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Electronic Portfolio: Reflective Project in a Community of Language Learners

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Abstract

In this article, I present my stance as an English as a second language (ESL) practitioner resulting from empirical observations of the development of eportfolio reflective projects by five groups of approximately 10-20 intermediate-level language learners in an online learning community during five iterations of the same course (February 2018-June 2020). I provide an insight into the experiences of ESL students with their first eportfolios as a capstone project based on ongoing observations grounded on theoretical concepts of the affective domain and a more ecological aspect of constructivism. The first four groups of 10-20 students completed their program of studies in a blended format – three days onsite and two online. The fifth group with 20 students, however, due to COVID-19, was thrust into learning entirely at a distance prior to the completion of their second module. In each cohort, students were aware of the remaining modules in their program of studies and waited in anticipation – and some form of trepidation – for their reflective project. The capstone eportfolio project was the fifth and final module in a five-month program of studies where students chose a platform for their projects (technology) and populated the pages with learning episodes (pedagogy) experienced in the previous four modules. These eportfolio projects, developed by the students individually and in collaboration with their peers, fostered engagement and feedback interaction at various stages. While developing their reflective projects, students learned to leverage eportfolio technology to enhance the achievement of their goals as well as eportfolio pedagogy to articulate the attainment of competencies. Since evidence of core competencies in each language skill ability is a program requirement, modules preceding the creation of eportfolios necessitate tasks that foster learner awareness related to language skills, abilities, and attitudes. Although students eventually understand *what* the competencies are, they often grapple with *how* they are attained, and *why* they are required. As reflective projects grounded on academic rigour and underpinned by theoretical principles, these eportfolios espouse self-awareness and deeper learning. As such, they foster student agency and empower creators to articulate their experiences as they reflect on the learning to date. My observations of five groups of language learners developing their first eporfolio as a capstone project may help inform the field of online pedagogy and also contribute toward a better understanding of eportfolios as reflective projects in blended and online learning communities.

1. Introduction

The eportfolio, which I consider a reflective and curated repository, is a thoughtful pedagogy (Cuzzolino, 2018; Dron, 2020). It is an innovative way for educators to not only design learning and facilitate instruction but also engage learners in online learning communities. As technology, ePortfolios enable students to document their journey and learning growth over

time. As pedagogy, they empower students to articulate their learning during the development of their capstone projects. These reflective projects are housed in a site (a platform of choice) and comprise a compilation of artefacts that students create throughout the term. Since these projects are created both individually and in collaboration with peers, they are part of a resilient and diverse network of systems. As depicted in Figure 1, the ePortfolio ecosystem, underpinned by construction and co-construction of knowledge, is where students demonstrate cognition and affect (Zuba Prokopetz, 2019a).

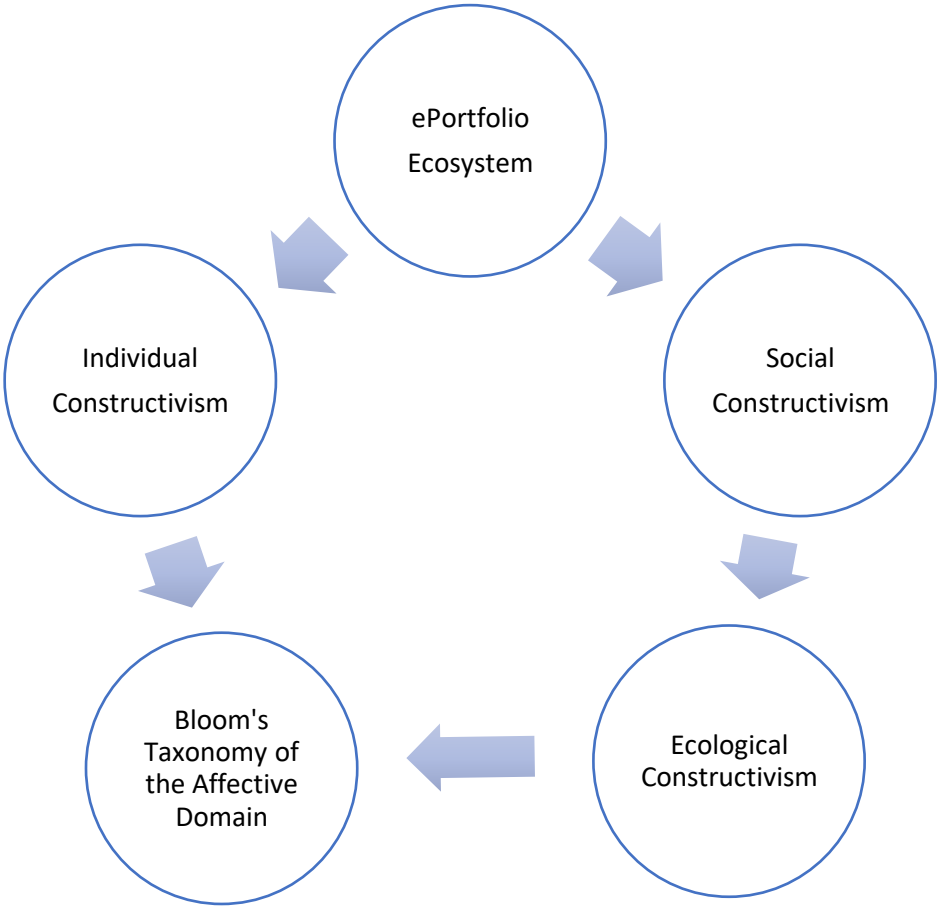

Figure 1: Eportfolio ecosystem and theoretical underpinnings.

This ecosystem, where students engage in reflective learning, peer-interaction, and modeling, requires a broad – rather than narrow – view of the activities in the course. The community foyer, or Discussion Forum, is where the community members gather to exchange ideas, share thought processes, and offer suggestions to one another. This ongoing online interaction enables course instructors to perceive connections of some of the dimensions of the affective domain (emotions, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs) with the effective application of technology (Tomei, 2005). As reflective projects, eportfolios make affordances for learning to take place in a visible and more organic way, thus providing a sense of student agency. During the eportfolio development process, students express their choices in the creation of their projects regarding platform, content, layout, and composition. During the presentation of their projects, students speak eloquently and reflectively about their *aha!* and *oh, no!* moments. Some of the students become very emotional as they think back on the experiences of the previous four months and on the evolution of their learning process. This final speaking assessment task in a class of language learners is authentic, spontaneous, and meaningful for the students on a personal, academic, and professional level.

2. Empirical Observations

My empirical observations of intermediate-level English as a second language (ESL) students in an online learning community started when I was offered an opportunity to facilitate a five-month course in a blended format (January 2018) in a learning centre in central Canada. Since I was tasked with both the course design and content, I chose to create five distinct modules. Each module enabled scaffolded learning activities, and the final one included capstone eportfolio projects. These projects, which show evidence of language learning and personal experiences over a period of time, include critical reflection, interaction, and reflective feedback giving and receiving. As suggested by Kuh (2008), they comprise culminating experiences in which students engage upon the completion of a course or program of studies. As such, they facilitate the application of sound pedagogy and theoretical principles and enable learners to experience the connection of instructional episodes with core competencies. As aligned with Social Constructivism, students gain a better understanding of learning episodes when they work in groups of two or more rather than alone (Ormrod, 2009). Another perspective is based on Ecological Constructivism, a more contemporary theory of learning, "derived from individual construal of affordances in the environment"; it considers the facility to explain learning experienced by students while working alone and with others (Hoven & Palalas, 2016, p. 5). Since I facilitated the same course in two different formats – blended and also at a distance due to COVID-19 – I was able to observe in the Discussion Forum meaningful learning that took place both individually and in groups as showcased in the eportfolio project iterations. As I had the perspective of both an outsider to the community (as an observer) and an insider (as an instructor and participant), I had a broader view of some of the challenges students faced while creating their eportfolios and interacting with one another; among these difficulties was the giving and receiving of reflective feedback on each other's eportfolios.

In the first four course iterations in a blended format, students often demonstrated the benefits of group work (project-based learning) during their face-to-face sessions. The students in the fifth course, however, due to COVID-19, were thrust into learning entirely at a distance prior to the completion of their second module which included a group project. As a result, they gravitated toward the Discussion Forum for guidance and social interaction. I noticed that in an attempt to conceptualize the course requirements, the students sought affirmation on how to proceed based on what their online learning space had to offer. In consequence, they began to leverage the affordances of their online community such as the iterations of their work-in-progress submissions and subsequent feedback from community members. In addition, in each new course, students from previous cohorts shared their own capstone eportfolio projects with the current group; an activity that was not only anticipated but also appreciated by the students (Zuba Prokopetz, 2019b).

2.1 Eportfolio Pedagogy

Eportfolio pedagogy is part of a growing movement that includes instructional practices that are aligned with the 21st century. It is an innovative way for educators to design learning, facilitate instruction, and enrich student experiences in online communities. This powerful pedagogy is undergirded by feedback giving and receiving – an instructional strategy that, to

be properly applied, requires time and effort on the part of both the giver and the receiver. The eportfolio purposes of learning, teaching, and assessing align with the development of attributes required by graduates in the 21st century, which Peet et al. (2011) identify as flexibility, adaptability, reflexivity, and critical engagement in life-long learning. As illustrated in Figure 2, eportfolio pedagogy fosters reflection, student self-awareness, peer learning, and feedback interaction (Zuba Prokopetz, 2019a).

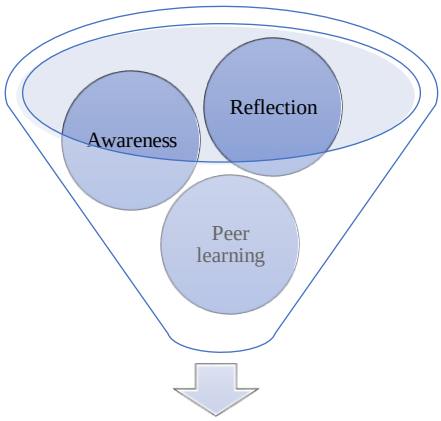

Figure 2: Eportfolio pedagogy and key constructs of feedback interaction.

2.2 Reflective Feedback Giving and Receiving

During the development of their eportfolios, students work both alone and in collaboration with their peers as feedback givers and receivers. The modeling and reflecting components in these learning interactions are affordances made by the eportfolio pedagogy that undergird one's reflection and awareness of growth over time.

Awareness, attentiveness, and willingness to engage in peer-feedback giving and receiving are in alignment with affect because, as posited by Anderson et al. (2001), many of the cognitive objectives connect with an affective component. Interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities, crucial aspects of feedback interactions, are part of such competencies underpinned by the affective domain. Table 1 presents the association between elements of the affective domain and of the new taxonomy.

Bloom's Taxonomy of the affective domain		**Marzano & Kendall's New taxonomy elements**	
Characterization by a value or valued complex	Demonstrated readiness to modify behaviour	Self-system	Believing in efficacy and importance of knowledge
Organization	Organized actions to apply feedback	Metacognition	Monitoring execution of knowledge
Valuing	Valued experience	Cognitive system	Analysis of information
Responding	Giving peer-feedback Receiving peer-feedback		Knowledge representation Knowledge utilization

Note: Adapted from Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia (1964, pp. 176-185) and from Marzano and Kendall (2007, p. 13).

Table 1: Brief overview of the Affective Domain and the New Taxonomy.

Students engage in meaning making during their social dialogues with peers and their interactions with their learning environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Such interactions become even more meaningful when opportunities for social dialogues among course participants are provided. These effective learning moments are present in an eportfolio development, and they include feedback giving and receiving which, as posited by Brown et al. (1994), is a skill required in not only one's academic life, but also on a personal and professional level.

3. Reflection

Initially, my view of eportfolios placed them as a technology-enabled pedagogy, and as a key part of a digital ecosystem in a specific instance of Internet culture. As I continued my observations with different groups of students developing projects, my perception evolved. These eportfolio pursuits afforded me opportunities to observe the activities of an online community where the members shared a common goal – improve language skills. Although unplanned, I began then what was to become an informal two-and-a-half-year experience with five groups of language learners. As a consequence, I gained insights into the connection of reflective feedback interaction and the student perception of community building. I noticed how peer-feedback interactions among students facilitate the initial stages of reflection and the subsequent alignment of program competencies, thus strengthening the learning community. As the students engage in peer-feedback giving and receiving during their eportfolio creation, they attempt to reflect on their learning while interacting with their environment (course content, instructor, peers).

3.1 Emergent realizations

The experience of feedback receiving was laden in emotions and led to feelings that ranged from doubt and discouragement to delight and confidence. Upon receiving feedback from a peer or instructor, students acknowledged the comments, and then engaged in a process of discernment and evaluation prior to accepting or including the new information in their revisions. I conceptualized what I saw happening at various stages of the development of receiving and giving feedback on the artefacts. Figure 3 presents these emergent realizations based on the observable communication among members of each eportfolio community. Ynah, one of the course participants in the Fall 2018 course iteration, used the following statements to express her experiences with feedback interaction:

> During my course with ePortfolios as a capstone project, the feedbacks I got from my instructor and my peers, even the feedback I have given myself in the discussion forum greatly impacted with the way I view myself and other people's opinions. I was able to fully understand and reflect on the answers and points I shared in the forum that supported me in my learning after reading my instructor's and peers' feedback.

The feedbacks I received in the discussion forum substantially boost my self-confidence and gave me determination to learn more not only academically but in every aspect of my life particularly with communication.

I evaluated the information before deciding to include it or not in my revisions before the presentation by thoroughly and positively comparing my answers to the feedbacks given by my instructor and peers. In this way, through looking for missing or additional information that could benefit my presentation, I was able to look at different perspectives that helped me broaden my ideas and also scaffold it with new information to present.

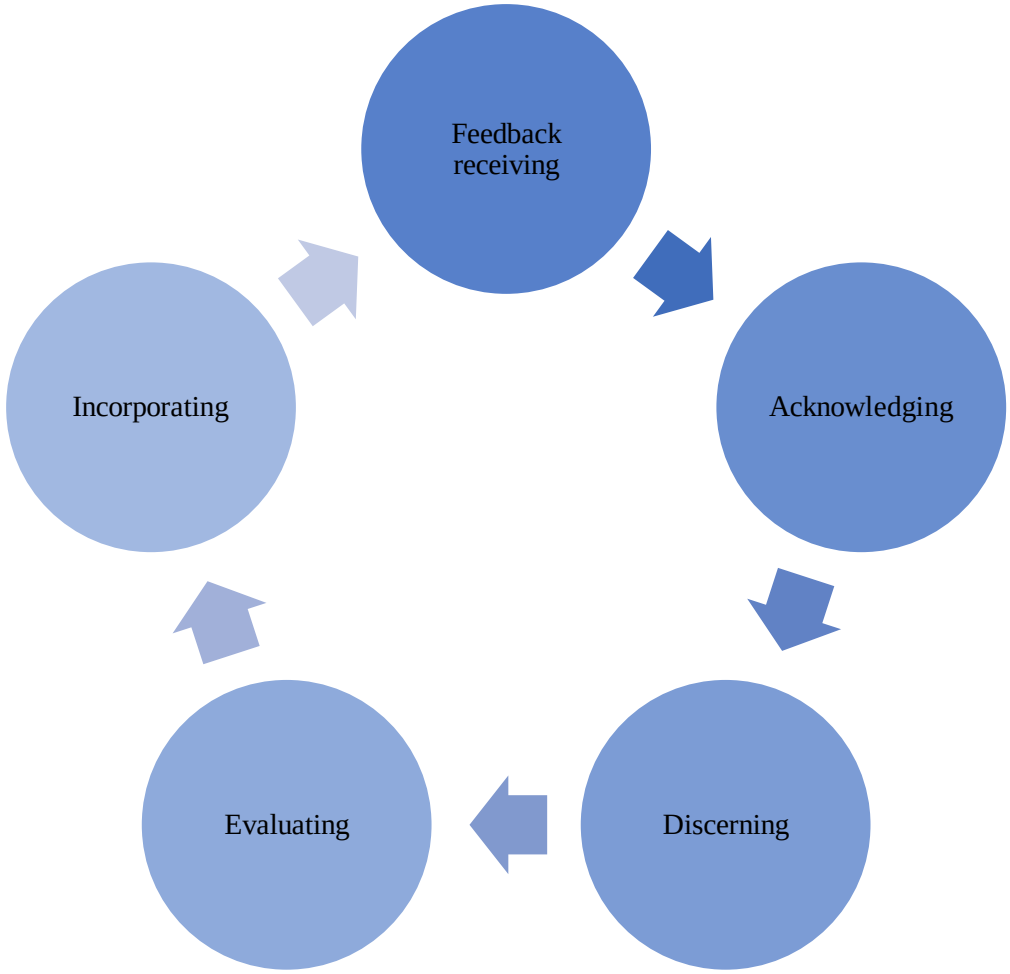

Figure 3: Feedback receiving and elements of the students' affect.

The feedback trajectory of awareness → discernment → acceptance or not → and articulation of rationale for the decision made was part of a system of interdependent components that, when working in tandem, fostered the completion of the reflective project (Zuba Prokopetz, 2019a). Completing the projects is the goal of every student in the final module of this course; however, the realization of how to achieve the end result is what makes the experience meaningful. When sufficient time is provided, students choose to engage and interact with each other and their eportfolios. Engagement with the project and interaction

among peers gradually lead to the development of reflection and help solidify the interconnectedness of all components in a feedback trajectory cycle.

4. Discussion

I became interested in the integration of the cognitive and affective domains during my observations of the experiences of students developing their eportfolios. I noticed that in order for learning to navigate from cognition (knowledge utilization, analysis, comprehension, retrieval) to metacognition (goal-setting, monitoring), and subsequently to our self-system (believing in knowledge acquisition), the students necessitated time, space, effort, self-regulation, and an intrinsic desire to learn. I saw firsthand how extraordinary things happened in the brain of learners when they were provided a level-appropriate subject-specific meaningful project (a capstone eportfolio project) and sufficient time to figure out how to proceed with the task at hand.

The current interest in domain integration is creating a need for studies undergirded by the value system that align learning experiences with competencies. The various layers of affect, cognition, and metacognition are detailed in Table 2.

Bloom's Taxonomy of the Affective Domain		**Marzano & Kendall's New Taxonomy Elements**		
Characterization by a value or value complex	• Readiness to change behaviour in light of knowledge • Regulation of personal and civic life • Ethical principles associated with ideals	*Self-system*	• Beliefs about the importance of knowledge • Beliefs about efficacy • Emotions associated with knowledge	
Organization	• Identifying characteristics of self-interest • Forming judgment • Weighing alternative practices • Managing demands	*Metacognitive system*	• Specifying learning goals • Monitoring the execution of knowledge • Monitoring clarity • Monitoring accuracy	
Valuing	• Desire to speak and write effectively • Ability to interact with diversity • Acknowledgment of effort of others • Ability to examine issues and form opinion	*Cognitive system*	*Knowledge retrieval*	• Recall • Execution
			Comprehension	• Synthesis • Representation
Responding	• Compliance with regulations • Desire to learn widely and broadly • Inclination to protect self and others • Enjoyment of self-expression • Enjoyment in interacting with others		*Analysis*	• Matching • Classifying • Error analysis • Generalizing • Specifying
Receiving (attending)	• Attentiveness to aesthetic factors • Appreciation for communication with others		*Knowledge utilization*	• Decision making • Problem solving

• Tolerance for cultural differences • Recognition of discrimination of elements • Alertness toward values and judgments	• Experimental inquiry • investigation

Note: Adapted from Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia (1964, pp. 176-185) and from Marzano and Kendall (2007, p. 13).

Table 2: Layers of Affect, Cognition, and Metacognition.

This complex interconnectedness of cognition, metacognition, and reflection in our process of thinking connects with our affect in a meaningful way. The aspect of going meta, when we engage in reflecting about our actions, requires that we step back to view our doing as it happens (Stanford University, 2003). When we think about our own thinking, we activate acts of both reflection–"thinking about *what* we know"–and self-regulation–"managing *how* we go about our learning"; metacognition, therefore, refers to stepping back to see the doing, as one who is simply observing it (Stanford University, 2003, pp. 157-158).

Conclusion

Since I had undergone the experience of developing an eportfolio reflective project in my graduate studies, I was aware of some of its associated emotions (Zuba Prokopetz, 2018a/2018b). As such, I was able to understand the eportfolio development process of my students when I immersed myself in their online learning community – as an observer of learning and also as a participant in a community of language learners. I was able to comprehend some of their frustrations, vulnerabilities, intimidating moments, and ongoing turmoil with both technology (eportfolio project development) and pedagogy (reflective feedback interaction). I further noticed the importance of ongoing communication in the Discussion Forum – a safe venue where members of the eportfolio community gathered and sought both affirmation and reassurance. This meaningful online engagement positions the eportfolio reflective project as a significant part of Internet culture, where technology, pedagogy, reflection and feedback interaction work in tandem. As a powerful pedagogy, eportfolios enable the overlap of cognition and affect and foster critical reflection (Zuba Prokopetz et al., 2019c). My observations of five groups of approximately 10-20 students were grounded on theoretical concepts of the affective domain and a more ecological aspect of constructivism. During the initial stages of the development of eportfolio projects, students embodied how these projects are helping transform the current structure and practice of higher education to make room for reflection—a higher-order thinking and metacognition characteristic of successful pedagogies, as purported by Husbands and Pearce (2012). Toward the completion of their projects, students were able to articulate *what* the core competencies were, *how* they attained them, and *why* they were important in their program of studies. These reflective projects, grounded on academic rigour and underpinned by theoretical principles, espouse self-awareness and deeper learning. They foster student agency and empower students to articulate their experiences as they reflect on the learning to date. These experiences of ESL students developing their eportfolios may help inform the field of online pedagogy and also contribute toward a better understanding of eportfolios as reflective projects in online learning communities. Proponents of eportfolio may consider engaging in studies that rely on the analyses of learners' eportfolio reflective passages in conjunction with observational methods in order to report on the mastery of complex competencies (Scully et

al., 2018). In consequence, there will be implications for scholarship and research on eportfolios as a reflective pedagogy in blended and online learning spaces.

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BIO

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