

Anything to declare? Language portfolios on degree and institution-wide language programmes

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As my last job was based at the London Institute, one of the world's largest providers of education in the field of arts, communication and design, I was already used to the importance of a portfolio. Indeed my legs still bear the scars and bruises of my regular contact with them on the crowded staircases and corridors of Camberwell, Chelsea and Central Saint Martin's colleges of art and design.

Physical pain aside, I was lucky to have spent eight years in an environment where language acquisition had a very real purpose, namely to enable talented design students to compete in the international marketplace with an acceptable level of linguistic competence. For example, most of the fashion jobs are in France and Italy, with Spain, Germany and even Japan being additional major league employers.

In order to work effectively in the studios over there, some knowledge of the target language is essential, and getting the right subject-specific mix in students' language tuition was an essential part of the teachers' job. We therefore developed – with the help and advice of the students, design staff and employers – a language portfolio, which would show off their language studies in the same way a student would present his or her designs.

We included business correspondence, designer profiles, CVs, personal and work profiles, transcriptions of qualifications, all selected and properly packaged to impress a potential employer. And it worked. Several of our students who were neck-and-neck with other students without a language profile got the desired jobs. Language portfolios tried, tested and found to be – in design terms – *absolutely fabulous!*

On the other hand, the students of the London School of Economics are not weighed down by black plastic portfolios. However, they are rather weighed down by ideas, concepts and above all the need to find solutions to the problems of the

world. Or, failing to find these solutions, they develop the alternative need to make a lot of money as quickly as possible in the financial markets. The one thing they do have in common with the students of my previous institution is the necessity and reality of competing with other students in the international marketplace. They have to act, think and, yes, even speak globally. And English – by the way – is not enough!

I was lucky to work with a new team of people who shared my desire to adapt this idea of a language portfolio to a different type of student. We had read with interest of the work done by Trinity College, Dublin, on developing a European Language Portfolio and based some of our new ideas on their recommendations. We decided to create an LSE-type language portfolio, which would bring together key elements of their study, and form a basis of concrete evidence to show a potential employer. We asked students to prepare a portfolio, which would contain:

- A detailed curriculum vitae
- Personal statements
- A video or CD of individual students speaking on a set topic
- Extended essays
- Personal projects
- Business correspondence
- Language qualifications and language history
- Teacher/student profiles
- Any other relevant material.

The reaction from students has been overwhelmingly positive. Despite the fact that it means extra work from an organisational point of view for the student (and consequently for the teacher, but how we suffer for our art...), the results over the past two years have been good. Degree students see it as an essential part of their study, and IWLP students see it as an important way of

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consolidating their weekly two-hour sessions. The portfolio acts as channel, personal organiser and, when pared down, a practical marketing tool to demonstrate in concrete terms what they have studied to a future employer.

It will be interesting to see if we can now marry the LSE’s “virtual” portfolio with the passport-type format of the European Language Council. Given the right promotion by governmental organisations, the right movers and shakers in the EU, and the international business community, this “language passport” may become as essential as the burgundy one some of us (lucky Schengen countries!) are still obliged to carry. But no matter

how things progress, the use of some sort of language portfolio seems to have become – for us, at least – an essential tool in the organisation of language teaching and in the promotion of positive linguistic outcomes.

USEFUL LINKS

European Language Portfolio

<http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio>

UK European Languages Portfolio for adults

<http://www.languagesnto.org.uk/careers/elp/eurlangport.htm>

European Language Portfolio (junior version)

<http://www.cilt.org.uk/primary/elp.htm>