The Digital European Language Portfolio

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ABSTRACT

The digital European Language Portfolio (ELP) is part of a Minerva project funded by the EU with main goal to adapt the ELP in an electronic format. Recent EU policies promote the language teaching and learning as a key element for European integration and mobility. EU underlines the necessity of a sort of language passport, called European Language Portfolio- ELP, which would be a personal document of the European citizen illustrating a detailed picture of all his/her language experiences and certifications. So far some ELPs has been validated and edited in a hardcopy format. These hardcopy editions present several limitations such as maintenance and long term updating. This paper will discuss the rationale behind the development of the digital version of the ELP, its technological and pedagogical aspects, and its advantages over print-based counterparts. Prototype examples of the digital ELP will be presented and discussed.

KEYWORDS: *European Language Portfolio, electronic portfolios, reflection, e-learning*

INTRODUCTION

With the extended use of computer networks and distributed multimedia systems for communication, education, and training, learning is taking new forms. The development of Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) tools has made a tremendous impact on the evolution of the field of education. Educators, students, scientists, scholars, researchers and practitioners can participate in online communities, work on collaborative projects, exchange

ideas, share information, and engage in constructive dialog. Emerging technologies and their affordances require that educators rethink their fundamental assumptions about teaching and learning (Vrasidas & Glass, 2002). Affordances of technology played a major role in reshaping teaching and assessment and have revolutionized the use of portfolios as a pedagogical, reflective, and assessment tool (Mason, 2002; Vrasidas & Glass, 2004).

In light of these developments brought about by rapid technology growth and use in education, this project was developed in attempt to examine the use of a digital European Language Portfolio (ELP). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages underlines the need for the European citizen to have a personal document describing all his/her linguistic experiences and certifications. It is similar to a language passport, called European Language Portfolio - ELP (see http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio). Many European Institutions have already accepted the suggestions given by the Framework, including the ELP. The EU encourages individual institutions to adapt the European ELP to their specific needs and to submit their new ELP to a validation procedure to verify its conformity to the requested format (see Guide for developers http://culture2.coe.int/). So far several ELPs have already been validated and published in hardcopy format. Nevertheless these existing hardcopy editions present several limitations (e.g. difficulties in life-long updating and maintenance). One of the main objectives of this project is to overcome such barriers and take advantage of the affordances of technology in serving the needs of language teachers and students alike. Furthermore, a digital ELP would bring at the same time advantages in terms of Open and Distance Learning – ODL, such as tracing the students' language learning process over the years.

The traditional paper-based ELP consists of 3 main parts: Language passport (presents at a glance the learners' language proficiencies), Language biography (presents documents and information regarding the learner's language learning history), and the Dossier (documents and samples of learner's work illustrating language proficiency). The ELP is a crucial tool for European mobility. A widespread use of ELP would give credibility to EU language policies and suggestions (see Resolution on the European Language Portfolio, 20th Session of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education of the Council of Europe; http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural_Co-operation/education/Languages/Language_Policy/). The specific objectives for this project are:

- to create an economic, multimedia, fit-for-harness and easy-deliverable digital ELP;
- to produce an ELP specific for university language students in view of their entrance into the EU job world;
- to make the ELP available in Italian, Greek, Spanish and Swedish;
- to give Institutions a tool to monitor the students' language learning process;
- to promote a pedagogically correct use of the ELP.

The partners involved in this project are the University of Milan (coordinator), Intercollege, University of Salamanca, GAP multimedia, University of Göteborg, University of Skövde, and Europa Universität Viadrina Frankfurt. The target users of the digital ELP are students, partner universities and other European organizations outside the partnership. The target users will implement the digital ELP in their daily work as follows:

- After a training period in the use of the ELP, university students will have access to, use and update regularly their digital ELP from their university web site. When they end their university studies, they will be able to go on using and updating their digital ELP on their own computers virtually for their whole life.
- Partner universities will be the first institutions to offer a digital ELP to their students as a free service. Their web sites (or single department servers) will host permanently

the digital ELP as well as the ELP users' database. From the pedagogical point of view both language teachers and students will need to be trained to use the ELP. Universities involved will carry out a research study on how the students use the digital ELP to foster investigation into language learning and to gather information on the pedagogical effectiveness of their language courses.

- After an experimental period, other European organizations outside the partnership could obtain and introduce the digital ELP in their curricula.

DIGITAL PORTFOLIOS AND REFLECTION

As a pedagogical and assessment tool, portfolios are been used in a variety of ways in education and training. Portfolios interweave several aspects of the education process including, the curriculum, instruction, development of material, evaluation, and assessment of student learning. They have been used extensively in math, literacy, science, language, and art. Activities can be integrated with the use of portfolios in order to encourage students to review their own work, reflect on their learning, analyze their learning strategies, strengths, and weaknesses, and assess their participation within a class context (Calfee & Perfumo, 1993; Glazer & Brown, 1993).

With the growing use of the Internet in education, electronic portfolios have been used extensively by educators. Portfolios, in simple terms, are the collection of selected pieces of work by students. In the context of the ELP, the portfolio includes students work, documentation, and certifications, as they illustrate the student's language proficiencies. One of the main focuses of a portfolio, is the students' reflections on their own work and they serve as a record of student learning and growth. When designed and used appropriately following sound pedagogical and design principles, portfolios can serve as a comprehensive document that can be shared with teachers, parents, the community, and future employers, and which demonstrates the learner's learning history and accomplishments. A digital portfolio can include video, sounds, text, and images.

An important aspect of portfolios is reflection. Reflection has been identified as a fundamental process that facilitates meaningful learning (Dewey, 1910; Schön, 1983; 1987). Dewey (1910) in his seminal work *How We Think* defined reflection as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p.6). Dewey also promoted reflective thinking as an educational aim and supported that it contributes to the intellectual and moral development of the person because it results in changes in one's perspectives. Schön (1987) distinguishes two facets of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action with the former being the essence of expertise and, therefore, the desirable goal of professional education. Practitioners can reflect on their practices (on their "knowing-in-action") by thinking back on a situation they have experienced and exploring the factors that led them to a certain handling of that situation with the intention to be better prepared for similar instances in the future.

The concept of reflection can be transferred to the context of language learners. The works of Dewey and Schön apply very well in the context of language learning, since when learners reflect on their language learning and proficiencies they engage in those processes essential for deep meaningful learning. Here, portfolios can play an important role. By constructing, rearranging, and evaluating their own digital language portfolio, helps them reflect on what they know and have achieved thus far, identify strengths and weaknesses and establish clear goals for improving their language expertise.

PEDAGOGICAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Schneider and Lenz (2003) the authors of the official ELP guide for developers acknowledged the importance of having a digital ELP. However, despite the importance of ELP and the advantages of electronic portfolios, there are no digital ELPs available yet. In addition to the reflective component of a portfolio discussed ealrier, some of the additional advantages associated with a digital ELP are:

- A digital ELP is easy to update: during their language learning process, students can update and expand their ELP with no need to buy new hardcopies or to add extra photocopied pages. If a paper copy is needed, it is easy to print either the whole digital version of the ELP or part of it.
- All the information of the digital ELP can be stored in a database, which can be used by the Institutions for longitudinal studies on the language learning process. On the other hand, the students themselves can have access to their ELP in progress to see the evolution of their language learning process in a graphical user-friendly form (e.g. historical function).
- Once implemented, the ELP is freely accessible online by the students.
- A digital ELP can be customized in accordance with the user's language level thanks to the hypermedia nature of the project and selective access to the evaluation grids.
- Considering that the ELP in its textual part is a plurilingual document (e.g. all the instructions must be in three languages at least), the digital structure would permit the coexistence of many languages avoiding graphical overload (e.g. with a change-language function).
- A digital version makes it possible to have a multimedia ELP: in the Dossier the student could collect not only paper documents, but also audio and video samples of his work.
- A further innovation is that a digital ELP is easy to send by e-mail and it is quicker to fill up than with a pen and paper procedure (Barrett, 1994).

The pedagogical approaches being employed concern some key points of foreign language learning and teaching. First, a digital ELP is an easier format to get and update than a hardcopy ELP. It implies that students will freely download the ELP and will allow them to update it more frequently and with no fear of making errors, since they can easily correct them. We believe that easiness of access and transfer is crucial to make ELP a usable tool for students, teachers, and administrators. On the other hand, we are aware that the digital massive distribution could bring to a superficial use of it. Therefore it is our plans, once developed, to provide teachers' and students' training for effective use of the digital ELP.

From a research and assessment perspective, the database underlying the digital ELP is an important instrument to get longitudinal information on the language learning process. This may bring considerable pedagogical innovations to evaluation. A digital ELP allows to experiment with new forms of assessment based on a dynamic - not static - concept of language learning. This concept of Alternative Evaluation would include evaluation of the process of learning (to integrate evaluation of product, e.g. tests) and students' self-evaluation.

An important aspect of the digital ELP is that it relates very well with a formative evaluation approach. We use the term formative evaluation as it was introduced by Scriven, who described formative evaluation as the process during which data are collected with the purpose of improving teaching and learning, as they are being "formed" (formative evaluation). Therefore, the goal of evaluation is not to determine the final outcome, but to improve the process, in this case teaching and learning. The portfolio can be used as a tool to help learners improve their language skills as they are being developed and shaped. At the same time, it can help language

teachers identify the areas that the student has weaknesses and define strategies to help the student overcome the weaknesses. So, not only the learners get to improve their skills, but teachers can improve their teaching and student support. Additional implications include: institutions can better monitor the students' learning process in order to improve it; teachers can easily have access to students' progress within the ELPs; students would be constantly stimulated to think about their learning (made visible by the digital ELP which fosters their learning autonomy and reflective thought).

The adoption of the digital ELP on a regular basis implies some new aspects in the organization of the university educational process. Every student would be required to complete his/her own digital ELP and to update it frequently in order to improve it. Furthermore, institutions would take advantage of the ELP data base to evaluate the effectiveness of their language courses. We trust this will stimulate an improvement in the quality of language teaching.

DESIGN
During the presentation, prototypes of the digital ELP will be presented. Some of the technical aspects of the digital ELP include the following:

- The global structure of the digital portfolio is a group of file of different type (multimedia, text file, etc.) grouped in a folder and indexed in a file manifest (see the last IMS specifications on e-learning contents standards). The manifest will declare the metadata and descriptors of the portfolio and of its owner, and will describe and relate the folder's resources.
- We will use stand-alone software for the authoring of the portfolio because the final output is for the students' personal use. This will allow easy portfolio creation and updating and will satisfy the need of operative system interoperability as well as the necessity of user-friendliness and simplicity of the interface (usability).
- The software for the management and the keeping of the ELPs is a web-based system on an open-source platform. This choice is due to the widespread diffusions of systems compatible with such a platform. It will have these functions: users' authentication, portfolio compilation, portfolio updating, portfolio transfer and some statistic functions of the data base.

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