



## Across the Borders

### The ELP in the USA by Randall Lund

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) has attracted attention around the world, including the United States of America. The level of interest manifested there may or may not surprise, depending on one's point of view. Portfolio work in general has been fairly well known in North America for decades; one might expect a yawn and a "so, what else is new?" Indeed, this has been the reaction of more than one leader in the profession. The stereotypical monolingualism of the country also seems incongruous with the plurilingual goals of the ELP. A cynical teacher's comment was, "We only learn one language, at that only to A2, and who would we show it [the portfolio] to anyway?"

On the other hand, anyone who is well-informed about portfolios will quickly recognize that the ELP represents an important new impulse in the field. The ELP program commands attention simply because of its international scope and the sheer number of people involved. It is also admirable that a high-level institution (the Council of Europe) is so determined to promote and protect the interests of the individual learner. Finally, it is noteworthy that strong emphasis remains on process over product.

These are reasons enough to interest any non-European language teacher, but the particular appeal of the ELP in the USA becomes clearer when the background of portfolio work in the States is understood.

#### Origins of the Portfolio

Portfolios have always been part of professional life in fields such as business and the creative arts. They were therefore known to teachers of creative writing when a new paradigm in the teaching of writing emerged about 1970. Teachers realized that the point of teaching writing was not to produce a good essay, but to help students develop good writing processes out of which good work would naturally result.

The writing process - generating and organizing ideas, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing - was found to blend nicely with the ability of portfolio work to show stages of work, to allow for presentation of work to real audiences, and to stimulate the critical qualities needed for the selection of texts and reflection on both process and product.

The process emphasis in the field of writing is just one example of what could loosely be called "constructivist" approaches to education. In these theories learning is seen as active, subjective, personal, contextualized, social, and affective in nature. The processes of metacognition, reflection, and authentic application are emphasized. Because of such views, portfolio work spread from writing to most other school subjects.

New ideas about testing accompanied the new ideas about teaching. Whereas traditional testing emphasized breaking down knowledge into discrete bits that could be sampled with multiple choice questions, educators began searching for "authentic" and "alternative" forms of assessment.

In the 1980s educators recognized that portfolios not only encourage good process, but also demonstrate good process along with the resulting product. "Portfolio assessment" became the hottest fad on the evaluation scene. The trend extends beyond teaching to teacher training. Through the national associations for language teaching and also the accrediting agencies for teacher training institutions, standards have been established that uniformly call for teacher portfolios as evidence that teachers are prepared to teach (including their language proficiency) and that teacher preparation institutions are delivering a quality product.

Many educators are concerned about this "take over" of the portfolio concept for assessment (Bräuer, 2002; Jordan and Purves, 1996). When powerful institutions at the top prescribe when, how, and why portfolios are to be used, they become in essence

the owners instead of the people who create them. The portfolio becomes merely an assessment; the author simply shows the institution what it wants to see in a way that bears little relation to learning. Process benefits are minimized. Whatever reflection occurs only reflects what the institution wants to see, rather than what the learner thinks. Portfolios become just a multiple guess-what-they-want-to-see test.

### Portfolios in Foreign Languages

Foreign language teaching came relatively late to the idea of portfolio work. The 70s were a time of broad methodological experimentation under the modern concepts of language and language learning. The 80s were dominated by the emergence under the leadership of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 1986) of a new consensus about proficiency and its implications for a functionally-oriented, communicative approach to teaching. Particular attention was paid to speaking and the new alternative authentic assessment, the Oral Proficiency Interview.

In the 90s the other modalities, including writing, received increased attention. Second language teachers followed the lead of their first language colleagues in using the portfolio to address writing process, but they also found it beneficial to listening, reading, and speaking.

It quickly became apparent that portfolios are in fact ideally suited for foreign language purposes, whether it be the integration of the modalities, communicative applications, community learning, autonomous learning, strategy-based instruction, interdisciplinary learning, or job-oriented education - the portfolio could do it all (Lund, 2004).

But when portfolios became popular in foreign language teaching, they were already almost inseparably linked with assessment. The two most popular textbooks on language teaching methodology at my institution discuss portfolio work exclusively in connection with assessment.

Indeed, portfolio assessment is more about assessment than about portfolios.

### The Portfolio Problem

The heavy focus in foreign languages on assessment of product highlights the inherent problem with portfolios: the conflict of interest between author and audience—the question of ownership (see Figure 1). The fundamental tension is between author-friendly process and audience-friendly product. From this tension arise others. Is the content flexible or fixed? Are self-assessments acceptable or only the judgments of experts? Can the work be interactive and collaborative, or must it be the sole work of the author?

Author Orientation	Issue	Audience Orientation
author	<b>ownership</b>	audience
process	<b>purpose</b>	product
flexible	<b>content</b>	fixed
artifacts	<b>evidence</b>	attestations
self and peers	<b>assessment</b>	experts
local	<b>standards</b>	external
elaborated	<b>context</b>	eliminated

Figure 1: Tensions in Portfolio Work

The paradox is that portfolios, whatever private meaning they have for their authors, derive much of their power from their public function. As with all true paradoxes, the solution lies not in the victory of one opposite over the other, but in the holding of the opposites together in wholeness (Palmer, 1998), though not necessarily in equal balance. There can be process without tangible product, but there can be no product without process, and no good product without good process.

### The ELP and the Portfolio Paradox

From this perspective it should be no surprise that the emergence of the ELP has been watched with interest, even enthusiasm by international observers. It



represents an attempt by an audience at the highest level to provide a portfolio in the express interest of authors at the lowest level—individual learners. The learner is central to both basic purposes: to motivate and guide the learner and to allow the learner to represent him- or herself to others. The fundamental principle of the ELP reveals its orientation: it is the property of the learner. It appears, so far at least, that process will be respected.

Nor is the audience and its need for product forgotten. The standard format, the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEF), and the accreditation function of the Council of Europe seek to assure that the portfolio will be comprehensive, informative, transparent, and valid.

### **International Connections**

Among the first Americans to become aware of the ELP were the German teachers attending the international German teachers' conference in Lucerne in 2001 when the ELP was introduced. Some of us immediately recognized the potential in the program and the appeal of studying a large-scale portfolio project. As a result of that trip I have been developing an ELP-style portfolio for use in our first-year German program. A few colleagues at other universities are also experimenting with the ELP. In one case a department simply adopted the complete Swiss model.

A greater effect was achieved by a Goethe-Institut seminar in 2003 in Germany that was attended by eleven state supervisors of foreign languages. Four of these supervisors returned home and began collaboration on adaptations of the European model for their states—Kentucky, Virginia, Indiana, and Nebraska. All are now well into pilot programs involving many schools and thousands of students.

The models share a common name—LinguaFolio Kentucky, LinguaFolio Virginia, etc. The National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL) has now adopted the LinguaFolio project under the name LinguaFolio USA in celebration of the Year of Languages (2005) in the United States. The con-

tact person for this project is Jacque Van Houten, the supervisor for Kentucky. At least four other states are joining the program. All models are available as downloads from links on the NCSSFL web page (NCSSFL, 2005).

Beyond the name, the four models have chiefly two traits in common. First, they are clearly based on the ELP with its three parts, including checklists and self-assessment grids. Second, they have all replaced the CEF with state or national proficiency descriptions based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. These guidelines were developed from decades of experience in the federal government's language schools, such as the Foreign Service Institute. Several levels of ability are grouped in four broad bands: novice, intermediate, advanced, and superior. Only Virginia's model makes the effort to equate its scale with the CEF.

Differences in the models are immediately apparent, beginning with audience. Kentucky's is for the elementary grades. Virginia targets teens and adults. Nebraska proposes a single model for all ages from six to adult.

Kentucky's model is relatively simple. It calls for a dossier section but provides no master for it. By contrast, the Virginia model is the most developed, with a number of specialized attestations and other records. In its size, detail, and layout, it is most clearly modeled on the Swiss prototype.

Nebraska's model is the most unique, not only in its wide age range. The proficiency descriptions make reference to two distinct systems: the ACTFL guidelines and the state curriculum standards. The checklists, rather than asking for yes/no decisions on the can-do statements, provide for a continuum of judgment from 0 to 100 for each task. The dossier consists only of instructions, including the advice that the learner should put in work that the teacher has selected.

The differences among the US models point up an important fact: there is as yet no accrediting authority; there are no standards. As various models



develop they are certain to diverge ever more widely from the ELP. While the controlled proliferation of models in Europe can be seen as beneficial experimentation and evolution, unchecked development elsewhere could work against the effectiveness, integrity, and reputation of the ELP model.

The NCSSFL has some power to steer the process in the public school arena. At present they seem content to encourage wider participation. The obvious candidates for leadership are ACTFL or similar national organizations. For the time being they are content to watch, consult, and advise, but they can be stirred to action by increased grassroots interest.

ACTFL in particular faces a difficult choice, as it sees its proficiency system in competition with the CEF. Even before the ELP there had long been a small undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the ACTFL guidelines on theoretical or practical grounds (it is prohibitively expensive to obtain official ratings). The CEF offers a real alternative that is particularly attractive to teachers of European languages.

While we explore local adaptations of the ELP, we watch developments in Europe to learn from your experience in regard to design, implementation, oversight, and, above all, the effects on learning. We want to know if process can remain paramount. Can the paradoxes be held in harmony? Will the ELP develop into a standing wave resonating with society or will it break on the reefs of resistance or redirection?

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