



Off the beaten path with ePortfolio & virtual conferencing: Pioneer projects in Humanities & Social sciences

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Facing an on-going transformation of classical research strategies and current occupational profiles due to an increasing amount of digital sources and tools, students of more traditional humanities need to be taught media-oriented and must develop new online competencies to be set for a successful future path. The blended learning projects “Great Depression online” and “Sociology of Education Intercultural” give an example of how the flexible usage of ePortfolios and virtual conferencing can broaden each student’s mind.

To enhance traditional history teaching means to adopt new methods in doing research, in distributing findings and teaching regarding the increasing amount of digital written, oral and visual sources. “Great depression online” demonstrates how the usage of ePortfolio and virtual conferencing can offer intercultural learning experiences by teaching history-specific questions such as source criticism of digital documents within a blended learning setting. The aim is to teach historical online competence to prepare history students for their academic and vocational future.

“Sociology of Education Intercultural” offers students of social sciences a new, intercultural learning experience and supports them in developing online competencies within their subject. They practice using online resources and the qualitative method “interview” by using ePortfolio and virtual conferencing. An international peer-review also is offered by the use of virtual conferencing.

Keywords: case study, best practice, ePortfolio, virtual conferencing, online competence

Teaching historical online competence

History is often considered a traditional subject with conservative attitudes towards teaching. Therefore it seems that teaching history students with online tools is not valued as a rigorous academic teaching expertise. But the evaluation results of the EU project eHLEE (eHistory Learning Environment and Evaluation) emphasize that there is a need to create new online learning opportunities for history classes. From 2004-2006 the project collected information on activities concerning e-learning history practices in European universities, evaluated best practices and gave recommendations on how to enhance the use of eLearning tools within the field of history. The research results prove that historians are forced to adopt new methods in doing research, in distributing their findings and in teaching history. But even in 2010, there are only a few publications on teaching history online available.

The teaching project “Great depression online” demonstrates the opportunities eLearning can offer to meet the future needs of history students. They gain historical online competence which is not only important for their studies but for their vocational career.

Course concept

The relationship between past and present plays an important role for researching and teaching historical topics. As the current economical crisis forces new interest in the “Great Depression” (economical crisis during the 1920s) the teaching project “Great Depression online” attracts non-history major as well as history major undergraduate students. The fact that all important source materials about the economical crisis during the 1920s are available in digital format (e.g. Library of Congress, National Archives or the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute) was the reason for creating a blended learning course with the purpose of providing historical online competence. It demonstrates how history-specific questions such as source criticism can be transferred to a blended learning setting.

Due to Jan Hodel (expert of teaching history online in German-speaking countries) the historical online competence is based on the traditional academic skills “reading, writing, and speaking”. These competencies are now influenced by new media and need to adjust to the future needs of history students. Therefore history students need to develop new research strategies and learn how to evaluate digital sources. They need to know how to publish and present their research results online. It is even relevant to know how to use a blog (epistemological writing) or to use a wiki (collaborative writing).

As historical research is based on a variety of sources and students are always expected to consider the multiplicity of history, a blended learning setting for a history class must be enhanced by using online tools which support these ideas. Students can practice the use of digitally-available material and become more aware of the need for an adequate source criticism if they demonstrate their work results in a digital format. An ePortfolio enables a student to demonstrate their views on history and their historical online competency in a creative and progressive way. By collecting, evaluating and utilizing a wide variety of digital sources a student can present a historical topic from multiple points of view.

In German universities, ePortfolios are not common for assessment or accreditation, so the students of “Great Depression online” are introduced to the ePortfolio as a teaching method for the first time. By introducing the usage of an ePortfolio within this history class, the students can be given an outlook on how an ePortfolio can demonstrate their achievements. It can document their learning progress by making connections through reflection between what they learn in different contexts (academic, workplace, community).

Using the open-source software “Mahara” the students compose an ePortfolio including pieces that provide evidence of their ability to research and evaluate digital sources. Due to the fact that a majority of written, oral and visual documents about the Great Depression are available online the students need to develop their own research strategies to decide whether sources are relevant for their ePortfolio. The reflective action of creating an ePortfolio is documented on a project blog and includes the questions “What is history?” and “Why do I study history?” It encourages the non-history major and history major students to understand and demonstrate their learning experiences. The students developed their own feedback criteria for a peer-review process in the ePortfolio building assignment. Before each student or each team hold a short oral presentation about their work, the students prepare a review in small groups. The following discussion encourages the students either to revise their work or even to defend their work as in real life.

New Deal (main page)

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My Lunatic Asylum

Mahara Pros and Cons of an ePortfolio

Pro:

- sleek presentation (if you are willing to put a lot of time and nerves in the creation of your ePortfolio)
- can be clearly organised to provide comfortable navigation
- possibility to implement a vast variety of media such as Youtube videos

Con:

- creation of galleries not possible. One has to add every picture with a single "picture block", which gets very annoying with a large number of pictures
- a newsheet has to be added, edited, etc in order to provide links to every part of your topic. you can present everything on one page with different text boxes, if you don't mind losing track of where you are currently navigating
- too much effort for too little outcome
- intricate navigation of the mahara site and its functions
- restricted html functions (almost non existent)
- extremely limited upload space
- text is not clipboard saved temporarily

Introduction

This e-Portfolio, crafted during the eLearning seminar "The great depression online", provides a basic overview of the NewDeal, a series of american economic programs initiated in the 1930's.

A brief historical summary of the events is complemented by a list of programs set in motion during the 1930's as well as a biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the initiator of the NewDeal. Moreover a selection of web-links and literature is offered for further reading. As there have been many pictures taken during the time of the Great Depression, a small gallery is also added to this project to paint a more vivid picture of the matter at hand.



Driving to California during the Great Depression

Figure 1: ePortfolio by Daniel Anders

Because the cultural context is always part of historical documents and focusing on American documents, it is important for the students to understand the different cultural approaches to the economical crisis during the 1920s. Therefore the students are introduced to the virtual classroom iLinc by the German company Netucate, a video conferencing tool. Video conferencing enables the students to discuss the Great Depression and the on-going economical crisis with the American economist Robert Murphy. The session at the virtual classroom demonstrates how other cultures have different national historiographical traditions. To complete the blended learning course there will be a virtual classroom session with Jan Hodel who will discuss with the students about the meaning of online competence for historians.

Teaching the qualitative method interview in an intercultural online environment

To meet the future needs of today's students, online education can contribute to international mobility. Students are expected to expand their knowledge of other cultures, languages and scientific discourses to be better equipped for the increasingly globalised labour market. Usually the only opportunity to experience intercultural learning environments in higher education means to study abroad. Unfortunately, still many students cannot afford to achieve this international mobility due to their financial situation or other reasons. The blended learning course "Sociology of Education Intercultural" demonstrates how international mobility can be integrated into social sciences by teaching online.

Lena Kamps's Blog

Reflection about my study

Why is qualitative research relevant for your studies?

Qualitative research is very important for the social sciences, because the scientist's search for

in-depth understanding of human behavior and the reasons that govern such behavior.

This understanding is also relevant for our topic, because we try to comprehend the living and study conditions of people from another part of the world.

You can't underestimate the importance, but there are also some disadvantages:

The results can be very easily influenced, because you work together with people. You have to be also very careful when you create such a study, because otherwise the results can be adulterated.

What are the (dis-)advantages by doing a little research project?

A little project is very manageable, you can't lose the overview. On the other hand is your basic population too small to get a presentable picture of the situation.

geposted von Lena Kamps am 19. January 2010, 23:36

Jared's life/ My life

If I try to compare the things that I knew from Jared's life to my life especially concerning our studies, I have to admit that I'm a little bit jealous. He lives in a very nice and sunny part of the world and studies in one of the best universities in the world. It also seems like he really likes his field and is really into it.

Okay, I also like my studies...

He finances his studies with his job as lecturer and with a scholarship. I have at least three jobs, but I don't really need the money for my tuition fees, "just" for living.



The campus



Link to the Department of Sociology/ University of California

<http://sociology.berkeley.edu/>

Interview with Jared Olesen

What is your name?

Jared Olesen

How old are you?

Figure 2: ePortfolio by Lena Kamps

The course concept

The theoretical framework of the course "Sociology of Education Intercultural" is provided by the work of Bourdieu, his ideas of habitus, capital, social reproduction and the effects of educational systems on social inequality. It guides the students while exploring one foreign educational system by using online sources. A wide variety of online sources demonstrate how an educational system can be evaluated from different points of view. To extend their research strategy they are introduced to the qualitative method "interview". To investigate and compare other foreign educational systems each student does an interview with a foreign student about his/her experiences within the educational system of his/her country. They experience new aspects of the qualitative method interview if interviewing a foreigner from a different cultural background. By using the software application "Skype" the interview can easily be done via internet and is recorded with the free Skype-recorder "PrettyMay". Doing an interview online is a common but still relatively new technique used mainly for market research, therefore challenging, but real life practice for social sciences students. They present their results on an ePortfolio (Mahara). An ePortfolio enables them a creative approach to their results and gives them an example of how they can use an ePortfolio to document and demonstrate their skills. Using virtual conferencing offers them an intercultural peer-review from foreign students and teachers. Students learn how educational systems and the question of social inequality can be rated differently due to various cultural understandings of education.

Future of teaching humanities & social sciences online?

As demonstrated in the teaching projects "Great Depression online" and "Sociology of Education Intercultural", there are many reasons for using online tools to enhance traditional teaching. They show how blended learning settings can be introduced to the humanities and social sciences by using it as a didactic concept to teach a subject and related vocational skills without over-emphasising the technical side of eLearning. This non-traditional way of teaching also attracts new groups of students (non-major

students, part-time students). The usage of worldwide used online-tools like Moodle, Mahara or video conferencing creates new sustainability for (inter)national co-operations in teaching and research.

To gain intercultural teaching experience is very useful for students, as scientific research is done worldwide, often in international cooperation. To exchange opinions or to compare results online gives them an insight into the everyday practice of peer-review. As teaching online is less expensive than inviting prestigious guest lecturers, it gives students and staff of economically disadvantaged higher education institutes the opportunity to extend their scientific investigation. Teaching humanities and social sciences online will also promote and justify demands for access to open sources e.g. digital archives, textbooks and statistical data.

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