A QUICK COSTLY FLIGHT OR A SLOW ECONOMIC TRAIN?
STUDENT CHOICES CONCERNING THEIR OWN LEARNING STRATEGIES. REFLECTIONS ON A PILOT EPORTFOLIO PROJECT IN A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN HONG KONG

Cheng Mei-seung
PolyU Hong Kong Community College
cchcheng@hkcc-polyu.edu.hk

Abstract
This article describes the author’s reflections after hosting a government-funded ePortfolio Project (The Project) in a Hong Kong Higher Education Institution (HEI). The paper first describes the author's experience as a university student, and gives a general impression of self-learning as a tradition in Chinese society. Next, the learning affordances of ePortfolios are examined, and the details of the project implementation are described. Based on data collected from different sources, the author evaluates the findings and shares her views on the reasons which explain why online peer feedback did not gain great popularity in our case. Improvements as well as direction for future research are suggested. Finally, the last section deals with the limitations and conclusion of this study.

Keywords: eportfolios; self-learning; reflective learning; Higher Education Institutions’ e-learning;

Introduction
Recalling my overall experience from the time when I was a university student, learning was a lonely challenge. I can still remember my first assignment: I was asked to write a 5,000-word report on the historical development of a specific Chinese character. Awkwardly, at that time all I knew how to do was to stay in the library for days to find the answer.

Some scholars (Pang and Penfold, 2008; Jin and Cortazzi, 2006; Yang, Zheng and Li, 2006) tried to expound on the typical learning climate described above by viewing self-learning in Chinese culture as a tradition of Chinese society. These authors explained that for each individual student, the whole process in the transmission of knowledge in the above context only involved the individual and the teacher. In this knowledge transmission process, no participation from peers is needed and this phenomenon may explain why self-learning is a popular
learning strategy amongst Chinese students. Jin and Cortazzi (2006, p.11) painted a picture of how Chinese students learn in the following passage: “......when near a bench, a patch of grass or flower bed, learners stand upright or sit very straight, alone or spaced about a metre from others similarly engaged, and repeat aloud sentences and texts (in English or in Chinese, often in loud voices), while holding a book straight in front at chest level.” Thus, each student is learning in his or her own isolated world.

Nonetheless, this phenomenon might be changing due to the shift of learning paradigms in Hong Kong from instructor-centred classrooms to user-centred learning communities. While traditionally self-learning heavily depended on the teacher to provide students with knowledge, this practice is gradually changing or even being replaced by a virtual environment where learners have “access to a curriculum made up of online and classroom components” (Leung and Chan, 2003). In other words, in the new paradigm, discussion opportunities amongst students are being created in HEIs.

In view of this transition, in September 2011, our College spearheaded an ePortfolio project and planned to carry out two pilot studies to incorporate ePortfolios into teaching and learning. This article is the review of the first one and it aims to share the experience of the implementation of ePortfolios in our College. It is hoped that by drawing lessons from this paper, readers could understand the factors that may hinder the development of ePortfolios in Hong Kong, as well as receive direction for future research in ePortfolio development and implementation.

**Learning Affordances and Project Implementation**

There are two major learning affordances concerning ePortfolios. Firstly, an ePortfolio could be used as a showcase of a student’s or potential employee’s achievements. The ePortfolio system consists of a digital repository of artifacts that were constructed and maintained by an individual (Batson, 2002; Lorenzo and Ittelson, 2005). The ePortfolio owners can show these organized artifacts to selected audiences.

Secondly, the System also provides excellent tools to prompt engagement and reflection between peers (Park and Lim, 2007; Okoro, Washington, Cardon, 2011). According to Vygotsky, learning first occurs when individuals interact with others at a social level, and then internalise and consolidate that information. In this
sense, ePortfolios provide an online environment for students to exchange their ideas with each other. It is hoped that their problem solving skill levels would be more evolved through the process of exchanging peer feedback.

A platform for ePortfolios has recently been developed. In January 2011-2012, an ePortfolio system named Mahara was conceived. Mahara is a user-centred system and provides a social networking facility whereby users can create and maintain a list of friends within the system (https://mahara.org/features).

Concerning the Project, a total of 168 students registered for the courses of “Introduction to Sociology Culture” (Group A, 149 students), and “Digital Video Production” (Group B, 19 students) in the autumn semester of the 2011-2012 academic year. These students became the participants of this study. They were expected to give online feedback to their classmates’ assignments after having submitted their own work in the context of the ePortfolio System.

At the end of the semester, five students from each group were randomly selected for telephone interviews. Each interview lasted for about 15 minutes and the questions posed in the interview included:
(1) How would you describe your online experience in this course?
(2) Which learning method do you prefer? Self-learning or online peer feedback? Why?

Results and Discussions
In our Interviews, students were generally positive towards the online peer feedback activities. All students said they knew they benefited in their learning through online peer feedback. Nonetheless, a majority of students chose self-learning as their preferred learning-method. In Group A, 3 out of 5 students chose self-learning while in Group B the ratio was 4 out of 5. In other words, 7 out of 10 interviewees (70%) choose self-learning as their preferred learning method.

What made self-learning their preferred choice while knowing the benefits brought about by online feedback? There are four major factors which could explain this:

(1) A mismatch between the time students submitted their assignments and the time they gave feedback in online discussions
The key to the success of online discussions is the strict control of the time allotted for several important “steps” from the draft copy to the final submission of the assignment: time needs to be allotted to permit students to give feedback to each other after their first draft is submitted online. Subsequently, more time is needed so they can digest the feedback they receive from their peers, connect their psyche to the new experience, amend their assignment after assessing peer feedback, and then submit their final production.

Obviously, such stringent time management would not be an easy task and comparatively, self-learning is a lot easier. Noteworthy is the fact that for many students in this situation, when doing an assignment, self-learning could be defined as “rushing at the last minute to complete the assignment on time with little thought of self-improvement.” In the case of the study at hand, all Group A students commented that the time was too tight for them to revise their work after receiving peer feedback and submitting their final copy to the teacher. “Many of us have just started to read and write comments when we received the email reminder from the teacher. Only at that time did I read some of the feedback and found that there were lots of areas for improvement on my work. However, I had no chance to modify it because the work had already been submitted.”

One student in the same group offered a similar view, “…I felt that my views could have been further polished and more appropriately extended after reading my classmate’s feedback. The online peer feedback activity was particularly suitable for Sociology courses. However, by the time I had read the feedback given to me and written feedback to others, it was already long past the time I had submitted my assignments. Thus, even though the feedback inspired me, it was of no use since there was no way to advance my work…..”

So, the question was asked by the interviewer if it would be possible to adjust the “time for feedback” to match the “time for submitting assignments”? Their answers were negative. They shared that they were cramming for three assignments within two weeks at that time. Given the tight schedule in the so-called “peak season” for submitting assignments, they stated that they would

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1 Note that students’ comments were originally in Chinese and the translation is by the author.
not invest a lot of time to study peer feedback with the aim to refine one of the assignments without starting the second and the third one.

(2) Time after time—adapting to a new learning environment

It also took time for teachers and students to adapt not only to a new computerized system, but also to the new curriculum which the ePortfolio Platform incorporated. All the stakeholders in our study were new to Mahara and inevitably they needed to spend time to study how to use this system before they introduced it to their students. However, even though the author arranged a one-hour training workshop for each group, all students in our interviews said they thought it was an “uneconomical” use of time to use this platform only once in the course of their studies after investing so much time to learn to use the system.

A student in Group A said he could do more research on the Internet or read a book by himself in order to consolidate his knowledge. To him, it was a lot more efficient than online discussions. He said, “at least I would save the time needed for studying the major functions of this platform and the time to wait for my classmates’ feedback.” Two students from Group B also remarked that only the teacher was in the most appropriate position to evaluate their work when completed, and they didn’t know if their classmates’ comments were right or wrong. In brief, interviewees said it would be too costly to participate in an online discussion in terms of the time they needed to spend online and in terms of the feeling of being artificially “rewarded” by online discussions that praised their work but gave little or even no worthy feedback on how to improve an assignment.

Seven out of ten students in our interviews indicated that they could make good use of their digital hardware, such as smartphones, and iPads. One student from Group B shared, “I could ask my friend through my mobile Apps if I had a question about my studies.” “There would be no need for me to sit in front of a computer and read feedback which were, for the most part, not formative,” he added.

These devices no longer confine their out-of-class studies to a fixed location when they want to exchange ideas with others. Given such freedom, they felt there was no point for them to stay in front of a computer to read the feedback
from others if they could easily share their questions and comments by using their mobiles with their friends in any place, or at any time. One student described self-learning and online discussion in this way: "Going to a destination by taking a flight (online discussions) is fast, but I prefer to take a train (self-learning) in order to avoid a delayed flight. This is not to mention that a train is comparatively more flexible and much cheaper." To many students, therefore, it seems that self-learning was more practical in the long run.

(3) A Lack of a sense of belonging to the Online Community

Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the “Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)” ascertains that problem solving skill levels evolve more if young learners worked with adults or with capable peers. Vygotshy (1978) further explains that learners do not learn in isolation from others, but from the results of social interaction with peers which can motivate and stimulate their thinking. Thus, the success of an ePortfolio project that supports learning from peer feedback largely depends on whether a social group is successfully constructed and whether the learners feel that they have a sense of belonging to that group.

From what the author learnt from the Interviews, it seemed that most of the students saw the idea of giving feedback as a task to satisfy the course requirements rather than as being part of an online community. As evidence for this assumption, Figure 1 below shows the percentage usage for the ePortfolio on the main server. The name of the server is “HKCCSHARE”. The chart shows that the percentage of usage of the CPU of HKCCSHARE was particularly active in late March and mid-May 2012. The author found that these two peak times were the assignment submission periods for Groups A and B, respectively. Apparently, most of the participating students only logged onto the website when the assignment submission deadline was approaching. This is consistent with the author’s assumption, that an online community was not successfully developed in this Project, which might explain why a significant group of students choose self-learning as their preferred learning method even though they knew the benefits online peer feedback could bring to them.
The way in which assignments were submitted also affected students’ understanding of online reflective learning. From the interviews, it was learnt that teachers in both groups had asked their students to submit their assignments twice—print them out then post their work online and, finally, give feedback online.

The reasoning behind these instructions were understandable. Teachers in both groups shared that it would have been too demanding to mark the soft copies assignments online from the Platform during the semester since everyone was working under a tight teaching schedule. Thus, assignments could be marked more easily if they were submitted in a paper-based format. To find a balance between the aims of facilitating students’ interaction and easier marking, teachers in both groups asked students to submit their work both online and in paper formats. Such instructions, however, did not favour the development of a sense of belonging to the online community. In addition, it neglected the potential benefits that giving or reading peer feedback could lend to learners. These learners who gave of their time to the Project did not therefore have the added benefit of having the possibility of refining their work after receiving peer feedback.

(4) The course’s structure Mahara’s Interface did not favour the exchange of ideas.
More than one interviewee said the design of the interface of Mahara was “ugly” and its organization, chaotic. The author believes that students’ impressions about the ePortfolio system might be due to the fact that Mahara is a user-centred system which may not give a sense of structure to learners if they are expected to complete a task on a specific topic. Furthermore, the user-centred interface requires users to manage their own artifacts well before they are shared with others. This process takes time for students to develop such management skills when using Mahara. For example, they needed to set “tags” for their work and specify keywords in their title so that their classmates could search for their peers’ work online. It takes time for this “new culture of learning” to be established, not to mention that both teachers and students need time to “digest” the technical functions of the new system. Given the tight teaching and learning schedules, the author believes that it might be difficult to promote Learning ePortfolios in classrooms in one or two years.

In brief, as previously inferred, in general most Chinese students adopt a self-learning method in their study habits. In our case, it seems that self-learning is still the prevailing learning method they prefer to embrace. Furthermore, it appears that, due to time constraints, teachers understandably prefer to promote self-learning rather than giving time for online student interaction and feedback.

Some suggestions for Future Directions of the Project

From our interviews, it seems that students have a clear sequence of learning or sequence of production in mind when doing their assignments. To many of them, learning starts with the teacher and comes firsthand from the teacher who has the responsibility to organize new concepts and to bring them to the students. Only afterwards, according to students’ perception, can self-learning begin. All interviewees said every student should revise their books, lecture notes or other references after attending lectures with their teacher in order to develop their own thoughts. Online peer feedback, they affirmed, is one of the sources that could help to stimulate or consolidate their ideas. A student described her learning experience in this way, “Student discussion is the second step and the first step is self-learning. I need to read the lecture notes, understand the concepts, and develop my own thoughts before I go to discuss them with my friends in order to
refine my learning.”

Based on the findings, we need to think out of the box. The following suggestions could be a future direction for the Project.

(1) Developing informal learning channels

Developing informal learning channels in the context of Mahara might be another alternative to enhance students’ reflective learning. Informal learning often refers to a learning undertaking “on our own without externally imposed criteria or the presence of an institutionally authorised instructor” (Livingstone 2000, p.493). If the control of learning lay in the hands of the learners, and if learning was neither classroom-based nor highly-structured, it would imply that students would be able to enjoy learning at their own pace in a more flexible manner. In addition, they would not need to familiarize themselves with the system in a short period of time.

Moreover, from the author’s observation, it seems that many students are equipped with a variety of digital devices, and these devices could be excellent tools to support informal learning after class (Cranmer 2006, Facer et al 2003). Could we develop educational channels or apps in the context of Mahara that could be accessed on these devices? This idea began to grow in the author’s mind after listening to students’ evaluation of the Project during the telephone interviews. Subsequently, in mid-August 2012, the author invited several students to set up an informal learning platform called “CCPOD” (see Figure 2). “CC” refers to the name of the College while “pod” means podcasting. Students would be able to download the podcast, in which some educational topics would be discussed, by using their mobile phones and they could also refer to links to Mahara if they wanted to learn more about the topics.

At the time of writing this paper, CCPOD is still in its preparation stage. The whole idea is to make use of podcasting combined with Mahara to provide a new learning experience for students that could stimulate their interest in learning by using the tools they love the most.
(2) Developing instructions or directions for reflective learning assignments

EPortfolios have good mechanisms to allow users to document their work, set up their own database, and link their goals and artifacts with their own reflections. According to Barrett (2004), an ePortfolio is an excellent reflective tool that demonstrates the user’s growth over time.

Yet, before reflective Learning ePortfolios could be fully developed at the College, it might be important for teaching staff members to develop a set of instructions that describe what is expected in a reflective writing assignment, and subsequently give an achievable timeline that students could follow. Consequently, expectations could be more clearly share with student participants. At the same time, as teachers, we may all need a deeper understanding of the philosophy behind student-centred learning and the benefits of peer feedback. As teachers, we may still be caught in the teacher-learning paradigm from our own learning culture we experience when we attended learning institutions. In addition, does the administration of learning institutions need to reconsider the time demands on teachers and rethink the student-teacher ratio?

Concerning student reflection, many courses in our College currently require students to submit a reflective writing as part of their course requirements. However, practices differ from teacher to teacher. One teacher said that every week she would distribute a note to students and ask them to write on what they had achieved in that week. Marks would be given at the end of the semester.
according to the post-it which would be collected back weekly from students. Another teacher shared that reflections should consist of a report that describes what students had done in the course. A colleague from a different stream told me that his students could freely share their feelings in writing in the course and he would judge their work case by case. If the requirements of reflective writing are so different in each course, can students develop their own reflective habits without depending on the teacher’s intervention? This postulate is doubtful.

The author searched on the Internet and found that different scholars have different definitions concerning what true “reflection” really is. However, true “reflection” means no more than the learner’s ability to analytically handle new knowledge. According to Balaban, I. and Bubas, G. (2010), reflection is how learners thinking critically about new things that are being learned. To Stefani and his colleagues (2007), reflection refers to the ability of a learner to relate a new learning experience to the existing knowledge the same learner already possesses. Could there be a mutually agreed definition of and process for student reflection for all courses on a campus? If a mutually agreed definition is difficult to achieve, instructions common to all courses, could be helpful to lead or train students on how to reflect in a purposeful way.

Limitations

There were several limitations in the present analysis of this pilot study. There were only ten students invited for the interviews and they were randomly selected from the pool. Due to the small sampling, the results from these interviews may not pertain to all the students who participated in the Project.

Moreover, the subjective reflective nature of this article is another limitation. The author as a researcher of this study, did not participate in the learning activities in the groups. All of her understanding comes from the teachers’ comments as well as the feedback from the students who were interviewed. In the future, it might be good for the researcher to be involved in the classes in order to observe how things actually happen in this context.

Thirdly, the experience of the stakeholders involved in this study might be a concern, as well. The author, the teachers, and the students in this study used Mahara for the first time and no one was familiar with such group-based learning systems. Since everyone was new to ePortfolios, the results of this study could be
adversely affected.

In addition, in this article, only students’ views were recorded. The research would be more comprehensive if we could include a formal sampling of the teachers’ views on ePortfolios, as well. Unfortunately, at the time of this writing, the author was heavily preoccupied with her teaching tasks. The manpower supporting the Project could only allocate time to record students’ views at that stage.

Nevertheless, as Wu (2002, p.387) appropriately wrote, people could sometimes learn more from “a casually dropped remark than from reading all the textbooks of philosophy.” This article is written in this spirit by using data collected in an informal way so as to provoke further discussion. Moreover, it is evident that Mahara is becoming more popular internationally in recent years. Yet, it is still a new topic with regard to enhancing student learning in Hong Kong. The efforts spent on the Project could be important for future research.

Conclusions

This article conveys the author’s reflections on the implementation of the ePortfolio Project and is based on telephone interviews conducted with partnering teachers and student participants. Her experience in self-learning and discussion during her own university education was also shared as an introduction to her analysis.

The shift of education paradigms in recent years has favoured a climate of online peer feedback in Hong Kong HEIs, which has in turn initiated a call for a new pedagogy in the tertiary sector. The College at which the author works therefore spearheaded a pilot ePortfolio project with the aim to enhance student reflective learning. The latter part of the article described the informal data obtained by telephone interviews with the partnering teachers and selected students. Although data showed that students generally were positive towards online peer feedback, some of them showed a low interest in this activity. This could be due to a mismatch between the time students were allotted to complete their assignments and the time allotted to give feedback. In addition, the time students needed to adapt to the new system as well as the lack of a sense of belonging to the online community seemed to be key factors of demotivation, as well.
Furthermore, the author gave two suggestions for the future development of Learning ePortfolios. Firstly, learning institutions could develop informal learning channels in the context of the ePortfolio Platform by developing apps for digital devices that students love using such as mobile phones. It is believed that an informal learning experience could help to stimulate student interest in learning. Secondly, it would be important for learning institutions to think about developing clearer instructions for reflective learning assignments and perhaps develop common directions for all. At present, different teachers have different practices and this may adversely affect students in the development their own reflective habits.

Lastly, the limitations of this project were shared. This included the following restrictions: the sample size of the telephone interviews was too small to be statistically valid, and all stakeholders may have been disadvantaged since they were new to ePortfolios. However, the aim of this article was to share the author’s global reflective account concerning this project. Consequently, it is hoped that by sharing this experience, discussions over ePortfolios could be further provoked.

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**References:**


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