Developing critical thinking through eportfolio based learning: an exploration of the experiences of online distance learners

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The case study

How can eportfolios enhance the nature of the learning experience and the development of critical thinking among online distance higher education learners?
Theoretical Framework - Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a judgement process. Its goal is to decide what to believe and/or what to do in relation to the available evidence, using appropriate conceptualizations and methods and evaluated by the appropriate criteria.”(Facione & Facione, 2008)
The model of eportfolio based learning for this case study is the process of eportfolio based learning is transformative, personal and empowering for learners. Effective eportfolio based learning can stimulate critical thinking, integrate learning, provide space for learners to experiment and apply theory and reflect on their learning journey. The process of learning with an eportfolio is meaningful, authentic and promotes deep learning.
Design of the study
Critical questions reflection template

**Critically reflect—Guidelines**

Write a piece (500 words) which critically reflects on your recent work in Soc3A.

Use these guiding questions to structure your response:

- What have you learned doing this module?
- Describe your learning process throughout this module and discuss the skills you are still developing.
- What challenges with the module have you faced so far?
- What does your work on the module illustrate about you as a learner of Sociology?
- How have you found the learning portfolio process?
- What is it like working with an learning portfolio?
- How does learning with an learning portfolio compare to other modes of learning?
- What implications will your learning portfolio experience have on your future approach to learning?
- What is the next step in your learning portfolio?

**Evidence**

Provide 3 pieces of evidence of your learning which supports your reflection. Write a brief rationale (100 words) for their inclusion.

Evidence might include:

- Photographs—relevant to the module
- Diagrams/infographics
- Audio/Video
- A section of work
Dear students,

I thought I would write to you to clarify a few queries around your assignment 3 portfolio.

First of all, well done for completing your first submission.

Word count:
Each reflection is approximately 600 words and additionally you have 100-300 words to explain your three pieces of evidence.
Total word count is 3000 words. The usual Open Education policies apply (+/-10%).

Feedback:
Your tutor will be marking and providing feedback at the end of the portfolio. Formative feedback will not be provided. Support, guidance, and best practice examples will be provided by your tutor/Orna.

Reflective writing resource: https://student.unsw.edu.au/reflective-writing
Tech support

If you have any queries about using Loop Reflect or any of the above, please email orna.farrell@dcu.ie
Student portfolios

Your reflection

I am in my second year of third-year education. The transition from foundation level to intermediate modules has been difficult. I began the foundation level courses with a solid grasp of the subject matter which afforded me time to experiment with different study strategies and learn at a relaxed pace. Therefore, I started this term believing my study habits were more than sufficient and I could easily absorb core concepts. Unfortunately, this was not the case.

This sociology module requires far more revising than I anticipated. I often reread the textbooks because I struggled with the core concepts and or the books are difficult to understand. Focusing on the required reading proved difficult which impacted my study schedule resulting in unproductive late night study sessions. My frustration with this problem lead to procrastination and outright avoidance of the module. Approximately a month into the term I decided to reevaluate myself as a learner and determine why strategies worked the first term.

In my first term, I discovered that I am an audio-visual and hands-on learner who requires physical activity during study sessions. For example, in the sociology foundation module, I listened to a lecture series conflict theory while gardening. This term I tried to sit in a dedicated study area reading and note taking for extended periods without breaks. The inactivity resulted in restlessness and distraction. Therefore, I have adopted a new strategy that allows me to move. I read for fifteen minutes and take notes in the margins of my notebook (Evidence 1). Afterwards, I stand up, engage in physical activity and review my notes. I alternate between these activities until I grasp the intended concepts. The success of this strategy encouraged me to engage more with the module and my classmates.

I have formed a cohort involving two other students who are on the same degree course (See Evidence 2). We have agreed to take the same modules every term and support one another. This help is invaluable because they encourage and motivate me as a learner by sharing information and strategies. The positive interactions with and support of my cohort has stimulated more engagement with Loop. I feel more confident posting questions and contributing.

Finally, I am a tactile and sensory learner and I do not like reading module text electronically (See Evidence 1). I need to be able to highlight passages and take notes in the margins. I can take the module text and or textbooks with me to cafes which help me focus. Sensory input enhances my study experience as I find the hustle and bustle of restaurants and cafes soothing. Like white noise, an outing can also serve as a reward for dedication to my studies.

In closing, I began this term floundering as a learner. Taking a step back and reviewing my learning process helped uncover study tools that suit my needs. First, I use physical activity as a reward for reading. Second, I connect with other students for support. Finally, I need sensory stimulation to help me focus on my studies.
Your reflection

At the beginning of each module it can be very beneficial to create a document which lists out the required reading for each unit on the course. This was done by a fellow student last year and I knew it was something that would benefit me this year. This is why the first week of the academic was set aside for organisation. The week was used to look at the assignments, come up with a rough guiding plan for the year and to look at each unit to identify what the required reading will be. This was done using an excel file and used a colour code in order to identify each book. This is particularly beneficial because there are seven required texts for this module.

So far the content has been interesting but dense. The module units are a little less concise then they could be and lacking structure. This has resulted in the required readings providing beneficial clarification on topics which are not explained as much in the units. The units are the links between the core text and the required reading. However, after discussing my concerns about the density of the required reading with my tutor, I have decided to change my approach by approaching the core text before I approach the required texts. My hope is that this approach will reduce the time I am spending reading. My tutor also recommended a particular YouTube channel which is relevant to some of the topics which proved to be an enjoyable addition when I needed a break from the books.

However, Lippert times by Zygmunt Bauman is very interesting. I found the content of the text especially interesting when considering the gun laws in America. In the text Bauman discusses how fear is created in the modern age. As I read this, I considered how the pro-gun population in America defend their stance by claiming they have a right to defend themselves. Bauman suggests that by constantly thinking that defense is needed, fear becomes more prevalent.

As a distance learning student in my second year, I am still trying to get to grips with the online environment. I intend to engage more in Loop and during online tutorials. During the first online tutorial for this module, I tried to use my microphone as much as possible. I did find it a little embarrassing, especially as I was the only student who was able to use the function. I do see the benefit of using the microphone, and intend to try it more during tutorials going forward.

I have once again used the approach to study that I discovered most beneficial to me last year. I read through the topic that I am trying to learn. I highlight the information that I feel is beneficial and are the key points. I then add these key points to a note pad. I use different coloured pens for titles of topic’s and the actual content so that when I look back over it, it can be easily found.

My second piece of evidence is a picture of the breakdown of readings per unit, which is also divided by topic within the module. This chart is to help me have a clear view on what is required by unit.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yp6q1202HkC

My third piece is a link to the YouTube video which Vanessa first introduced us to in our first tutorial which was online. It was an interesting change of environment instead of always having my head stuck in a book.
**ANALYSIS**

- ongoing process - circular model of gathering and analysing data, as “coding is analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, Lichtman, 2014)

- Analytical approach- thematic analysis following the Braun & Clarke (2006, 2013) 6 step approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description of the process</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:</td>
<td>Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Generating initial codes:</td>
<td>Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Searching for themes:</td>
<td>Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Reviewing themes:</td>
<td>Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Defining and naming themes:</td>
<td>Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Producing the report:</td>
<td>The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.</td>
</tr>
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Findings: 5 Themes

- Being an online distance learner
  - Studying while balancing life commitments
  - Motivation
  - Peer community
  - Module Supports

- The experience of Learning with eportfolio
  - Using eportfolio technology
  - Negative aspects
  - Reflection on learning-skills

- My approach to learning
  - Confidence lack of
  - Time Management

- Thinking critically in my eportfolio
  - Learn about own thinking
  - Open minded

- Sociology discipline context
  - Applying sociological theory to everyday life
Finding 1

Learning with an eportfolio enhanced the learning experience for online distance learners by providing them with a safe and personal space to experiment with new ideas, to evaluate their own learning, to process their thoughts and experiences in the context of the sociology module. The experience was both retrospective and future focused.

“It is a great aide in my learning because it gives me a platform to express my thoughts and processes of my experiences. Normally coursework is so structured and formal; instead a learning portfolio is personal and I like that.” (P16, eportfolio entry 2)
Finding 2

Learning with an eportfolio enabled online distance learners to document their lived experiences and learning approaches in an authentic and meaningful way.

“a very personal representation of the turmoil of the distance learning student as they attempt to drag themselves away from the drudgery of everyday life to enlighten themselves.” (P20 eportfolio entry 2)
Finding 3

Studying sociology combined with learning with an eportfolio supported the development of critical thinking skills and dispositions in online distance learners.

“Studying the subject of power has encouraged me to look more closely when reviewing current affairs such as the U.S. presidential campaign. In a discussion with my brother I noticed that while he was siding with a particular candidate, I was interested in the pro’s and con’s of both. In the past perhaps, I would have been quicker to jump to conclusions with little thought to the bias of what information the media are manipulating.” (P10, eportfolio entry 1) (open mindedness)
**FINDING 4**

Eportfolios enhanced the development of the critical thinking skill of self-regulation for online distance learners.

“*I: Do you think your critical thinking skills improved?*

*P2: Yes, for sure. To the point where you are critical of your own critical thinking. [Laughs] but yeah definitely as I was saying you are looking at your own beliefs and I think it’s good though, it’s always good to be always reassessing. The world is always changing so everything else should change with it. And I definitely have, you just look at different things, see different patterns. Yeah I don’t really know what else to say on that.*” *(P2, interview 2)*
Finding 5

The sociology discipline context was fundamental to meaningful learning with an eportfolio for online distance learners. Learning with an eportfolio supported the development in participants of discipline specific critical sociological thinking.

“Upon reading about ‘charismatic authority’ in chapter 22 and noting the authors use of example between Jesus Christ and Hitler I was irreversibly intrigued. I find I have spent much of my free time outside of study lightly researching this concept and reading about this deeply interesting comparison and looking at other ideas linked to this such as cult leaders and politicians power.” (P13, eportfolio entry 1)
Thank You