Digital portfolios and feedback practices in a traditional university course

Olga Dysthe & Astrid Tolo
Department of Education, University of Bergen, Norway

EARLI 10TH BIENNIAL CONFERENCE, PADOVA, ITALY
August 26-30, 2003
"Assessment and e-learning. Threats, challenges and opportunities"

olga.dysthe@psypb.uib.no

Dysthe & Tolo
Introduction

- **Site**: The History Department at the University of Bergen, Norway

- **Type** of portfolio:  
  - *discipline based learning and assessment portfolio*

- **Aim of change** in assessment system:  
  - Improve student writing  
  - Improve student learning

- **FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN FOCUS**:  
  **ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING**

  Dysthe & Tolo
The research study

■ **Aim:**
  - investigate how portfolio assessment is implemented in a traditional academic department
  - the role of digitalization
  - areas of improvement

■ **Method & materials:**
  - Interviews with teachers, students, tutors
  - Course evaluations
  - Survey
  - Students’ texts
Theory: Socio-cultural perspectives on learning and assessment

- **knowledge and learning**
  - situated (focus on institutional & disciplinary context)
  - social (focus on interaction)
  - distributed (afforded by the medium)
  - mediated (portfolios as mediating tools)
  - dependent on language (written genres)
  - dependent on participation in communities of practice (establish effective rules and routines)

Dysthe & Tolo
Research questions

- Characteristics of digital portfolio assessment in history? Learning benefits? Unused potentials?

- Contextual factors influencing the assessment format?
- How does the history pf model differ from a collection-reflection-selection model?
- Benefits and challenges of digital aspects?
- How is the learning potential in digital and interactive feedback utilized?
- What can be improved?
Summary: Digitalization of portfolios

- is a basic prerequisite for an effective feedback system

- does not ensure high quality feedback, nor that students actually use it when they revise

- necessitates
  - teaching genre knowledge & explicit quality criteria
  - training response and revision skills
Findings 1: Learning opportunities of digital pf

- Transparency and accessibility of medium afforded improved formative assessment:
  - Interactive and distributed learning
    - exchange of feedback
    - learning from all aspects of feedback process
  - Better quality of public feedback
Findings 2:

- Digitalization needed to administer pf
- Disciplinary goals determine the use of digital tool
- Disciplinary traditions restrict the utilization of medium specific learning potential

Dysthe & Tolo
Findings 3.

1) Students report learning from
   1) reading other students' papers
   2) reading feedback from teachers and peers
   3) writing comments

2) Great variations among students regarding length and quality of comments

3) Student revision of drafts in general rather superficial (omit problems instead of solving them)

Dysthe & Tolo
Portfolio definition

- "A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress, or achievements in one or more areas. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of the student's self reflection" (Poulson, Poulson & Meyer 1991).

- A digital portfolio is in addition “stored and organized digitally and utilizes digital tools in the learning process and in the documentation” (Otnes, 2002).
A model of portfolio processes

Learning phase 1
(formative assessment)
- Design of learning activities
- Individual-collective
- ICT
- Writing strategies
- Feedback practices
- Metaprocesses (criteria, reflection)

Learning phase 2
(formative)
- Selection
- Self assessment
- Criteria
- Reflection

Learning phase 3
(summative)
- Presentation portfolio (selection)
- Object of ass.
- Ass. format
- Student involvement
- Criteria
- Assessor
- Reflection

Dysthe & Tolo
Portfolio Assessment Processes in History (2003)

Learning phase 1
(formative assessment)

- Argumentative historical essays
- ICT: drafts and comments published in LMS
- Writing: 4 papers (2000 w)
- Peer & TA feedback
- No reflective text required
- Required asynch. discussion

Working portfolio = Present. portfolio

Learning phase 2
(formative assessment)

- No selection
- No self-assessment
- No criteria

Learning ph. 3
(summative)

- Holistic ass of pf + peer response + async. debates 75%
- Assessors: tutor + external assessor
- No student involv.
- Trad. Exam 25%
Portfolio characteristic
(Modern history course spring 2003)

- **Contents** (basis for summative assessment)
  - 4 papers (argumentative essays)
  - link to their peer response to 9 student papers
  - link to their participation in the asynchronous debates

- Compulsory peer feedback -- *new*

- Teacher and student feedback public – *new*

- Peer response texts included in summative assessment -- *new*
Contextual factors 1: “Quality Reform” Norwegian higher edu.

- Student active teaching methods
- Integration teaching and assessment
  - Portfolios recommended
- Closer follow-up
- Continuous feedback
- ICT (technology optimism)

- Changing the traditional "exam-giving" university
Contextual factors 2: disciplinary setting: the History Department

- Discipline with long academic traditions
- Untraditional aspects of this department:
  - Teaching high status
  - Student learning high priority
- Developed local Learning Management System 1992-95: KARK
  - Designed to support writing
  - Fit the needs of teachers giving feedback to student papers
  - Giving students access to each other's papers
  - High student participation in Asynchronous discussion forum
- LOCAL OWNERSHIP OF MEDIATING TOOL
List of changes

- Portfolio collection of essays replaced end of term exam? (hybrid solutions)
- Compulsory essay writing
- Compulsory peer feedback
- Teacher feedback made public
- Self-assessment (select 4 of 6 essays)
- Transparency replaced privacy

Dysthe & Tolo
### Finding 4: contextual factors alter portfolio format and learning potential

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Autumn 2001</th>
<th>Spring 2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30 credits’ course</td>
<td>15 credits’ course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 papers in work portfolio</td>
<td>4 papers in work portfolio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SELECTION:</strong></td>
<td><strong>NO SELECTION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 papers in pres. pf</td>
<td>4 papers in pres. pf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2hrs writ. ex. + oral</td>
<td>No oral exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ass. by teacher +</td>
<td>ass. by tutor +</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>external assessor</td>
<td>external assessor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dysthe & Tolo
The reform paradox

- the Quality Reform
- advocated portfolio assessment to improve learning
- required modularization of courses

Result:
- reduced the possibilities of establishing an optimal portfolio model
  - No selection, no reflection, no self-assessment

Dysthe & Tolo
Findings:

- Digitalization needed to administer pf
- Disciplinary goals determine the use of digital tool
- Disciplinary traditions restrict the utilization of medium specific learning potential
Digital aspects:
”Filing cabinet or learning arena?”

- Administration of pf: ICT deemed indispensible
- Medium specific learning potential
  - Multimediality? no
    - Did not support course goals: written text genre
  - Hypertextuality? no
    - Did not support goals: logical text structure
  - Interactivity? yes
    - Supported goals: distributed, dialogical learning
Formative assessment processes: students’ view of learning benefit

- Reading peer papers: 60% high, 38% medium
- Giving feedback (writing comments): 41% high, 43%
- Getting feedback from peers: 51% high, 46%
- Getting feedback from teacher or TA: 79%, 17%

- Using feedback in revision of their own paper
  - Preliminary findings:
  - Very limited use of feedback
  - Students’ revision of drafts superficial
Challenges:

- Utilization of learning potential in digital portfolios depends on
  - knowledge of possibilities in medium
  - *institutional constraints* (i.e. module size)
  - *course goals*
  - *disciplinary traditions in pedagogical approach*
  - *training of response & revision skill*
  - *formulation and discussion of explicit quality criteria*
Threats in the History Department

- **Human and economic resources**
  - transparency of pf (teacher feedback) demanding
  - TA replace teachers - quality reduction?

- **Institutional constraints: Modularization**
  - superficiality
  - lack of time to experiment with media-specific learning opportunities

- **Disciplinary constraints:**
  - metacognition & procedural knowledge not goals
Summary: Digitalization of portfolios

- is a basic prerequisite for an effective feedback system
- does not ensure high quality feedback, nor that students actually use it when they revise
- necessitates
  - teaching genre knowledge & explicit quality criteria
  - training response and revision skills

Dysthe & Tolo