

LEARNER DEVELOPMENT

A frame for learning 2

Annie McDonald
continues her analysis of the
European Language Portfolio
with a look at the Dossier.

In my last ETP article, we saw how the Biography, one of the three documents which comprise the European Language Portfolio (ELP), facilitates language learning. The ELP (a document for learners of languages no matter where they are) comprises a Biography, a Dossier and a Passport, with each component performing distinct yet interconnected functions. The Biography, as its name suggests, charts the language learning life-story of its owner. The Dossier functions as a container of examples of work which show levels of competence in one or more non-native languages. The Passport is a summary of the holder's linguistic competence and intercultural experiences. Like its namesake (or any ID card), it identifies who and what we are as we move from place to place, either across educational or language-teaching institutions, or regional or international boundaries.

In this article, I would like to turn to the Dossier, which, like the other components of the ELP, is little more than a template which metamorphoses into a visible record of language learning experiences over time.

A record of learning experience

A language learner's Dossier is essentially a file containing work which documents and illustrates language competence. Having students put work into a file serves to make sure that the work done on bits of paper ends up in one place, rather than ... well, goodness knows where. For some reason, most of my (university) students don't automatically follow this obvious procedure without prompting. Yet, a file

of, say, a year's work can be quite an impressive and useful document, especially for the learners. Furthermore, if we consider the opportunities presented by a Dossier, for both learners themselves and with further guidance from the teacher, we see what a remarkably ingenious tool it can be.

There are many versions of Dossiers in existence, either officially validated by the Council of Europe or commercially produced. They range from nicely decorated contents pages reflecting a coursebook syllabus (on which learners simply have to enter a page number for the piece of work) to completely blank contents pages to be updated continuously as new work is included in the Dossier. Degrees of control exercised over the work to be put into a Dossier can be either total, as in the case of work generated by a coursebook syllabus, or entirely free, with the holder having complete choice over what to include.

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For younger learners, the Dossier is something which can be shown to parents, siblings and friends and family, with all kinds of work eligible for inclusion. Types of work might include pictures, selected written work, documents, photos and souvenirs from countries the holder has visited (including transport tickets, menus and money), texts and examples of work such as audio or video recordings, posters or a reading record.

Similar types of work might be included by older learners, but the contents page might be more complex as it serves to index the material contained, describing the type of document, recording the language of the work, documenting the kind of work and the date on which it was included. It might give learners the

option to include work which is either individual or group work; typical or best work; work which is the result of spontaneous production or the final product after correction and redrafting; or work at an earlier stage of development or current stage of development. Like other documentation in the ELP, the Dossier ages up in design and activities whilst the learning principles which underpin the different models remain the same.

Evidence of learning

Work kept in a Dossier evidences learning. Examples of personal work both document and illustrate achievement or experiences which have been recorded in the Passport or the Biography. The Dossier is designed to play a central role in the learning process as work can be linked to action plans in the Biography. Students can be encouraged to use this to think more about their ways of learning and their success in language learning. They can loop back to the records they have been keeping in their Biography. When work has been produced to a required standard, the opportunity arises for learners to reflect on, redefine and plan their learning objectives: in other words, to learn more autonomously. Similarly, any records of pluri-lingual and pluri-cultural experiences and observations might serve to motivate learners to, for example, pursue more contacts and visits, and to read more or undertake further project work.

A public document

The Dossier is intended to be a public document, to be shown to various interested parties at different times and in different circumstances. It serves to facilitate mobility, and might be shown to educators, employers, in a meeting with a careers advisor, or when applying for a job or transferring to another school or higher educational sector. As the audience or interested party changes, so the materials can be changed to suit a new purpose, evidencing its flexibility and informative role. It is the holder who chooses what is presented to whom. One of our tasks as teachers, if we take the ELP on board, is to help learners make effective use of the power devolved to them as they seek to organise the products of their learning experiences into

appropriate documents to present to various audiences over time.

The process of selection

The task of selecting pieces of work demands reflection skills which don't necessarily need to be articulated by the learner. Simply deciding to include one piece of work as opposed to another can require the conscious activation of a whole repertoire of learning and assessment criteria. Over time, the activity of selecting work which tracks learning involves the learner in formative self-assessment of a concrete type, based on clear, visible and transparent evidence of competence. A teacher could use an individual's selection process as a basis for discussion on progress, learning styles and strategies. It goes without saying that any discussion between teacher and learner would be based on personal

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rather than class performance. This makes it particularly useful for mixed-ability classes, with progress evidenced on a relative basis. If there is space in an institutional assessment procedure, a student can be asked to present a selection of work for that mark.

A personal experience

My first experience with something akin to a Dossier was when I started my teaching life as a secondary school teacher of history in Liverpool, some 25 years ago. In one class, I had 30 unruly non-exam-stream pupils, with a rather huge legacy of learning failure behind them. We were to be together for two years, until they reached the magic age of 16 and were free to leave school, no doubt as fast as their legs could carry them. They were notorious, had the

reputation of being the worst class in the school, and I was dreading it.

The first hurdle was choosing a course for these pupils to follow and I decided to go for a two-year exam course with a 40 per cent continuous assessment component. Twelve pieces of coursework had to be submitted to an exam board by a certain date before students were allowed to enter the written exam. I was working on the assumption that, at least, these individuals would have the opportunity to succeed in something, if, over time, they managed to get coursework of a certain standard together.

Everyone had a file and it was to be kept in the classroom. Class time was set aside for coursework and we started out lockstep, everyone working on the same task. This would change. My idea was to get the pupils to do more than 12 pieces of work and, with my guidance if necessary, they would select the best for submission to the exam board. Over time, as the sheer quantity of work built up, I noticed a developing sense of pride and ownership, something much bigger than simply compliance with the teacher's instructions when it came to coursework classes. There was a sense of collaboration developing between us, and this also spilt over into other more traditional content-based classes. We all felt there was something to be gained from the time we spent together.

One day, just about a month before the final 12 best pieces of work had to be assembled and sent off, there was silence in the classroom as everyone worked intently on polishing thing up. Suddenly, a very difficult pupil, Mike, swore aloud – the 'F word'! I looked up, so too did the others, eyes fixed on me waiting to see how the teacher would react to this serious flouting of school rules. Mike, sensing a changed atmosphere in the classroom, also looked up from his work and asked his colleagues what the problem was. One brave soul told him what he'd said aloud. He looked aghast, asked me if it was true, I said yes, he apologised and got straight back down to work. I smiled and shrugged my shoulders at the rest of the class, and they got back down to their work. I realised he'd simply been frustrated at having made a mistake, and had sworn at himself. As a teacher, I just could not ask for any more by way of student commitment to producing to a self-imposed standard of work.

A frame for learning 2

The importance of dossier work

Nowadays, of course, we wonder about the efficacy of referring to coursework as a display of students' ability. It's so easy to get other people to do it for you, or to download and plagiarise from the internet. At the beginning of this academic year (September 2004), the headmaster of one of the best London schools called for an end to coursework as an assessment element. He described it as boring, being neither demanding nor stimulating, and rife with cheating. His school has the best examination results in the country and he was

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talking about some of his most able pupils! He might have a point, though – especially when coursework carries weight in formal assessment.

For me, however, the pedagogic value that accrues from dossier work is far too important for it to be dismissed. Rather than being too readily prepared to accept the point of view of the London headmaster, I think we need to focus more on the type of coursework we set our students. We should rely on our intuition as language teachers (after all, if your elementary student turns in a composition at C2 level worthy of publication, you're probably going to smell a rat), and we should put store by the learning objectives which underpin the Dossier. Some teachers in the higher education sector who piloted the Portfolio in the academic year 1999–2000 commented that what they

liked best was that it provided the opportunity to include all language learning experiences, not just those validated by diplomas.

The importance of the Dossier

Without coursework, my Liverpool group wouldn't have had the opportunity to tune in to learning over time, or witness personal growth and achievement. Having had their coursework accepted by the examining board, they were entered for the written exam. All my students now had a shot at success and were taking it – something absolutely unthinkable 18 months previously. And even 25 years ago, they certainly wouldn't have been so stupid as to hand in a piece of work on the history of the British canal system containing chunks of text lifted from a museum catalogue. They knew that I'd know!

In the ELP context, without official attestation sheets or examination certificates worthy of entry in the Passport, 'claims' to be at a level evidenced by a Dossier full of someone else's work is not going to take the holder very far. The Dossier, like the other documents of the ELP, enhances the development of learner responsibility and learner autonomy. Compiling a Dossier contributes to the continuum of life-long learning, where individuals need to be able to handle knowledge, update it, and to recognise and value learning.



In the next issue of *ETp* we'll take a look at the third and final part of the European Language Portfolio, investigating how the Passport draws on records and work in the Biography and Dossier, to represent a comprehensive summary of an individual's learning achievement in foreign languages. **ETp**



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