

# Chapter 12

## Student E-Portfolios: Unfolding Transformation in University Life in General Education Program

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**Abstract** University students now attend a variety of general education courses to provide a foundation and broader perspective of knowledge across disciplines in Hong Kong. Among the variety of learning activities in such general education programs, students may have undergone different facets of transformation in university life. Students voluntarily prepare E-portfolios targeting the GE Student Outstanding Award and a campus-wide GE Eager to Share award scheme, with award levels through the General Education Office. While students make many instances of gained knowledge and skills in the structured curriculum, evidence of learning transformation through both the curriculum and cocurricular activities are analyzed and discussed from these E-portfolios.

**Keywords** General education · Transformative learning · E-portfolios · Competence · Generic skills · Metacognition

### Introduction

A general education (GE) curriculum was introduced in Hong Kong in 2012, when undergraduate degree programs were converted from three to four years. The University Grants Committee aims to set renewed learning experiences in university study so that there is a need to “strike the right balance between the breadth and the depth of such programs. This would, in addition to helping students master the necessary knowledge and skills for specific professions/disciplines, give them exposure to other learning areas and help them to develop a sense of integrity, a positive attitude, a broad vision and important generic skills” (Hong Kong Education Commission 2000: 9). The goal of the GE program is to promote whole-person education through exposure to a range of transferable skills, guiding principles, and attitudes that students will need in their future professional and

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personal lives. Students attend courses that are equivalent to 38 out of 128 credits (around 30%) covering more than a dozen three-credit courses for the GE program, which is now a requirement for undergraduate study in the university.

In such GE courses, not only may students build sound foundations for higher order thinking for academic requirements, they are also exposed to a range of learning opportunities. They will experience a variety of learning opportunities in addition to classroom-based lectures. This includes doing fitness tests in a physical laboratory for physical education; taking field trips to outlining islands to explore nature and cultural heritage; exploring city sculptures to examine cultural arts; interacting with stakeholders in communities when doing projects; designing and creating objects in a laboratory; and experiencing new technology applications such as 3D printing or Google Glass.

Apart from this rich mix of learning opportunities, they are assessed through writing essays, project presentations, producing multimedia footage, designing products/objects, quizzes and paper-based examinations on different courses. Among the types of assessment, students build different competences through authentic hands-on projects. They may report on professional practice by interviewing professionals, reflect on the Hong Kong legal system as experienced in the High Court, provide services to communities, and research social issues by conducting surveys and interviews.

In addition to this structured curriculum, they can opt to participate in off-campus GE activities such as taking field trips to interact with indigenous village people on their views on government policy on environmental sustainability, interacting with people playing street football, simulating living with disabilities to experience social inclusiveness, and building social communication and networking skills in small talks circles with business pioneers and students from other institutions. Students can develop transferable skills through such an array of activities.

## Learning Transformation

The change to a four-year curriculum has created the opportunity for university students to broaden their horizons through GE. Students can reflect on the process of learning across courses, so that they are made aware of the process of how they make inquiries to meaning-making through metacognition (White and Frederiksen 1998). Students as 'self-authors' create their e-portfolios (Fitch et al. 2008: 51), whereby they can integrate and synthesize what has been learned over time; they can build personal and academic profiles, and evaluate personal interest as they search for their academic pathways for studying majors and gaps in their competence (Miller and Morgaine 2009).

During this transformational learning process, students may critically reexamine and reflect on their beliefs, assumptions, and values while acquiring new knowledge through reframing from a new perspective through the process of personal and social change (Mezirow 2000). Cranton (2002: 64–65) identifies seven facets during this transformation:

1. An activating event that typically exposes a discrepancy between what a person has always assumed to be true and what has just been experienced, heard or read.
2. Articulating assumptions, that is, recognizing underlying assumptions that have been assimilated uncritically and are largely unconscious.
3. Critical self-reflection, that is, questioning and examining assumptions in terms of where they came from, the consequences of holding them, and why they are important.
4. Being open to alternative viewpoints.
5. Engaging in discourse, where evidence is weighed, arguments assessed, alternative perspectives explored, and knowledge constructed by consensus.
6. Revising assumptions and perspectives to make them more open and better justified.
7. Acting on revisions, behaving, talking and thinking in a way that is congruent with transformed assumptions or perspectives.

The first six steps are predominantly a cognitive process in which critical thinking on beliefs, values, and assumptions is reconsidered. However, this would influence what we do and subsequently build new meanings and understanding through reframing from individuals' pre-assumptions in actions and experiences (Clark and Wilson 1991).

## Writing E-Portfolios in GE Program

About 84% of members of the Association of American Universities use e-portfolios at the program level to facilitate student reflection on learning and assist program assessment (Mayowski and Golden 2012). Thoughtfully selected artifacts produced by students in GE courses in a program can demonstrate both impact learning and quality accomplishments (Ring and Ramirez 2012). However, it is not common to create e-portfolios for learning or assessment in courses or programs in universities in Hong Kong. While students are encouraged to complete all GE courses in the first two years in Hong Kong Baptist University, they receive a collection of final grades from courses attended. Grades and marks may easily be interpreted as student achievements with reference to the cohort or the holistic criteria, but little is known about individuals' comprehensive cognitive and tacit knowledge.

However, there is much information about individuals' capability and insights gained through a spectrum of learning opportunities. This includes conventional coursework, off-campus GE activities, cocurricular activities, and other forms of life experience such as volunteer activities and internships. Only coursework is assessed, and students are encouraged to do reflections after attending these activities. Information of these events can be viewed at <http://ge.hkbu.edu.hk/students/geoffcampus/>. To encourage students to build a deeper understanding of personal

growth through the GE curriculum, the General Education Office invites students to reflect on different GE learning experiences, and it has created a campus-wide GE Eager to Share award scheme through e-portfolios. Students can build their first e-portfolios from the first year or share reflections on learning outcomes after the completion of all GE courses.

Students are prepared intensively for the format and requirements of writing that is prescribed in the criteria in high-stakes examinations, which is quite different from the academic writing required in university study (Acker and Halasek 2008). First-year students go through a transition from school to university study, which includes learning to evaluate critically the second-hand data available on the Internet, and work through a methodological process of an inquiring research to collect valid and reliable data for analysis. As a first attempt to build student e-portfolios for the GE Eager to Share award scheme, students are provided with guidelines that include eligibility, suggested topics, popular platforms, notes on copyright and privacy, and samples of exemplary past works (<http://ge.hkbu.edu.hk/students/ge-share/topics/#eng>). Awards are evaluated according to the variety of GE experiences, the depth of reflection, the effective use of multimedia, the language used, and clarity in the organization of content (<http://ge.hkbu.edu.hk/students/ge-share/awards/#eng>). A variety of presented e-portfolios from other university students are shown to encourage creativity when building the e-portfolios. Students participating in the scheme can select any public platform to host their work, and they are made aware of the public audience. In addition, in order to promote extended reflections across university study, students have a second chance to submit their work if they are not awarded the highest level in their senior year, and they can choose to include competence gained through learning in their majors as a demonstration of learning transformation in the four-year curriculum. Although the number of first-round submissions was not high, there is evidence to trace some facet of learning transformation.

## **Transformative Learning Unveiled in Student E-Portfolios**

The primary purpose of employing e-portfolios is their use as a 'reflective tool' for learners, who can reflect on the process of standing back from experience and examine how that experience creates personal insights and meaningful knowledge as part of their holistic growth through thoughtful integration into the entire program (Love and Cooper 2004; Challis 2005). A transformational learning process can be observed through the reflective discourse in student e-portfolios. Some students make reflections after they have completed a dozen or more GE courses; some submit their learning journals in which they select topics across college life, and the reflection goes beyond formal and informal learning experiences. Four students using platforms Wix, Mahara, Weebly with self-selected structure, and Wordpress in diary format, have been selected for discussion. In the reflective

discourse, students generally describe what they have done to illustrate growth in knowledge or skills instead of changes in perceptions or assumptions.

Students attending core courses such as *English II* or *Public Speaking* have opportunities to practice and debate what they did not have the chance to do in school. Student names have been replaced with pseudonyms ‘A,’ ‘B,’ ‘C,’ and ‘D’ in this section. Student A: “my first time debate experience in English of which I learned to prepare a good debate speech and how to respond to criticism in an effective way.” In the core IT course, students build IT skills after acquiring different educational tools for learning. Student C used “[a] platform called ‘bubble us,’ and I can manage to organize this complicated and fragile information using a large but clear mindmap.” Student A showed her creativity by producing a video with two classmates and posting it on the YouTube platform.

Apart from mastery of different forms of communication, university students are challenged with real-world practice through which they establish heightened awareness of ethical practice in disciplines. In an interdisciplinary GE course, student C learned that the “degree of ethics in a company was interrelated with its profits,” and he learned to make judgements on the ethical behavior of employees and the practices of companies.

However, transformational learning is embedded in the cultural context, so learners reflect with reference to psycho-cultural assumptions (Mezirow 1981). Students need to take a course from the core category *History and Civilization*. Student B, a Hong Kong Chinese student, may have had some background knowledge of China as part of his school curriculum but not be able to critically review different primary artifacts to learn about the impact of imperialism and how to interpret these sources through the eyes of modern China until attending university study. However, when exploring between the lines, assumptions can be extracted from those students who were born in the 1990s.

I learn to analyse various types of historical primary source, including art, literature, material objects and propaganda, so as to explain aspects of China’s interactions with the modern world...enhance my understanding of the complexity of China’s relations with the world, which ranged from imperialism and violence to artistic and literary exchange...to think in a more internationally-aware way...need to acquire a basic but broad ranging familiarity with the history, literature, regional geography and economics of various peoples around the globe...enhance my sense of a global brotherhood...allows me to gain a more profound sense of my own culture [broadening mindset and attitude]. [Student B]

Student B did not elaborate further on the types of propaganda used, but the scope of his personal view seemed to be more ready to extend to alternatives, i.e., from local to global, while students were expected to assert individual thoughts and demonstrate an awareness of the uses and limitations of different historical evidence in the course.

Apart from the campus-based curriculum, students can participate in off-campus activities that enable them to extend experiences beyond the curriculum. First-hand personal experience as a volunteer can enable these students to interact with people in need in Hong Kong.

I have joined the social service program held by Wofoo. As a student, we could only know the second-hand information reported by the journalist. We went to Kowloon City to visit some subdivided houses. This program enabled me to gain first-hand information on the plight of the lower class, also providing me an opportunity to learn how to help those people in need skillfully. For example, the technique of being a volunteer, communication skills and the correct attitude of being a volunteer. Moreover, it provided me with an opportunity to teach those children English, to help them tackle their academic problems, to make a special connection with the people living in different environments in the same society. [Student C]

The impact on students through community-based learning is notable because they are actively involved in the process of relief actions in which they can learn the psychological aspects and complexity of caregiving (Amer et al. 2013). Through direct contact, student C was in the first stage of transformation, and she personally learned about the gap between reality and news reported by journalists. She had the opportunity to reach out so that she could provide short-term but direct assistance with children living in a substandard environment. She gained tacit skills as a caregiver, although she did not elaborate on the change in her perception of people whom she contacted. However, she gained a heightened awareness of the gap between the environment where she lives and people living in subdivided houses in the same city.

Besides volunteer experiences, there is a wider possibility for university students to participate in exchange programs through which they are exposed to different cultural practices, and the cultural differences provide a good opportunity to question assumptions on ways of doing or ways of working (Wright and Clarke 2010). Students in Hong Kong can choose to experience exchange programs during the summer, and the impact on such students can still be observed.

From Day 1 of the exchange program, I learned not only to be independent, but also to be adaptable and more flexible when a power failure could happen from time to time. Now I appreciate more the stable electricity supply in my home country. [Student A]

It's lovely to teach a group of adorable children in Yingde province. I am teaching them English, while they are teaching badminton skills to me! Such an unforgettable experience! The program not only enhanced my teamwork training and social skills but also raised my sense of social responsibility in seeing these disadvantaged children get educated. [Student B]

Students A and B both realized the prominent divergence of living standards between the place they visited and Hong Kong. Apart from sensing the privileges of living in Hong Kong, experience gained through exchange programs triggers pre-assumptions, that is, a regular energy supply and education for children do not happen around the world. While business students can learn about social responsibility at a corporate level, exchange programs can reach individuals and instill responsibility from curriculum into community.

Nevertheless, the pace of change in the process of transformation varies from person to person. University students as young adult learners have established identities and values, and they were born around the time the United Kingdom

government transferred the sovereignty of Hong Kong to China in 1997. These students are at a key stage of becoming independent in terms of thinking and ways of doing things. Student D unveiled a subconscious question about his identity, although he knows that Hong Kong has been part of China for over 18 years now

I attended another photography class at Communication University of China in Beijing, last 48 hours in Beijing, I still couldn't feel my nationality as a Chinese, but a Hongkongese who started to realize that one day.... [Student D]

Student D certainly did not share the identity of being a Chinese at the time of writing her e-portfolio when she reported off-campus activity in Beijing. The first-hand experience in her homeland did not unfreeze her established belief that Hong Kong is not part of China, although the sovereignty of Hong Kong had been formally handed back after 157 years of British governance. Nevertheless, there is a degree of resistance expressed by student D, and university students are at the stage in their lives where they are building critical analysis and defining individual identity with respect to the historical context (Fairbrother 2003).

Writing e-portfolios is a process of self-reflection, and reflection on actions is one of the most important lifelong learning skills; starting from self-observation and self-reaction, individuals build enhanced self-awareness (Zimmerman 2002). Subsequently, this may contribute to continuous improvement of personal and professional practice (Leitch and Day 2001) and building of metacognition at a personal (Abhakorn 2014) and team level (Nonose et al. 2014).

I can really experience great team spirit among all our team members. Everyone is doing their best, showing qualities of self-awareness on being confident to oneself, qualities of social awareness on placing empathy on other team members, qualities of relationship management on making good collaboration with teammates and handling conflicts smoothly among members.... We are able to voice views that are unpopular and go out on a limb for what is right. [Student B]

At the end of the day, no matter how good your speeches were, only one passed draft resolution would count as this is why we have a marathon-like conference to discuss possible alternatives for the existing problematic international bodies under United Nations.... I realized that how much cowardice I demonstrated as I didn't raise motions frequently. Despite delivering a couple of satisfactory speeches, I was too conservative to raise motions since I feared to say anything wrong. [Student D]

Communication skills, whether spoken or written, are key skills to develop as university students prepare for their future careers. Both students B and D have gone through self-reflection, and they have both addressed the heightened awareness of individual performance when working in different group activities. Student B seemed to have built skills in managing conflicts among team members and can communicate diverse views, while student D felt confidence in making speeches but was still lacking confidence in raising motions. Students reflect on their perceptions of confidence in their communication competence. Nevertheless, growth in language competence can be achieved through continual practice in an

immersed environment, which can be shown through reflection in their e-portfolios across years of studying in a university (Buzzetto-More and Alade 2008).

Apart from building language competence, the process of reflection encourages students to revisit established assumptions and original perspectives and make adjustments for alternatives (Mezirow 1990). With a lesser degree of British cultural influence, university students have now been more exposed to Chinese culture compared with their parents. In this university, students have an option to learn more about Chinese medicine practices in GE courses. Courses may cover foundational knowledge of different types of Chinese medicine, Chinese herbal therapy to maintain physical health, acupuncture, and health services in Chinese medicine clinics. Learning experiences in the GE courses serve to build a general understanding of Chinese medicine. However, this provides an alternative perspective to pursue health concepts through Chinese medicine, as claimed by student A: “it is good to learn about health preservation from different perspectives, both the Western and Chinese concepts.”

Many students remark on the opportunities to have varied GE learning experiences, including internships and voluntary work. Unsurprisingly, some remark on actions taken after having experiences in GE courses in these e-portfolios. This includes “creat[ing] an online platform for people to exchange or just take the unwanted used items”; “assist[ing] in paddy rice revitalization and other farming-related work in Lai Chi Wo to help to redevelop the rural community there in a sustainable way...changing my lifestyle bit by bit—reducing my daily unnecessary consumption”; “Although it is very common to do assignments for the sake of marks and grades, we decided to keep putting our thoughts and ideas in the blogs after the grading of the ‘assignment’...eventually we continue our individual stories in Facebook.” Actions are taken because they have established renewal values; students learn to be responsible for actions if they want to maintain a sustainable living habit; and they take continuing action as they redefine assignments as sustainable assessment.

The General Education Office also arranges theme-based off-campus activities, including field visits, guest talks, experiential events, and watching films. Students can participate in these activities without thinking about assessment. Nevertheless, this can have an impact on some students. In one case, a student reflected deeply after watching the drama *Tuesdays with Morrie*, which is a memoir by American writer Mitch Albom, on life’s greatest lesson, and he decided not to go for a job interview for a government position because he had learned to redefine life satisfaction, not how much one could earn but how one could work on purposeful academic activities, while many university students build profiles based on a variety of working experiences. While students show growth in skills and knowledge through both curricular and cocurricular activities, they start to build the capability to make informed decisions and take action for themselves.

## Limitations in Creating E-Portfolios in GE Program

The variety of GE courses means students can experience multiple exposures and challenges in different contexts in the early years in university life. Reflections through e-portfolios serve as an integral part of different learning experiences (Tosh et al. 2005). The General Education Office aims to encourage them to develop the habit of learning through reflective journal writing using e-portfolios. While some students have had experience in a few GE courses as a requirement to submit the assessment tasks in those courses, many students have little or no experience in building e-portfolios. Therefore, samples selected for discussion in this chapter are very limited, given that all students attend the GE program. Although a briefing session was organized, the participation rate in both the briefing session and the GE Eager to Share award scheme on the first attempt was low. This may be due to a policy that there was no direct email communication from the GE office with individual students while the award scheme was being launched, after all forms of orientation had been completed. Nevertheless, samples of student e-portfolios have been selected, but they are not homegrown examples to provide some concrete ideas on reflection of learning experiences. With hindsight, there can be more concerted efforts between GE educators to encourage student reflection and the use of e-portfolios as tools for continuous learning in addition to the Student e-Portfolio Community of Practice.

## Conclusion

Terrel Rhodes, vice president for the Office of Quality, Curriculum and Assessment at the Association of American Colleges & Universities, writes: “e-portfolios are one of the best technologies available to institutions of higher education and their students, as they seek the opportunities to resist the atomization and privatization of education in favor of more integrative and meaningful forms of liberal education—the forms of education that faculty and employers have repeatedly claimed are essential for success in college, the economy, and civic life” (2014: 3). Students can have a variety of learning experiences in the GE courses they attend, including developing competence in service leadership through community service, public-speaking skills through planning structured outlines and paired debates, research skills through making authentic inquiries, digital storytelling skills to produce multimodal reports, and practising critical reflections in blogs. Although these learning experiences may be summarized in the form of grades and marks in different courses, students are encouraged to create their e-portfolios to capture the revealing moments of learning and the representative work they have produced in the first two years of university study.

Generally, these e-portfolios serve to showcase memorable events or activities. Not only do they demonstrate a variety of evidence-based learning (Yancey 2013), but, most importantly, e-portfolios are the testimony for individuals' progress across courses and a period of time (Young 2002; Miller and Morgaine 2009; Yancey 2009). Learning transformation may proceed at different rates and in different directions, it is neither a linear nor a unidirectional path. Students can show the process of personal growth in which they have undergone transformational learning and reflect on experiences that renew their understanding of personal beliefs, assumptions, and values (Ajoku 2015) while they build personal identities through cultural-context activities and set forth on individual academic pathways (Miller and Morgaine 2009). Grades and marks can provide a quick indication of personal attainment, but e-portfolios show the richness of student transformation in their individual learning journeys. These e-portfolios represent snapshots of the early stage of transformation while these students are undertaking the university study. However, there are many more learning opportunities to come, because they need to revisit individual assumptions and perspectives when they attend the senior years. Most importantly, these future graduates are encouraged to start to establish a habit of reflective writing that embraces reflection on actions as a preparation for them to become reflective practitioners in the twenty-first century.

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