

# ePORTFOLIOS AND eARGUMENTATION

## CHAPTER 4

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### INTRODUCTION

It is commonly perceived that students who work in environments involving Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) invest differently in solving learning tasks, since these environments promote relevant progress in the conceptual changes of learning and of educational innovation.

In distance learning and in web-based environments, online identities are created through text and its authorship, and most interactions happen in written form.

Creating learning objects like ePortfolios is a task that demands involvement and reflexion. So it consists on more factors to expose one's skills and capacities and to give greater visibility to the author's work.

The success of ePortfolios also depends on the interaction between the author and the tutor and/or his/her peers. This interaction is considered as one of the more interesting and important factors of improving skills and knowledge because the outcomes are related, on one hand, with the best performances of the "ePortfolio author" and, on the other, the difficulties s/he shows are detected and viewed by the tutor that can guide her/him in this learning process.

### ARGUMENTATIVE SKILLS

Nowadays, considering the global society and multiculturalism, the ability to argue should be developed to achieve better dialogue between people of all countries.

Arguing is very important, since students and all people need to be able to make themselves clear, justify, discuss, and defend their own ideas. Besides, it is very important for the learning process because according to the literature argumentative skills help students develop and structure their knowledge in a more sustainable way.

Activities aimed at working on argumentative texts, suggested in several textbooks, often show a simplistic, linear and reductive conception of such texts, with consequences for teaching and learning. What's more, they are introduced and trained too late in the schooling process.

Discourse activity is limited mostly to understanding and producing narrative or descriptive texts, since argumentative texts are considered too complex for students.

Argumentation has, in fact, specific structures and characteristics that differ from other types of discourse. It is based on a mechanism of persuasion that aims at convincing someone or changing one's opinion to reach consensus. One of the fundamental questions of this type of discourse is giving the speakers the useful tools (abilities) for solving conflicts between contradictory statements.

The dialogic dimension of argumentative discourse is more easily understood if one sees argumentation as defending personal points of view, as mutually understanding, refuting, changing, extending and improving a group of arguments and counter-arguments, between two or more issues, aiming at resolving tension or a conflict resulting from a problem-situation, considering a particular context and target reader.

Choosing a pedagogy based on negotiation and collaboration, it is undoubtedly important for teaching in general and especially — due to the argumentation dialectic character — for optimizing students' argumentative skills.

Writing (negotiating and arguing in the academic context), or academic writing, refers to facts or speculations that logically support one new idea or evidence. However, it is also persuasive, because convincing arguments must support it.

Academic writing is very demanding. Studies show that teachers, in general, are not providing their students with academic writing skills, and that they are not very specific about their demands.

This is the same as saying that arguing requires very demanding and complex cognitive skills like questioning, interpreting, judging, self evaluation (reflecting), and also to find one's own strategies for solving problems, memorizing, and learning how to learn.

It requires critical thinking, due to the fact that it is a set of ideas which teaches to think and to learn. Critical thinking consists of examining ideas, detecting arguments, and analyzing arguments such as sub-skills of analysis—, among other abilities like interpreting, analysing, evaluating and inferring, as well as taking into consideration evidence concepts, methods or contexts on which judgement/thought is based.

## ONLINE LEARNING

As this text concerns ePortfolios and eArgumentation, a brief approach to eLearning is necessary, in this context. It is known that, for some students, ICT may be and may become better cognitive partners for advanced problem solving functions if compared to the notebook and the pencil.

Literature about online learning communities and online interactions is abundant. It is true that eLearning and blended learning have proved their potential and for a lot of students it is a good alternative to traditional learning activities, depending on the students' learning styles. This function is as important as encouraging students to discover knowledge virtualisation and its actualisation dynamics.

As a matter of fact lots of studies show that online activities have positively influenced students' attitudes towards their own writing and argumentative capacities. Such activities have also contributed towards their awareness of ICT complexity.

However, efficient online performance does not necessarily correspond to efficient offline performance. Recent studies also show that students with well organized argumentative reasoning, and with a strong capacity of initiative and complex contributions, exhibit a poor offline performance. A positive attitude towards online tools and a solid familiarity with them are decisive factors for success online (Pinho, 2008; Loureiro, 2007).

Studies of this nature constitute a contribution towards validating online collaboration and learning strategies and an increased knowledge about the development of reflexive and written skills in web based environments and their contribution to the construction of knowledge. Finally they constitute a starting point for future research in these areas: (i) analysing the importance of learning strategies and tools created online for the development of

reflective skills; (ii) examining the contribution of guided online interaction with advanced tools; (iii) determining the influence of the online development of critical thinking skills on academic writing and ePortfolio construction.

## **ePORTFOLIOS**

ePortfolios are a learning tool and strategy that are strongly based on three competences: writing skills, reflexive skills and self evaluation skills. Thus, the connection of ePortfolios with the previously mentioned statements about arguing and critical thinking is, nowadays, in the educational and life long learning context, evident.

In the construction of ePortfolios learning becomes more comparable, visible, portable and transparent (if we consider the 4 principles of the implementation of the Bologna process). The ePortfolio accompanies the student and future professional wherever s/he goes and it facilitates the emergence and visibility of an European citizen.

The ePortfolio evolves around 4 different axes: (i) personification/uniqueness; (ii) reflection; (iii) progression; and (iv) sharing. As a matter of fact, ePortfolios can positively influence teaching, learning and evaluation and can create a new concept of the classroom: a place where learning is constructed according to the individual rhythm of each student which includes valuing reflective thought, experience, intuition, and the knowledge of each individual and the belief that difficulties can be overcome.

Therefore learning must be seen differently. It is a process where teaching and learning actors must possess other skills. The teacher is not there only to judge, but principally to help, to guide the learning process.

The best capacities of the student are elevated and s/he receives good feedback on them, so s/he becomes more able to overcome his/her difficulties and fragilities and is therefore motivated to move forward.

Considering those principles the ePortfolio becomes a reflexive narrative that gives each learner a voice in a way that implicates the learner in the process and in the multiple interactions between teaching and learning. This process is always unfinished and intentional. The learners interact with contents and identify their own learning strategies, giving them meaning.

It is a continuous process and the relationship between teaching and learning (teacher/learner) becomes more equal and democratic. Feedback is timely and the "areas of non-knowledge", in Sá-Chaves' words, become salient but without the stigma of the negative notion of the repressed "unlearned", negatively judged by the traditional school (2004).

It is not hyperbolic to say that both teacher and learner, at some point, change roles. The teacher is now the tutor, the moderator and the facilitator and the student is the meta-cognitive reflexive learner, able to make decisions about his/her own learning and way of learning, a pro-active intervener.

The new attitude of the teacher has an impact on learning. In this relationship that includes multiple facets due to the interaction with teacher, peers and learning itself, the student becomes an active participant in his/her own learning, making meta-cognitive decisions about the whole process.

The teacher as counsellor, as an advisor and mediator has never had more meaning than now. The end of training can evidence the process of learning evidenced by a new deep and amplified knowledge and a gradual, progressive, intentional and supported process from the scientific point of view.

## CONCLUSIONS

In a process of this nature, that has a strong connection between both the meaning and the characteristics of learning change, the tasks developed by learners have other implications.

As far as research is concerned, it is important to construct new narratives using the narratives of students, Novel readings render new insights into these narratives, taking into consideration that uniqueness and sharing, interaction and reflection, are both important in the construction of a more pro-active student working *online* and *offline*, interactively and reflexively, individually and collaboratively.

Web 2.0 tools can be useful to reinforce learning through mechanisms based on the concept of collective intelligence. This web of social interaction and content production promotes the new concept of collective intelligence that is of the utmost importance for the development of one's learning.

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