PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT IN SIMULATION FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

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1. Introduction

According to Archbald and Newmann (1992: 169), "a portfolio is a file or folder containing a variety of information that documents a student's experiences and accomplishments." Portfolio assessment has been used for many years in fields such as the fine arts and architecture, but its use in other fields is relatively new. Many schools are now experimenting with its use in fields as diverse as finance or English language composition, for achievement evaluation or for placement on college entrance. This article presents the experience with classes in English as a Foreign Language at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia and at the Universidad Pontificia Comillas de Madrid.

In keeping with the current emphasis in language learning assessment on performance (McNamara, 1996), the portfolio appropriately offers a good measure of a student's performance in the foreign language. It also satisfies the considerations of authenticity and of the context in which the performance takes place which are inherent to the communicative approach to language learning (Milanovic & Saville, 1996). These reasons lead the authors of the present article to fully identify with the reflections by Black et al. that "portfolios seemed to us and to many others a reasonable answer to questions of content validity and at least a partial answer to questions of construct ability" (1994: 2).

Other authors feel that portfolios are a good method for evaluating students "because it places responsibility on students ... to develop a representative body of work and ... to select appropriate samples of that work and present them according to certain guidelines" (Hill & Parry, 1994: 265). It includes information from every phase of instruction through a reflective working process: preparation, lectures and discussions, and learning outcomes. This total learning philosophy and the emphasis on learning through doing are fundamental in simulation and,

therefore, make portfolio assessment a logical follow-up to a learning experience involving simulation.

For the facilitators and the students who take part in simulation, there are many advantages in using portfolios. If we establish a parallelism between simulation and the purpose of the portfolio as defined by Angelo and Cross, we can set out the advantages for the facilitator. First, the portfolio provides the facilitator with a limited sample of students' creative work, along with the students' explanation of that work in relation to the simulation content or goals. Second, the portfolio allows the facilitator to assess students' skills at making explicit connections between their creative work and the simulation content. Third, the portfolio helps the facilitator to see how well students can apply what they have learned and how well they can explain those applications (Angelo & Cross, 1993)

Continuing with the parallelism, we see that the advantages for the students are even more numerous. First, the portfolio makes the student develop abilities to apply principles and generalisations already learned in the simulation to new problems and situations of the real world. Second, the portfolio allows the student to develop abilities to think creatively. The portfolio is an individualised, creative assessment tool in itself. Next, it helps the student to develop skills in using materials, tools and/or technology central to the subject of the simulation, which implies knowledge and experience for future processes. Additionally, the portfolio urges the student to develop a commitment to personal achievement, as s/he is responsible for reporting on the amount and quality of learning. Finally, the portfolio forces the student to develop the ability to perform skilfully. The student has to reflect on the contents and tasks as a whole. The inter-relation of cognitive fields promotes a global cognitive process, which leads to more meaningful learning. In short, the main purpose of the portfolio is that it prompts students to demonstrate to their instructors - and themselves - how their creative and self-evaluative skills are developing.

2.   Two University Experiences

This paper discusses experiences from two different universities in three different fields of study. The principal purpose of the simulations used is to learn English as a second or foreign language within a specific field of study.

2.1.   A telematic simulation

In the first case, Advanced English students from the Telecommunications Engineering School of the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Spain, have participated for five years in telematic simulations in which the students are assessed by way of portfolios. The School has participated in two large-scale simulations, IDEALS and ICONS, in which the scenario is a summit conference on issues of world-wide interest. The teams of students from different countries communicate with one another over internet through a host site, the University of

Alabama in the case of IDEALS and the University of Maryland in ICONS. The simulations include three phases of instruction.

Phase I:

- Briefing on goals, roles and teams;
- Study of background documents on the issues to be dealt with during the conference;
- Preparation of a policy statement and position paper, the first two "official" documents produced by students in which they express their thinking on the issues and strategies with which to achieve their objectives in the conference.

Phase II

- Sending the policy statement and position paper to the other participants;
- Participation in teleconferences. All teams are connected on-line;
- Bilateral negotiations between country teams;
- Multilateral negotiations among various teams;
- Development of the Negotiating Text;
- Development of the Final Treaty and its ratification.

Phase III

- Participation in a plenary debriefing teleconference in order to evaluate the simulation as a whole;
- Presentation of individual portfolios, orally before the class and in writing to the facilitator.

The information collected for the IDEALS/ICONS portfolio should present material from the three different phases. This information could come from any of the following sources:

- other students
- facilitators or others professors
- gophers, www databases, etc.
- magazines, newspapers, encyclopaedias, books, etc.
- personal lists of vocabulary and grammar structures
- a personal log
- briefing and debriefing sessions.

The portfolio takes shape through the students' coherent linking and analysis of the information collected, requiring continuous updating of the contents in a process that is similar to real life or a simulation in that information is handled as it becomes available. The portfolio culminates with a reflective essay. Students use their own criteria to select the items which they consider most relevant to their learning experience, which produces a comprehensive profile of their effectiveness in learning.

With other traditional learning-assessment methods, students can assimilate the contents of the course in the last phase of instruction. With simulation, students must acquire background knowledge before the activity begins in order to respond to daily needs for information and strategies. The day-by-day building of the portfolio makes the assessment continuous, as well as a self-study and instructional process.

2.2.   Classroom simulation

In the second case, the students were studying third year Business Administration, in a five-year degree program at the Universidad Pontificia Comillas in Madrid, Spain, and in the third case, they were sixth year engineering students who were completing their studies at the same university.

The Business Administration students used THE STRATEGY GAME, in which they had to make strategic decisions in the running of a pharmaceutical company, starting with the choice of allocating funds in marketing or in research/development. Either choice could lead to success in the form of profits and company expansion. The game also includes a Leadership Style Analysis based on the Myers-Briggs Personality Types, in which the students must answer a series of multiple-choice questions, after which the program indicates which category the students would fall into. Language items are isolated before the students begin to help them with vocabulary and grammar structures and there are continuing exercises on these items throughout the game.

The portfolio required of each student consisted of the following items:

- Notes from the class on decisions taken
- Vocabulary lists of words which were new to the students, with a definition and use in a sentence.
- A report written by the students in the role of CEO in which he/she must explain his/her background and the reasons for basic decisions.
- Results of the Leadership Style Analysis questionnaire with the students' comments on whether he/she agrees with the analysis.

Once the portfolios had been graded, oral examinations were conducted individually. This lasted from five to seven minutes and the student was expected to answer questions about his/her career at the company, explaining the decisions taken and the fortunate/unfortunate results obtained. In some cases, the students were asked to explain some of the lexis used in the report.

In the latter of the two cases mentioned above, the engineering students used INTERACTIVE CASES IN MANAGEMENT. In this instance, the students were again asked to make decisions as CEO, this time of a ball-bearing manufacturing company. Options, usually three or four, were given to the students or student groups and a "right" answer was expected, based on management principles and the advice of management consultants. Points were given to the student(s) according to how soon they discovered the correct answer and explanations of each answer were given before the student(s) progressed to the next stage. The vocabulary load of technical terms connected with engineering was much heavier than in the game used by the business administration students. As in the other game, vocabulary was isolated for explanation purposes, but much was left to the students to understand through context, and students were given more leeway to organise their own learning. These students were asked to provide a Portfolio containing the following items:

- The final printout of their group with the number of "right" answers and the number of "wrong" answers to each question (there were nine questions), and the company decision with regard to their future (promotion, dismissal or renewal).
- A composition or report explaining why they took the "wrong" decisions, what they had based those decisions on, and a comparison of Spanish and American management styles and/or circumstances which explain these differences
- A personal list of vocabulary, structures, etc. which they had learned in the simulation.
- A study of how they would change the company to make it more efficient - or how they would change the simulation to make it more appropriate for Spain.

Data were collected on seventy-five students in the third-year Business Administration classes. As can be seen in the following two graphs, the grades on the portfolios corresponded with the final course grade which had been compiled from vocabulary quizzes and grammar exams, oral exams, composition grades, etc., indicating a high overall validity for the portfolios.

Figure 1 goes here
Figure 2 goes here.

From these data it appears that the portfolio assessment is valid as a reflection of the overall level of the students, as well as a means for allowing students with different learning styles to generate materials in consonance with the way they learn best. As Sandra Murphy (1994: 150) said, "Portfolios ... offer us the opportunity to make the assessment process a learning process."

3.   Conclusion

In conclusion, portfolios are in consonance with current trends in language teaching and assessment, with pedagogical advantages that clearly tilt the balance in favour of portfolios as the most desirable form of assessment. Students are given the opportunity to show what they know and facilitators have more information on which to base their judgements of learner progress. In measuring the effectiveness of language learning with simulation, our findings indicate that portfolio assessment yields results that are comparable to those of traditional assessment. Further research is called for to ascertain the numerical validity and reliability of portfolio assessment as a language testing tool.

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