



Learning Paths

Implementing language and cross-curricular portfolio projects: some pedagogical implications

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Introduction

What do people think when they hear the word "portfolio"? Well, ask a businessman and he'll tell you about his investment portfolio; ask a politician and she'll worry about being a minister without a portfolio; ask an artist and he'll show you a collection of his best drawings; ask an EFL teacher and ...

Most EFL teachers in Italy have been introduced to the idea of a portfolio through the recent Council of Europe European Language Portfolio project. This document is organized into three basic parts: a *Language Passport*, which shows at a glance the level reached in different languages; a *Language Biography*, which contains a summary of one's personal language learning history, self-assessment checklists and plans for future learning; and a *Dossier*, a collection of documents selected as evidence of personal competences. This evidence can be anything, from examples of written work to audio or video cassettes, projects on CD-Roms and so on.

Portfolios have been used quite extensively in the USA and elsewhere, basically with two main functions, which are also evident in the Council of Europe project:

- a *reporting* function: this refers to their *administrative* uses - what are sometimes called “showcase portfolios”: one of the many possible ways to implement alternative forms of assessment. This can coexist with more traditional forms of assessment or can even replace them;
- a *pedagogic* function: this refers to the *classroom* uses of portfolios. These “learning portfolios” are not necessarily linked with formal, institutional assessment – rather, they are a collection of items which document how each individual student goes through the process of achieving certain competences.

This paper is concerned with ways of developing a *learning portfolio* (that is, one that has mainly a *pedagogic* function), for *adolescent learners* (that is, students at “media” or “biennio” level), mainly for *internal* (that is, school) use, and focussing on *language* learning, but also open to *cross-curricular* developments. Because cross-curricular portfolios have a very wide pedagogic value, there is ample scope for using them across the watertight compartments of the curriculum.

This paper consists of three main parts. First, I will describe a possible structure of a language or cross-curricular learning portfolio; then, I will discuss the pedagogical implications behind this structure; and finally, I will briefly talk about a set of practical guidelines for developing a portfolio project.

An example of a possible portfolio structure

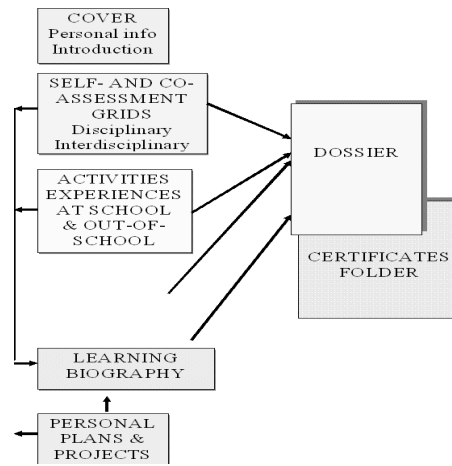


Fig. 1 - Example of a portfolio structure

As can be seen in Fig. 1, a portfolio could open with a *front cover*, which would include personal identification and some other details chosen by the student as personally meaningful and valuable. We could then have a series of *self-assessment grids* for each subject, and within this, for a number of crucial points in time: for example, at the beginning and at the end of the school year and/or at the end of each module or period of instruction. Notice that any documents or certificates relevant to this section would go either into the *dossier* or into the *certificates folder* at the back of the portfolio.

Next we would need a space for students to record their *activities* and *experiences*, both at school and out of school: here they would describe any activity which has in some way contributed to their learning progress – it could be films they have seen, books they have read, trips they have taken, websites they have visited. Notice that any documents or certificates relevant to these sections should go into the *dossier*: for example, report cards on films and books, projects they have carried out, letters they have written ...

After that, we would also need a space for students to make a note of their own *plans* and *projects*: for instance, their thoughts about their language learning priorities at the beginning of the year, or short-term plans to improve a particular aspect of their competence, or longer-term plans to learn or to use the language beyond school. Finally, we would need a specific space for what I have called *Learning Biography*: by this I mean a space where students could record what they discover about the

languages and cultures they are studying, about the learning and teaching process, and about themselves as learners. Here they would gradually build up and update their *personal profile*. I will describe this part in more detail further on in this paper. It goes without saying that any document relevant to this section would find its way to the *dossier*: for example, questionnaires on learning styles and strategies, reports on tasks, observation cards, learning logs or diaries, and so forth.

Pedagogical implications

I will now focus on the pedagogic implications of this structure. It is my firm belief that a portfolio project involves much more than the collection and organisation of materials. In fact, it can be an example of promising innovation in learning and teaching, but for this to happen, we need to make the pedagogic assumptions behind such a project as clear as we possibly can. We will therefore consider the proposed portfolio structure once again, starting from the front cover.

A. Front cover

<i>Promote the student's sense of belonging, personal involvement and serious responsibility</i>
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This is no formal introduction; it is rather meant to stress that the portfolio is the student's property, something which the student should feel belongs to him or her. The question really is how to promote the student's involvement, both a sense of belonging and a sense of the portfolio as a serious enterprise, one which can offer rewards but also demands responsibility and active participation. We are aiming at students' *intrinsic* motivation – a kind of motivation which, unfortunately, is often stifled at school. I have already heard high school colleagues complaining that the first question that students ask is, *will I get a mark for my portfolio? Will you use it for my final grade?* I think that these are legitimate questions to ask, but in a way they highlight the fact that so many things at school are valued by students only if there is an *extrinsic* reward or an *extrinsic* punishment involved – getting a good or bad mark, passing or failing an exam, and so on. The portfolio works in a different direction - so it is a question of developing new beliefs and new attitudes about work done at school, in students as well as in teachers and parents.

This points to another crucial pedagogical implication:

Provide graded support and opportunities for use within day-by-day work

In view of what we have just said, I think the problem for teachers is, how to gradually introduce a portfolio into their own teaching practice and how to provide support to the students, especially in the early phases. One of the dangers here is to fall into the trap of thinking that working for a portfolio means doing extra things in addition to what is already being done. Such a project would be doomed to failure from the start if teachers and students were to do things for the sake of the portfolio. In fact, it is the other way round: we do things and then select those things that lend themselves well to being included in the portfolio.

B. Self-assessment grids

Describe competences which are understood and recognised by students

Here the problems are manifold, but I will just mention one or two. On one hand, we need to identify and describe the competences we are trying to make our students achieve, the expected outcomes. On the other hand, we need to make these descriptions user-friendly, that is, easily manageable by the students themselves. The Common European Framework, the European Language Portfolio, and our coursebooks help us a lot in this respect, because they provide us with many ready-made checklists, but the problem is how to make these competences recognizable by the students. This is a problem which is often underestimated.

Some descriptors are obviously easier to understand than others. For instance, the Framework descriptor for written interaction at A2 level reads: “Can write very simple personal letters expressing thanks and apologies” – I think that is clear enough. But let us consider another Framework descriptor for reading strategies at A2 level, like this one, which we would obviously translate into Italian:

“Can use an idea of the overall meaning of short texts and utterances on everyday topics of a concrete type to derive the probable meaning of unknown words from the context”

We are obviously talking about deducing the meaning of unknown words, but what can a twelve or thirteen-year-old make of a descriptor like this,

even in Italian? It is partly a question of complicated language, naturally, and we can reformulate it using simpler words. However, it is also a question of making the described behaviour *recognizable* by the student, that is, the student must be able to refer this general description to a task or a series of tasks which she or he has actually just done, or done in some recent past. In other words, the descriptor of a competence needs to describe a sort of “memorable performance” – maybe it would be enough to remind students of a specific task or exercise which they did not so long ago, with prompts such as: “Do you remember what you did on the task on page 67 last Friday? Look at it again. What did you learn to do then? Do you think you can still do it?”.

Set clear targets and value unexpected outcomes

The other problem related to describing and assessing competence has to do with the need to set clear but “open” targets. This simply means that, on the one hand, we have to identify competences, for example in the form of “can do” statements, that are clear and unambiguous. But on the other hand, we also have to recognize, respect and value *unexpected outcomes*, things which students might produce during a task but which do not fall neatly into prefabricated checklists of objectives. We know that input does not equal intake, that what we teach is not necessarily what students learn. Out of a reading task, students may learn to do other things in addition to, or even instead of, developing a reading competence. They may feel that through the reading task they have learnt new words that interest them, or some useful information they can use for their hobby, or a new way to work with classmates. I think we need to give students the opportunity to assess, not just what *we* would like them to have learnt, but also what *they* have *actually* learnt, whatever that might be.

C. Activities and experiences at school and out of school; plans and projects

Next we come to the sections of our portfolio where students record their learning experiences and their personal plans and projects. Here we are concerned with designing, implementing, documenting and assessing activities.

Design and carry out meaningful tasks

The challenge is how to implement *meaningful* experiences at school. Of course teachers are committed to designing activities, from the simplest

exercise to the most complex project, which produce new knowledge and new competence – but the problem is, it must be new knowledge and new competence which can be recognized by students as *personally meaningful*, that is, of direct relevance to them personally. Why would one want to record an experience which has meant very little to him or her? Here the implications for task design are clear. It is not just a matter of selecting interesting and motivating content, of making the task active and concrete, of providing context, purpose and a realistic focus for communication – it is also a question of designing tasks which are *problem-based* – by this I mean tasks which cannot be solved through the use of routine behaviour, but rather require the use of *strategic behaviour*.

One useful benchmark to judge the value of tasks in terms of a problem-based approach could be whether you can do them without thinking or whether you must stop and think, stop and look for a new way to solve what appears to be a problem – in other words, stop and find a *strategy* to deal with the unexpected. Notice that this can happen with the most demanding project work, but also with a reading passage which creates expectations and calls for higher cognitive skills such as inference and deduction. I am obviously not advocating new ways to make things more difficult for students! I am perfectly aware of the balance we should keep between task difficulty and students' ability. It is a bit like walking on a tight rope: if the task is too easy, no strategy will be called for and no new knowledge or ability will be produced – we will fall on one side. If the task is too difficult, even the best strategy cannot make up for abilities that one does not yet possess – we will fall on the other side. So the question is, find the right balance so that the task poses a problem which can be solved by using strategies. Then the activity can possibly become meaningful and worth talking about and recording in a portfolio.

<i>Value the student's global learning experience</i>

The other challenge which faces us in connection with documenting activities is how to recognize and value the full range of experiences that may be carried out by students out of school. We know that this is especially relevant today, when most learning seems to take place out of school, in informal settings, whether on the web or in a disco, during a trip abroad or while playing a computer game. It is a fact that a portfolio should be a record of a student's *global* learning experience, wherever and in whatever contexts it is carried out. The problem is, rather, how to describe and assess that experience, so that both students and teachers can get meaning out of it. It is just not enough to read books, watch films, surf the net or study abroad. Just as we are striving to identify and

describe formal competences to be acquired at school, so we should make an effort to describe – or rather, ask students to describe – what they have learnt through a particular experience out of school.

For instance, it makes little sense to record that you have spent three weeks in England. So what? For all I know, you might have spent three weeks sitting on the beach or in a pub with your Italian boyfriend or girlfriend. Tell me where you stayed, who you stayed with, what you did with them, what opportunities you had to listen to, speak, read and write English, what you feel you have learnt from these opportunities. Other, more difficult but maybe even more important questions I could ask you could be, how did you realise you have learnt new things or to do new things? And also, do you think you have become a better language learner through this experience? Why, or why not?

Reflect on experiences to give them meaning, by focussing on both product and process

In a word, doing things is fine – but it is no use doing things if you do not extract some meaning out of them. *Action* needs to be combined with *reflection*. One of the major functions of a portfolio is exactly this: providing space and time to give meaning to what we do, to focus on both product and process.

D. Learning biography

This is a special part of the portfolio – special because it is meant to focus both on product and, above all, on process. If competence has to do with the *what* of learning – what you know, what you can do - process has to do with the *how* and the *why* of learning: the strategies you use to carry out tasks, your learning preferences, such as cognitive styles and intelligences, your very personal aptitudes, and, going even deeper, your beliefs, attitudes and motivations. Why is process important, and so, why is it worth making it visible, recording it in a portfolio? Basically, I would say that process is important for three main reasons:

- in the first place, and although this may sound a bit banal, because *it is through process that competence is achieved*;
 - secondly, because *the ability to monitor and manage process is a competence in itself*: you may call it in different ways – metacompetence, ability to learn, cross-curricular thinking skills – but there remains the fact that today everybody, but especially young people, need to be equipped not just with specific knowledge and skills, but also with the *flexibility to learn all through their lives*;
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- and finally, a third reason why I think that process is important is, because by focussing on how and why you do things you discover your own *learning self*, your problem areas but also your potential strengths.

Fig. 2 provides a simple example of a *Learning Biography*.

<i>day ... date)</i>	<i>in the context of ...</i>	<i>I've found out that...</i>	<i>key- words</i>
1/2001	a grammar exercise at home	it's useful to revise class notes	REVISE CLASS NOTES
9/2002	a class discussion	a written list of points helps me	USE WRITING
10/2003	watching some Italian video clips	it's fun to spot English words	BE READY TO SPOT ENGLISH

Fig. 2 - Example of a "learning biography"

The core of it would be a sort of a diary, with just a few basic entries:

- there would be a date and a context, to remind me that I can discover something about myself as a learner any day, any time, in any context: for example, today ... (date) ... while doing a grammar exercise at home ... during a class discussion ... while watching some Italian video clips ...
- there would be a synthesis of my discovery: I have found out that ... for example, ... that it is useful to revise my class notes ... that it is easier for me to make a written list of points ... that it is fun to spot English words in Italian programs ...
- there would be a further synthesis of my discovery in the form of essential *key words*: for example, "revise class notes" ... "use writing" ... "be ready to spot English" ...

These key words could then easily be transferred to the other basic tool of a Learning Biography, which is "My personal profile" (Fig. 3).

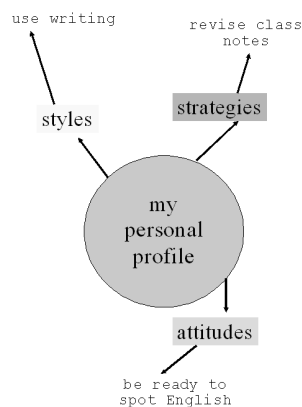


Fig. 3 - "My personal profile"

This is an extremely simple mind map, or spidergram, where I can arrange and rearrange my key words in any way, delete, add and change them as I think it fit, to capture my global self and how it evolves and changes over time.

E. Dossier

Physically, the *Dossier* could be a big envelope, a box, a folder, something big and strong enough to contain the *hard* evidence, the documents which are witness to what students have done and learnt and talked and thought about in the various sections of their portfolio. The pedagogical implication behind the Dossier is clear enough:

Select evidence to make learning visible, according to shared criteria

An attempt is being made to select evidence to make learning visible – according to some clear criteria which should be shared with students. Again, I think we need some simple tool to describe the documents students are enclosing (Fig. 4).

No.	Title / description	Kind of work	Reasons for inclusion	Date
1	CD review for school's web page	group typical free	my friends liked it - linked to my great interest - music	3/2/01
2	questionnaire on study habits	individual	I've realized I need to manage my time better	9/9/02

Fig. 4 - The Dossier introductory card

This particular card was inspired by the Swiss version of the European Portfolio. For each document which I decide to enclose in my dossier, I jot down a number, a title or description (for instance, “A CD review for the school’s web page”), the type of work done (for instance, whether it is an individual or a group work, whether it is the result of a free, spontaneous production or the final version of a work which I have corrected and redrafted one or more times, and so on), the reason why I include the document (for instance, “because my classmates liked it and it’s linked to one of my great interests – music”), and the date. Notice that the *reason* is particularly important, because I have to justify the rationale for my choice and, by doing so, I become better aware of my own abilities and how they are changing over time. This is why the items included in the dossier do not need to show mastery, but only that *progress has been made towards a goal*.

A checklist of guidelines

In the final part of this paper I will briefly describe a checklist of guidelines to develop a portfolio project. It is probably useful to see these guidelines as a set of basic *wh-questions*.

First of all, WHY? Why would we want to set up a portfolio project? There may be several different reasons, but it is essential that we should make them very clear to everybody concerned. In my examples I have focused mainly on the *pedagogic* value of portfolios, and no doubt this would be at the forefront – but we may address other specific needs, for

example, the need to use the information gained through portfolios to assist students, parents and teachers in choosing a school or a job (“orientamento”), or the need to document experiences to be evaluated as part of the school’s final assessment (“crediti formativi”).

Then we would want to clarify WHO would be involved in the project, and WHAT it would focus on. Here a decision would have to be made both on the subjects or subject areas involved and on the kinds of materials to be included in the *Dossier*. I have already mentioned that practically anything could be included, provided it is clear, hard evidence of a learning experience. A *Certificates Folder* can be the ideal companion to the *Dossier*, and these certificates would come from sources other than the student: teachers and organizations, of course, but also, and depending on the age of the students and on the purpose of the portfolio, peers, parents and other adults.

Next we would want to consider the HOW. This involves choosing an appropriate physical format for the portfolio (for instance, a folder? A box? A CD-Rom?) and its overall structure, which we have already discussed in some detail. However, one of the most difficult issues to be faced here is, which sections of the portfolio can the student be supposed to manage on his or her own. Which sections would probably require some kind of support from teachers, especially in the early stages of development? And if we decide to provide support, that is, to assist students in the management of their portfolios, which sections of the portfolio would most need support? Who (that is, which teachers) would offer this support, and in what circumstances? Here we are probably facing one of the most practical, but also of the trickiest, issues.

The final questions in the checklist have to do with the WHERE and the WHEN. Where should portfolios be kept? In the classroom? In a lab? In a library? When should they be updated? On a regular basis, at fixed times, or whenever students feel the need to do it? And, in connection with this, on which occasions should portfolios be made public? Portfolios are the students’ property, students must develop a sense of ownership as a prerequisite for the very idea of a portfolio - but that does not mean that portfolios should be kept strictly private. It is important to discuss and decide who else could be entitled to see them, and on what specific occasions: for examples, teachers and parents during class meetings, or tutors during remedial lessons ...

Conclusion

Setting up and running a portfolio project is in many ways a new and challenging idea, both for its important pedagogical implications and for the impact that such a project can have on the very nature and organization of work at school. Because the stakes are so high, we probably need a fair amount of both teacher training and learner training to provide both us and our students with some essential guidance and support.

Finding time and space resources is no easy task. Innovations take time and energies. They cannot be expected to happen just “by default”, as we say in computer jargon. Perhaps our most challenging task is to work *within the constraints*, but also *using the opportunities* which are provided by the changing status of our schools.

I know that this paper has provided more questions than answers, more challenges than comfortable thoughts. But we live in an age of uncertainty, and I think we must learn to manage uncertainty in our daily routine. As Edgar Morin recently wrote in his UNESCO publication “Seven Complex Lessons for Education in the Future”

“We should learn to navigate on a sea of uncertainties, sailing in and around islands of certainty”

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