groups include:

- ePortfolio Resource/Information Group
- ePortfolio Teaching Circle Group
- Pace Rubric Repository (new in Spring 2012)

These groups provide Discussion Forums where faculty members can post questions and get ideas from colleagues, and they are a place where faculty members can access materials such as tutorials, suggested assignments, rubrics, articles and other readings assigned in the Teaching Circles, PowerPoint presentations, etc.

**Articles read in Teaching Circles:**

A few of the articles we read in the teaching circles, concern reflection, including:
Outcomes Assessment:

We have been engaging in 2 assessment pilots, where students’ reflections are part of the process of reviewing ePortfolios with rubrics adapted from the AAC&U Value Rubrics to analyze how well students are accomplishing critical learning outcomes of the University Core Learning Outcomes:

1) **Interdisciplinary**—to assess the core learning outcomes of Written Communication, Analysis, and Information Literacy; some of the Writing Faculty participate in this pilot as well as in the English Department ePortfolio Review. A number of faculty reviewers are trained to review a sampling of ePortfolios from a variety of courses across the disciplines—usually about 10-15.

2) **English Department ePortfolio Review** in partnership with Instructional Librarians—to assess Written Communications and Information Literacy. In both cases students in this course have participated, and their reflections are read by reviewers as part of the process.

Technology

Our Mahara Platform definitely supports Reflective Practice. There is room on our Introduction page for Overall Reflections, and there is a blogging feature, which can be used throughout the ePortfolio. Also, there is a Feedback feature at the bottom of each page, so faculty and students can provide comments that can be made public or kept private.

Scaling Up

This practice is used in a number of courses and programs from the first year, to Capstone, to Graduate Programs, but not yet in any systematic way.

Involvement of Peer Mentors

We have a number of ePortfolio eterns, who act as student mentors. They come to class to assist students in understanding and developing their ePortfolios, trouble-shoot with technical problems, demonstrate their own ePortfolio reflective practices, and advocate for the use of ePortfolios in various disciplines and other academic settings.

Co-curricular Activities

Linda Anstendig was on the Advisory Committee of Student Life to develop a Setters Leadership Program. Students are using their ePortfolios to reflect on their developing leadership skills and their leadership activities. Linda Anstendig led a workshop for the student leaders in the program about Developing a Personal Vision Statement. Students uploaded their Personal Vision Statements in both written and WORDLE form to their ePortfolios.

**PowerPoint Presentation for Leadership Program:** personal_vision_Presentation1
Professional Guidance

The Director of CTLT, Jim Stenerson, is a member of the C2L Leadership team, and the CTL sponsors faculty development days and workshops where ePortfolio team members can present. Also, CTLT sponsored the TAPs initiative—whereby all faculty coming up for tenure and promotion, began using the ePortfolio as their dossier, and all committee members used ePortfolio to evaluate candidates.

Supporting Materials

Dr. Linda Anstendig’s English 201 Syllabus: syllandcalrev142012
Reflective Blog Rubric: ReflectiveBlogRubricrev-1
Digital Storytelling Presentation Guide: Video_Presentation_Guide
Student Survey on Reflection: http://pacedyson.qualtrics.com//SE/?SID=SV_2b2Nb3cpHjD5MW0

Written Communication and Information Literacy Rubric used as part of departmental ePortfolio Assessment Review.

Not a complete list—so many articles, books and presentations: all of the Connect to Learn, and C2L materials, especially Rodgers, Dewey, Eynon, EPortfolios 2.0 book, presentations at AAEEBL, Susan Kahn’s work at IUPUI.

Conclusion:
Although we have made good progress over these past few years, integrating reflection into the writing program on the Pleasantville campus, we hope, through more widespread ePortfolio use, to change the culture, ensuring that Reflective Practice becomes a key feature of the curriculum. After all reflection requires attitudes that value both the cognitive and affective growth of oneself and others.

Through our Faculty-Student Undergraduate Research project we conducted peer to peer interviews with ePortfolio users and made a presentation to a large group of faculty and students from across disciplines. We hope to continue to collect and analyze these as well as create a few videos of some of the interviewees speaking about their ePortfolio experiences and sharing these on our ePortfolio platform Website.

We have created a Qualtrics student survey on reflection; this semester we are testing it with a small number of students, but hope to use it in a more widespread way to gather evidence about role reflection plays in student learning. Some quotes from students:

“I think it is worthwhile because you are able to look back and see where you started, reflect and see where you are now”

“I have learned how I have improved as a writer and researcher”

“My reflections have given me the ability to learn how I have improved as a writer and what revision process works best for me when I am writing a paper.”

“I have been more reflective about paper I am writing in other classes. I am more aware of the revision and editing process due to reflecting about it on the blog.”

Link to Qualtrics Survey:
https://paceadmin.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_2b2Nb3cpHjD5MW0&Preview=Survey&BrandID=pacedyson

Some other initiatives which have helped to nurture reflective practice include our success with digital storytelling, and our emphasis on self-assessment activities throughout the course.

We expect to keep working to help students understand how they learn, to review their own work, to make connections within the course and among other courses, and to set their own goals. As Carol Rodgers has shown in her work, "Seeing Student Learning: Teacher Change and the Role of Reflection," reflection does not come naturally, but rather it requires more than ordinary thought; thus it must be learned and demands community involvement" (Rodgers, 2002).