Virtual Portfolios in Blended Learning: Assessment and Collaboration[1]

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Abstract

A portfolio is an alternative way of assessment that offers many opportunities for both teachers and students to foster a teaching-learning experience. There are many kinds of portfolios that can be adapted into different contexts, levels, necessities or interests. The virtual portfolio offers the opportunity to work in an asynchronous way, permitting different kinds of interaction and collaboration. Besides this, the teacher has the opportunity to follow and accompany the student learning process during the course and in the end, to assess it based on many elements as participation, reflections, learning products and feedback. In this study developed in Mexico, students were evaluated with virtual portfolios that let them develop different kinds of abilities, not just cognitive, but affective and collaborative.

Resumen

El portafolio es una forma alternativa de evaluar que ofrece diversas oportunidades tanto a maestros como alumnos para conducir una experiencia de aprendizaje enseñanza. Existen diversos tipos de portafolios que pueden adaptarse a cada contexto educativo, nivel, necesidad o interés. El portafolio electrónico ofrece la oportunidad de trabajar de manera asíncrona permitiendo diferentes formas de interacción y colaboración. Además, el maestro tiene la oportunidad de seguir y acompañar el proceso de aprendizaje del alumno durante el curso y al final, evaluarlo basado en diversos aspectos como participaciones, reflexiones, productos de aprendizaje y retroalimentación. En este estudio que se llevó a cabo en México, los alumnos fueron evaluados con la construcción de portafolios electrónicos que permitieron que los alumnos desarrollaran diversas habilidades, no solo cognitivas si no también afectivas y colaborativas.

Introduction

This article reports on the use of virtual portfolios with a group of undergraduate language students in a public university in Mexico. The students were taught in a face to face modality and at the same time, distance education was simulated to learn and practice a virtual culture. These combinations of approaches permitted the group create a blended learning community. This simulation was held in a Yahoo® group to create our virtual classroom where the students created their electronic portfolios in teams. The implementation of the portfolio was an alternative way to assess students and at the same time, it was an opportunity to promote autonomy and collaboration among learners. In the first part, the author presents a brief overview on portfolios, then, the impact and results of the virtual portfolios to assess learners; finally, a reflection about alternative assessment which can be implemented through the use of electronic portfolios.

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Review of the Literature

Today learners use different channels of communication and technologies are present in many of them. It is essential to create an integral development in our students that permits their active participation in society as productive and useful members of it (Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2007). In this work developed at Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla in the Language School a group of undergraduate language students were taught with traditional face-to-face lectures. In addition, virtual communities were formed with the purpose of forming blended communities. The professor implemented a free, virtual space online using Yahoo® groups to permit students reflect, discuss, summarize, collaborate and upload learning products, building their electronic portfolios in teams. The professor assessed students in that virtual environment monitoring every product they uploaded online, accompanying them during the discussions and reflections, and enhancing student's participation during the course. In different contexts, assessment is still based on paper exams; "many language classes assess at the end of the course responding tests, and teachers prepare students to present paper exams" (Johnson, 2001). The exam does not always represent accurate development in the learning process. Elements of the test usefulness have to be considered: the validity, the difficulty, reliability, and applicability among others. "Nowadays, authentic assessment has been relevant in highlighting the importance of the assessment as a process rather than just as a means of grading students" (Savin-Baden, 2003). Our challenge nowadays as facilitators is to assess students in an integrative way that considers not only knowledge, but other skills that are part of lifelong learning. As Paris & Ayres (1999) state "authentic assessment is defined by the situational appropriateness of teaching and learning practices" (p.7) which makes us analyze our context in order to determine our specific needs and thus lead to the use of appropriate methodologies in our courses. "The challenge is to create frameworks for assessment which genuinely progress towards valued goals, which are sensitive to the contexts in which the genuine understanding is displayed, but which also provide clear, hard evidence which can be communicated to others" (Bentley, 1998). There are some options to evaluate students that are based on the learner's process and development, for example, journals, diaries, projects, portfolios. A portfolio is an opportunity for both learner and educator to foster learning and literacy. They have been considered as a "project of learn –as-you-go" (Paris & Ayres, 1999). In this work, virtual portfolios were created in teams to promote collaboration, cooperation and autonomy. The zone of proximal development defined as "the distance between actual development as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vigotsky, 1978, p. 86), was enhanced by the collaboration among learners to help each other construct a portfolio as an authentic assessment for their learning process. To develop the portfolio, students had specific requirements but not specific formats, so each member showed their own learning style and personality to work online. Portfolios develop a sense of self-regulation that "requires an awareness of socially approved behaviors, in addition to the maturation of the thought and speech processes" (Schunk & Zimmerman,

1994). The advantages of portfolios lie as much in the decision-making process they initiate as in the range of products they contain.

Defining Portfolios

Portfolios are comprised of selected student work representing their development during a course. Beyond this simple definition, student portfolios widely vary in content and purpose and even in who decides what goes into the portfolio. "A portfolio is a record of learning that focuses on student's work and their reflections on the work" (Benson & Barnett 1999).

The Concept of Portfolio Assessment

Learners deserve to be active participants in assessment of their own learning rather than "passive respondents to a series of tests" (Paris & Ayres 2002, p. 6). Portfolio assessment is the systematic, longitudinal collection of student work created in response to specific, known instructional objectives and evaluated in relation to the same criteria. Portfolio creation is the responsibility of the learner, with teacher guidance and support, and often with the involvement of peers. There are many kinds of portfolios that can be developed in a course to assess the student's process. "It is always hard for academics to empathize with a learner's sense of bewilderment in encountering a new idea, as assessing with portfolios is, for the obvious reason that they either never experienced it that way or have long since forgotten it". (Laurillard 1993).
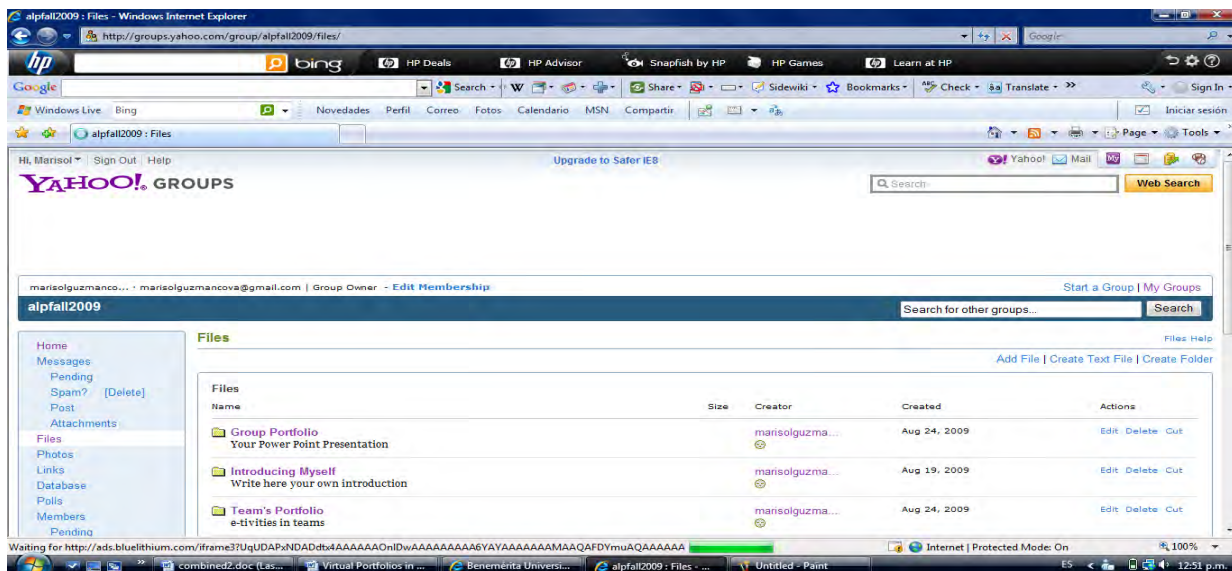
Kinds of Portfolios

There is a variety of portfolios that can be adapted to every learning necessity at diverse levels and contexts. As Robert and Pruitt state (2003) "a professional portfolio is a thoughtful document demonstrating a teacher's approach to teaching". (p. 159). There are frequent formats of portfolios that educators select: "The working portfolio contains complete collections of evidence; detailed units, photographs of classroom activities, many samples of student work, work in progress, reflections; this is a dynamic, ever-changing document". (p. 159). "The presentation or showcase portfolio is smaller than the working portfolio and contains one sample of picture, video of activities, summaries, examples of used activities. It should be easy to handle, attractive, and representative of the writer's view". (p. 159). Virtual portfolios contain the same information as the traditional portfolio but "they are developed and accessed electronically." (p. 165). They can contain a variety of files as images, audio, video, scanned material, texts. "The collaborative portfolio classroom encourages students to use multiple criteria for evaluation" (Paris & Aires 2002, p.67) and students become analytic and critic to assess all work developed during the course.

In all cases, a portfolio is an alternative to evaluate students' development in and out of the classroom, "Creating portfolios for a grade only does not make them authentic. Portfolios become authentic when they are intended to be used beyond the classroom" (Benson & Barnett 1999, p. 3).

An example of a virtual portfolio

First of all, in our context, the virtual portfolio was a collection of work online that permitted open communication between teacher and students that formed this virtual community. We used yahoo groups® with the URL: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/alpfall2009 to collect works, presentations, reflections, feedback, show social presence online and reflective assessment. Then, two versions of electronic portfolios were created; one in teams and another with all the group's Power Point presentations. Each team created a virtual folder to collect all their reflections, learning outcomes, comments, summaries, charts and peer evaluation into the yahoo group®. Finally, the teacher leaded, monitored, e- mailed, posted in the group to foster the learning process, gave feedback and assessed students.

FIGURE 1: EXAMPLE

Methodology

In this work developed at *Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla*, undergraduate language students were taught the subject "Alternative Learning Processes" in a face to face modality. The participants were male and female language students in a range of age between 20 and 29 years old. In this subject, the students learnt how to use technologies for teaching languages. The methodology was based on the model "The Community of Inquiry" (Garrison & Anderson 2003) and included the creation of a virtual community, a space was opened online to develop virtual literacy and foster the three presences that the model states: Cognitive, Social and Teaching. As a result, both kinds of communities were formed; virtual and face to face with the purpose to combine modalities (Blended-learning) and develop real e-learning during the course. Lectures took place in the classroom but learning outcomes were uploaded to the virtual space in teams into the Yahoo group® to build portfolios. The lectures were the input to create learning products in electronic formats. The professor
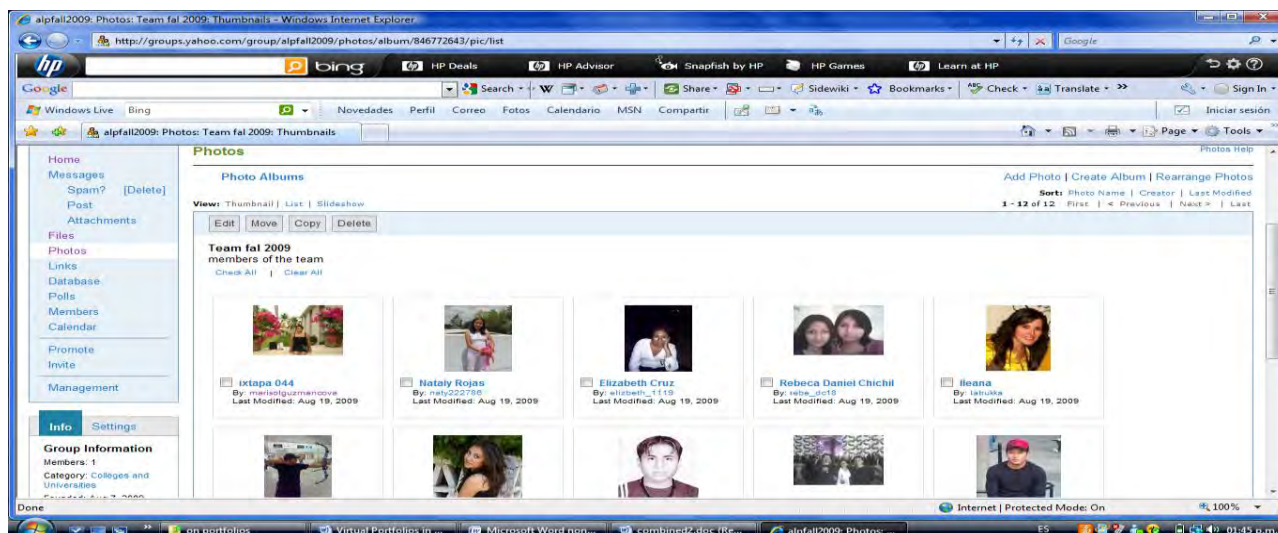
taught students to design didactic materials using software (Hot Potatoes®, c-map®) created their blogs using Blogger®, developed a mini course using the demo free version of BlackBoard®, and the Yahoo groups® to develop e-tivities online and create their portfolios. The assessment consisted of an electronic team portfolio that was integrated by electronic activities or e-tivities (Garrison & Anderson 2003) and a reflection or task was designed to consolidate each part of the curriculum. The electronic group portfolio contained team Power Point presentations and reflections about each topic presented in the classroom.

Results

There were many relevant aspects that the implementation of virtual portfolios had in our classroom; they will be listed in three main categories: Cognitive, Social and Teaching. The cognitive aspect is usually emphasized in educational fields as the most important to be developed. With the use of the virtual portfolios, the students had the opportunity to receive information, comment on in the classroom, compare it with other sources of information, and work individually and in teams to develop learning outcomes and most importantly, to reflect about all the topics reviewed in the course. Those were indicators that demonstrated that the Cognitive Presence (Garrison & Anderson 2003) was developed in our course with an acceptable level. All of this process was monitored and followed openly online by both teacher and classmates during the creation of the virtual portfolio.

To understand the virtual culture, the learner has to be part of it. During this experience, the students formed part of a community, collaborated, interacted and socialized online, discovering the opportunity to transmit their own personality using Text Based Communication. As humans, the social part constitutes the base to motivate learners to feel satisfied and collaborate with the rest of the group forming a family of learners. The Social Presence was demonstrated by the expression and projection of students online as real people forming part of a community.

FIGURE 2: SOCIAL PRESENCE

The teaching part constituted the most satisfactory for me as an organizer of this learning moment in my students' lives. I could observe them not just working but discovering their potential and little by little, integrating a community of motivated people, learning together, asking and answering during the revision of contents, acquiring new autonomous abilities and collaborating with a common learning purpose.

Final reflection, advantages of the alternative assessment with virtual portfolios.

This study, based on Brown's supportive ideas (2004), emphasizes many of the advantages of the use of portfolios in different contexts.

As Brown summarizes (Brown 2004, p. 257) portfolios:

- Foster intrinsic motivation, responsibility and ownership, promoting student-teacher interaction with the teacher as facilitator.
- Individualize learning and celebrate the uniqueness of each student.
- Provide tangible evidence of a student work; facilitate critical thinking, self-assessment, and revision process.
- They offer opportunities for collaborative work with peers and permit assessment of multiple dimensions of language learning.

Apart from these results, electronic portfolios developed a virtual culture among learners. They could show their Social Presence online through open communication and developed their writing skills to communicate in a text- based context. The students noticed that the use of Internet is not just for entertainment but also for academic purposes. The facilitator took advantage of the asynchrony of the interaction, the flexibility of time and space to be there in the virtual community, participating and guiding the learning teaching process. The learners conducted their own process with responsibility, respected deadlines and uploaded their learning products, expressed their opinions in a confident way, reflected individually and in teams, commented, and compared with the rest of the students the target point in each section of the course.

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