

## Electronic Portfolios as a Means of Student Reflection and Assessment

Submitted by Anjeana K. Hans, Chair of German Studies

### Project Structure:

We introduced electronic portfolios in two components of our German curriculum: in third- and fourth-semester German language courses (GER 201-202, taught by Mark Roemisch) and in an intermediate-advanced language and culture course (GER 236, “Memory, Identity, and Nation in German Short Stories,” taught by Anjeana Hans). We have both previously used traditional portfolios in intermediate language courses and found them interesting as a learning tool, but limited in several ways by their format; in particular, students struggled to maintain them over the course of the semester, and ultimately seemed to view them as one additional task to undertake at the end of the term.

Nevertheless, I wanted to expand the use of portfolios to an electronic platform in order to test out its potential as a more broad means of assessment; my colleague, Mark Roemisch, agreed to undertake a parallel project in GER 201-202, so that we might compare the efficacy of ePortfolios in language courses with that in more advanced courses. The aim in using portfolios is to give students primary responsibility for their learning and allow them the space to reflect in a productive way. At the same time, the portfolios have the potential to serve as a potentially more effective way of assessing their learning, both within a given class and, ideally, over the course of their study of German.

The portfolios included representative work from the course of the semester. In 201-202, this includes brief written assignments including translations, grammar exercises, and creative work; outlines of oral presentations; brain-storming exercises; etc. In GER 236, this included drafts and revisions of their essays; commentated blog posts; notes and outlines on oral presentation preparation; pre- and post-assignment wrappers; etc. In addition, both Mark and I asked the students to include a pre-assessment pertaining both to the course itself and to the portfolios (noting previous work, what they would like to learn about, what they most need to improve, etc.). At the end of the semester, we asked the students to reflect on their progress by responding to questions and/or commentating on their previous work.

We hoped that the electronic portfolio would help us to trace student progress more clearly. The process of curating the portfolio over the course of the semester and of reflecting on their work at the end of the semester should move students towards a learning mode that centers their own responsibility and empowerment.

In part, we undertook this project to see whether it would be feasible to implement it on the departmental level, so that students in our program build a single electronic portfolio, made up of work created in all of their German courses, over the course of their time at Wellesley. This would both allow for a sort of capstone experience simply by virtue of reflecting on their progress over the longer term and give us as a department a clear picture of a student’s work and thus a tangible way to assess the effectiveness of our learning outcomes.

Outcomes:

GER 201-202:

In the intermediate language classes (at least in the first semester), the project was tested on a larger student population: There were 18 students in 201, 4 in 202 (this included 3 who also enrolled in 201). In this course, the implementation built on previous use of paper portfolios, so that the instructor had some experience with the overall concept of guiding students in creating and curating a portfolio; transposing this to digital form, of course, required some adaptation.

Mark found the final products to be more creative: students integrated multimedia components (Powerpoint presentations, audio, photography, graphics, links to other platforms, etc.). The final product was appealing both in terms of being suited to current students' own use of digital media and in its potential of being a publicly-accessible representation of student learning.

In comparison with the paper portfolios previously used, Mark found that most students experienced less stress when constructing these; they were more likely to consistently work on the ePortfolios over the course of the semester, instead of leaving their curation to the end of the term. The project also gave students greater control over content and submission of work. For example, the syllabus asks students to compose active vocabulary lists for each chapter; it is consistently a struggle to get students to submit these at the end of the chapter and thus also for instructors to comment on and return them. Handling this via the electronic platform eases that turnaround. In addition, because Mark had access to the portfolios over the course of the semester, students got feedback that allowed them to address shortcomings, rather than getting this only in response to the final, submitted portfolio. Perhaps because of the constant responses to the portfolios, students seemed more comfortable with them as component of the course and were more likely to complete them.

Perhaps most markedly, the electronic portfolios as documentations of student learning continue to be accessible to them. With paper portfolios, students rarely pick them up and look over instructors' responses. The on-line site that each composed as electronic portfolio, however, remains accessible and usable to them.

GER 236:

For this level of course, I had not previously worked with portfolios, but rather had relied on more traditional assignments (papers, presentations, etc.). Given the far smaller group here (6 students) and the range of skill levels they represented, the gathered evidence for the use of electronic portfolios at this level is less complete.

In this setting, I put special emphasis on the idea that students should create the site as a representation of their work and interest in German both inside and outside the classroom. To that end, we included sections that students were to compose about themselves, as well as reflective components. The reflective components were especially useful. For example, students regularly submitted blog postings responding to key parts of the given short story

under discussion; at the end of the semester, I asked them to select several posts and reflect on their success – or lack thereof – in writing them. Several students chose to take posts that they felt were their weakest and to explain why they no longer were satisfied with their analysis and/or with the presentation of their argument. Student responses to surveys regarding their goals and expectations for the course and to pre- and post-assignment wrappers were also useful and indicated that they were thinking in more detail about how to address assignments and structure their work. For example, in the pre-assignment exercise for their final essay, I asked them to answer questions aimed to spur brainstorming in advance of writing, responding in an informal way that I hoped would allow them to articulate a clear argument and create an effective outline:

1. First, think about your topic of interest. What do you find especially interesting about the text(s) you've chosen? Can you narrow down recurring themes in multiple texts, or a key theme in a single one?
2. What drew your attention to this topic and/or these themes? Can you pinpoint specific things about the text that drew you to it? Does it tie in to larger themes in the course that you find important? Do you have a personal interest in the topic/theme, extending beyond the classroom?
3. Once you've found your topic, answer the 'so what' question: Why is it important? What makes it significant in this text, in a larger examination of cultural development, or in the context of the era? Can you formulate this answer to 'so what' into your argument?
4. You've already thought about specific parts of the text that drew you to the topic. Think about them again: do they support your answer to 'so what?' How? Your interpretation of these moments is important: it should be based in the text itself, but it will of course be individual, so make sure to consider how you explain that interpretation.
5. How will you best explain your argument? Try to talk through it: what steps are necessary? Jot these down – they will form the outline of your paper.

The process of thinking through their approach clearly helped students structure their final submission; I saw improvement between initial written work and the later work that I believe is more marked than I have seen when students are not asked to reflect actively on their work process and on their previous drafts and revisions.

#### Limitations and difficulties:

Working with the portfolios, of course, increases (at least in the short term) the instructor's administrative work, in particular as regards building the sites and helping students navigate its technical functions. Both Mark and I found technical issues to be the primary difficulty of implementing the E-Portfolios. We used Google Sites and students were asked to build their own pages after being trained by a member of LTS. While Google Sites is appealing in that it does not cost additional money (as do various software systems designed specifically for E-Portfolios) and allows students to maintain control over their site even after the given course has ended, it also required us to implement often complicated technical work-arounds. Students had difficulty setting up proper permissions functions; with some students, it took well into the term for these to be successfully set up. Other functions were difficult to integrate because of limitations in the platform itself. For example, my students needed to

post drafts (with my comments on them) and revisions thereof; to do so, they were told to link through the Google Site to a Google Doc. This, however, limits the functionality in displaying comments, means that permissions need to be set on multiple platforms, and takes the viewer of the portfolio 'outside' of it. A more stable platform such as those that are designed specifically for electronic portfolios might address this type of recurring issue.

Overall outcome:

In spite of the difficulties, the implementation of the electronic portfolios had positive outcomes, in sum. Students seemed motivated to think that they were constructing a representation of their own learning and improvement to which they could later refer back and on which they might build in the future. The reflective component in particular seems to have been valuable, though (naturally) the depth of reflection and engagement with the process was most impressive among the most highly-motivated students in the courses.

While we need to find a way to address some of the challenges, especially of the technical issues, and will need to discuss the potential of expanding this program to cover potentially all German courses and thus offer a tool for assessment of our majors and minors on a much broader scale, we will continue to use the electronic portfolios in GER 201/202 and in the intermediate courses I will be teaching during 2019-2020.