

A DIGITAL PORTFOLIO IN VISUAL ARTS ?

Bernard-André Gaillot, June 2005, completed in 2014. Update 2024.

Summary and English translation of an encouraged research objective
in French secondary education

One of the debates that has shaped the teaching of visual arts over the last twenty years has been that of the usefulness of a “visual arts notebook”. This debate is still open, as there are strong arguments on each side: for some, artistic education takes place through the experience of “doing” and any enterprise of schooling content can only disrupt the creative vein or be only an infertile veneer; for others, the visual arts can only be legitimate as a discipline in its own right in the education system if the learning is identified, capitalized on and evaluated.

Between these two poles, a middle ground has often been established spontaneously by French teachers: the notebook has changed name, it has become a “traces notebook”, “documentary file” or “logbook”, it has changed form to transform into a box or even a real art object, sometimes. At the same time, technology has evolved and more and more teachers are using digital technology both to photograph student work and to archive and project artistic references. The student file presented for the French baccalaureate art option now includes the IT requirement and teacher certification has been operational since 2006.

In North America, from early grades onwards, the (paper) *portfolio* has been widely used for a long time. A first prototype of a digital portfolio was developed by David Niguidula, a researcher in educational technology, then tested between 1993 and 1996. This software was built from the programs and the student added to his file based on the reference elements. In Quebec, the electronic portfolio was tested from 1997 including for the personal work of students and a very elaborate model as well as its evaluation was developed by Helen Barrett in 1999-2000 from two main sources (Danielson & Abrutyn , 1997; Ivers & Barron, 1998): “the development of electronic portfolios will provide teachers and students with a powerful tool to demonstrate progress over time which is the core value of a portfolio”. It was the “memory of a school journey” which did not collect all the work of a student but a selection of the best, brought together by the student himself, accompanied by a summary text, with the aim of making take into account their acquired knowledge for certification or advancement to the next level.

Definitions

What is funny, as Carole Essautier-Bavay (2004) points out, is that “the concept of portfolio is historically associated with artistic disciplines, such as photography, visual arts or even architecture. In these areas, it is a collection of the artist's achievements presenting a sample of his work as well as his best achievements. It is intended to be presented to various interlocutors, such as publishing houses, clients or even the public” (we also think of the architectural project initiated by Brunelleschi). The Italian *portafoglio* gave *portfolio* in English.

For different sources, the portfolio is first defined as an “evolving set of documents and electronic resources which reflects the background and skills of the person who created it” (INRP document, March 2005). “Specific to each student, the portfolio includes the original or digitized copy of their homework or exams (texts, images, sound sequences or videos) accompanied by comments from the teacher, or even parents.” According to Philippe Amblard (2004), “the portfolio is a dynamic tool which makes it possible to follow the evolution of a student's *progress* in their learning. Through his school activity, the student is the *main actor* in the development of the portfolio which may also contain comments and reflections from teachers and parents. The digital nature of the portfolio has the advantage of facilitating its accessibility and consultation, its modification by adding or deleting files or its reorganization by inserting hyperlinks from one document to another. In summary, the whole point of the digital portfolio is to be both a place for archiving the student's work, a place for reflection, monitoring and evaluation.

The portfolio is a management tool which favors the principle according to which the student is at the center of his learning, or even “*the master of his learning*”. The Quebec Ministry of Education (2002, pages 12 to 16) defines three types of portfolios:

1. *The learning portfolio* which is a collection of work of all kinds, completed or not, accompanied by the student's reflections on their achievements. These works are chosen by the student alone or jointly with the teacher. The student must comment on the means implemented to complete his work. He can deposit his most significant documents, add work or remarks to the collection or reorganize the content. All these operations allow the student to interact and become aware of the learning achieved.

2. *The presentation portfolio* which presents the student's best productions or those he prefers. These productions are chosen by the student who must justify their choices by annotating the documents. It serves to exhibit and present one's achievements. This portfolio teaches the student to have control over their learning, to take a critical look at their work, to take responsibility, and is part of a process of self-knowledge. It has a positive effect on the motivation of the student who feels pride in what he does.

3. *The assessment portfolio* which makes it possible to assess the level of development of the student's skills, throughout or at the end of a cycle, based on the expected and listed skills. This portfolio allows the student to become aware of the level of development of their acquired knowledge. It is made up of certain student productions chosen with the teacher, various observations and may contain self-evaluations. Other references speak of a work portfolio, personal development or reflective practice.

In this Canadian context, an interesting university study testing the interest of the “*media portfolio as an artifact or tool for critical reflection in the teaching of artistic projects in secondary schools*” was carried out in Quebec by Stéphane Dussault in 2003. He presented

it as follows: “By contributing in an informed way to the advancement of research in the almost unexplored territory of the school portfolio in visual arts, our study develops an approach allowing the student to put their achievements at a distance, by integrating their projects critically in an electronic portfolio. For his part, the teacher specializing in visual arts benefits from a monitoring and evaluation tool through which he will be able to discern a more authentic portrait of the student's learning throughout his journey. *And its content appears all the more valuable as it associates the portfolio with the **project situation***. This study first emphasizes (p.14) the major interest of the portfolio which consists of helping the student to take ownership of the learning and to involve him in the evaluation of his acquired knowledge. It asks essential questions such as: - should we standardize portfolios; - should we put everything or select the contents; - should we present the drafts or only the final creations? (p.19). Concerning the electronic version, he notes (p.21) that this offers the opportunity to have a wider audience (Berryman, 1992), he also underlines the interest of hypertextual links and the enormous savings in space, transport, accessibility. Echoing the work of Barrett (2000) already cited, the researcher notes that the use of the portfolio in visual arts is almost non-existent, both abroad and in Quebec. For the visual arts, he cites two American references, one bookish (Palmer Wolf, 1988) written following the *Arts Propel* project founded in 1985 by the Rockefeller Foundation where we can read (p.26) “it is time to "examining what artistic disciplines teach and how teachers examine what their students learn" as well as other reflections such as: "learning in art must come from what students do" where we find explicitly named the skills, inventiveness and risk-taking, which attests to a certain similarity with French concerns. Thus, in these approaches, the portfolio is associated with the notion of *journey* and, even more, with that of the *project*. Dussault's study takes up the various benefits already presented in the general context and linked to a *social constructivist* vision of learning associated with the development of critical judgment. The author then shows how the relationship to the expression project (he refers to Jean-Pierre Boutinet, 1990: refer to our IUFM-DAFIP publication [Gaillot, 2004] on “*The project in 3rd grade class*”) necessarily implies a metacognitive perspective on the entire creative process, bringing together the two axes developed for several years by researchers in arts education in Quebec on the subject of the creative process (Pierre Gosselin, 1993) and the dynamics of the project (Moniques Richard, 1996). It also shows us another avenue which is that of the collective portfolio and which is therefore that of the class journal designed and posted online by the students (and not only by the teacher) whose interest lies in the search for coherence and listening to others (“plurality of points of view”, we will say here). Dussault's research takes stock (p.86-125) of three portfolio creations in secondary school by volunteer students helped by a road map and collaborating teachers. Two are collective, one is individual. An interview shows how much the students are aware of what this formatting has brought them, even if they also underline the enormity of the time devoted to this.

The benefit of the digital portfolio

Regarding the teaching of visual arts, it is rather the first two aspects that will interest us: *learning* and *presentation*. The digital portfolio has advantages over paper, notably those

of being more easily modifiable, archiveable, transportable, disseminated, and finally manipulated thanks to both internal and external links that can be installed there. Like its paper elder, it is undoubtedly less, in the visual arts, a document intended to be evaluated than the *journal* regularly nourished by a personal journey in the field of the arts: updated and therefore *evolving*.

In these various occurrences, what are the objectives sought? In most descriptions, the portfolio is the place where the student collects their work. The first operation is therefore that of selection if everything is not systematically archived, which means mastery of the evaluation criteria associated with the various productions. Then, these works are organized in a presentation, either simply ordered, classified by categories or arranged in a tree structure. An essential element is that the productions are commented on by the student and the teacher, which implies a reflective return on what was (more or less well) done. Finally, traces of research and the main cultural references relating to the subject treated are often associated with the work. Thus, even in cases which are most similar to the assembly of "all the homework for the year", the interests in terms of training are multiple: return, first, to the main questions studied, appropriation learning and putting it into perspective, development of metacognitive awareness (one of the key concepts currently) through self-evaluation (a better understanding of one's successes and difficulties) and, overall, development of critical thinking. The presentation develops a better understanding of the meaning of the discoveries made within the disciplinary field but just as much, when it comes to presenting them to others (students and parents), in relation to the context of life daily: this whole constitutes "*the beyond of practice*" which is its didactic purpose (Gaillot, 1987; 1997). Let us add that we should not underestimate the rewarding nature of the manufacturing and presentation of this object as well as the transversal computer skills perfected on this occasion. All these aspects go in the same direction of student empowerment. Finally, the portfolio is also the history of a learning process, the means of structuring a work and discovery space, it also allows, thanks to hyperlinks, to sustainably connect class work with the world of knowledge, primarily cultural, downloadable on the Internet.

An inventory

Twenty years later, it seems the time has come to take stock of the portfolio. Long after having shown that evaluation in visual arts (as elsewhere) could not be considered without the student being able to state for himself what he discovered and on what occasion (which we globally called metacognition; we now also speak of "meta-skills"), I took the liberty in 2005, drawing on American precedence in this regard, to insist on the fact that support tools allowing the return on acquired knowledge, such as a "traces book" or "digital portfolio", proved essential. They prove all the more essential today in the affirmed context of a competency-based approach (CBA) where metacognitive time obviously becomes one of the major links, the conclusive link, the one which then allows the "snowball effect" of resurgence wisely and therefore of consolidation of achievements and permanent enrichment.

In the arts, more than in the written disciplines, beyond the visual (or sound) produced or perceived, it turns out that the oral cannot be enough to keep track. It is therefore important to ask yourself what the student is able to take home: “*this is what I did, what I discovered and understood*”. Moreover, this reflection is gradually continuing its path in France. Asked about the “artistic and cultural education courses” presented by the Ministry of Culture and Communication in 2014, Philippe Meirieu pointed out that it would have seemed interesting to him if we could propose on this occasion “that each primary school, middle school and high school student presents a summary of their artistic and cultural career, in the form of a portfolio, and that this is integrated into the evaluation, at the end of each cycle, for the college certificate, as in the CAP and the baccalaureate. It would be a question of verifying (...) that the child was able to keep a trace which contributes to his personal, intellectual, social and civic construction.”

The digital notebook in visual arts is no longer a novelty, it is very advanced in Canadian education as well as in Luxembourg; it is also observed in other European countries but not necessarily in the arts. But it remains little used in France in the usual way. As I have already presented in my files on evaluation and CBA, the goal is to ensure that the student pays better attention to his acquisitions, that he can think of himself in a process (a duration) of experiences and discoveries, it is in a certain way to give substance to what has been constructed and, in plastic arts, also to preserve the visual traces of what has been developed.

This type of system thus places a double emphasis on *process skills* and refers to notions often valued in didactics and docimology: self-assessment and metacognition. Many authors (including S.G. Paris and L.R. Ayres, 2000, p.94) now recommend elements of commentary to which we are already accustomed, in particular:

- *say why I thought it was important to select this;*
- *say how I went about carrying out this work;*
- *say what I learned on this occasion.*

The portfolio is thus both an instrument of training as has just been said but also of evaluation in that it contains documents which bear witness to the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired but also, and more, by the way in which the elements are presented, by the perception that the student has of them. What matters above all in a portfolio type tool is not the content of what is transferred there but the very way in which the fruits of the work have been organized, commented on and valued, *in that it can attest to 'a real assimilation*.

Unfortunately, things have not progressed much. On the one hand, it must be recognized, such an arrangement undoubtedly increases the work of the students and the teacher (but is this not the sine qua non condition for real appropriation of discoveries?); on the other, we could hope that the verbalization phase now integrated into any sequence of visual arts, associated with the generalization of digital technology, could be factors leading towards new ways of learning. Because many practices encouraged at the School were already helping to move in this direction. Thus, from nursery class in France, the child is encouraged to put his discoveries into words (1995 programs), which continues in primary and secondary school; on another level, during exhibitions of student work, it is not

uncommon for the students themselves to write the accompanying labels supposed to explain to visitors the intentions of the approach undertaken, this for a very long time, this which goes well in this same direction. Moreover, despite these regrets, it is honest to point out that multiple experiments with digital files had already flourished here and there since the beginning of the 2000s, I can testify to this for the Aix-Marseille academy where I was in charge of teacher training, but this has always remained sporadic and exceptional. Currently, if in France the use of portfolios is still uncommon in college, we can rejoice in some promising advances, experiences whose expansion can be followed on academic sites¹ dedicated to the visual arts. An upgrade of digital equipment should contribute to this, although we should not underestimate the organizational aspect which requires experienced teachers.

Let us also specify that the creation of this digital object, whatever its form (files stored on a USB key or DVD, personal file distributed on "social networks", intranet or internet site created or supplied by the student, transported together on a digital tablet, etc.), what must be the credible vector must imperatively be the activity of cognitive feedback and not an accumulation of "copy-pasted" references only transferred from a student or teacher source, nor the simple narration of "what I did", because too often the commentary on the images of the practice posted online stops there.

Note also that the use of a portfolio type file, not yet entirely digital however, is now legitimately (but still timidly) introduced at the heart of the evaluation of skills in the visual arts during the oral presentation of the "candidate's workbook » for the French baccalaureate at the end of the secondary cycle. Beyond that, still on the subject of the portfolio tool, it is interesting to note another advance, this time at the university, the French initiative entitled "*the ePortfolio approach in French higher education*" (2011, updated 2023) intended to introduce this digital file to the university: "ePortfolio devices aim to bring together, in a digital environment, a set of documents and electronic resources which describes and illustrates the learning or career of a person, their experiences, his work and his skills. They are of very direct interest to higher education for initial and lifelong training (formalization of pathways and benchmarks, new methods of acquiring and identifying skills, etc.) and for professional integration (promotion acquired knowledge and experience). In France, this system is currently the subject of one-off experiments, of varying magnitude. These experiences presuppose the inclusion of the ePortfolio approach in university policies, which is only just beginning, but we cannot deny the interest in greater openness towards professionalization (this is the primary goal) at the same time as this helps the student to have a better grip on their skills (this is their educational benefit) and to better capitalize on their strengths.

In the visual arts, any didactic reflection, since it was the ambition to go beyond the simple learning of techniques, did not fail to lead to better work on **the elucidation and capitalization of acquired knowledge** but – in my opinion – witnesses of appropriation such as the "portfolio are not yet taken sufficiently seriously. Likewise, if the effect of the

¹ Accessible online (verified in 2024): [Les réseaux académiques en arts plastiques | éduscol | Ministère de l'Education Nationale et de la Jeunesse | Direction générale de l'enseignement scolaire](#)

competency-based approach (CBA) has probably reinforced visual arts teachers in their teaching, in both cases, a lack of learning control has long been documented because the truth on the ground – except in Luxembourg, Germany and in technical artistic sectors – is very often that our students, even if they aspire to find a different, less academic climate in the arts. where we discover differently, we also realize that we sometimes learn (too) little, as in this recent observation (Sylvain Fabre, 2015, p.32) about the conclusion of visual arts sessions or sequences in France, tragically without appeal:

“Very frequently, the conversation about the works of artists or the productions of students leads teachers or lecturers to mention other artists: “you will look on the internet for next week”. Without precise content, without indication of the means of the research or the expected forms of presentation of the results, these requests are only mentioned and never verified, renouncing to rely on the academic forms of obligation and work”.

In a more systemic way (Laurence Espinassy, 2011, p.7), the discovery of cultural references further reveals the flaw that has long weakened French prescriptions: “Although calling itself and presenting itself as *teaching*, we never talk about it of learning, nor of disciplinary knowledge, but of *contribution to the acquisition of a culture and participation in the acquisition of transversal skills such as mastery of the French language, social and civic skills, autonomy and initiative*. But in the expected outcomes no practical application is mentioned: students are "informed about", "situate a work", "frequent" cultural places, have "attitudes" (which imply curiosity and open-mindedness - concentration and motivation - critical thinking), without ever worrying about the way in which learning through experience is established. The teaching of the arts joins the particularities of “education in””.

Whatever the country, it is important to lucidly confront these observations which can only harm the image of artistic disciplines.

When in 2005 I was given the opportunity to learn about the research carried out in Quebec with a view to adapting the educational tool of the portfolio to the teaching of visual arts in secondary schools, I was immediately convinced of its usefulness and decided to undertake its promotion in France.

There is no future for arts education if its credibility is not attested by real learning that contributes to developing the adult future of our students. Entering skills-based training is a whole and, in this process, the project and the portfolio have a determining role. We have everything to gain from our didactic action leading to this last stage, that of real appropriations, which is why it is to be hoped that the path of the digital portfolio in plastic arts will not be abandoned (despite the increase in induced work) but on the contrary questioned, explored, worked on in its feasibility, first for the benefit of the students, then for the future of arts teaching.

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