e-Portfolio for Collaborative Learning in Study Abroad: Case of VIA Asia/US Exchange Programs

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Abstract: VIA Asia/US Exchange Programs is a non-profit organization dedicated to increasing understanding between the United States and Asia through service and education. As one of the initiatives to stay competitive, VIA rolled out a program called Exchange for Social Entrepreneurs and Leaders as an innovative program that brings together college students from Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, and California to Silicon Valley to study social entrepreneurship and leadership. Due to the intensive nature of the program, students were required to start working on projects well before they arrived in Silicon Valley. In order to manage the operation of the program effectively and track the activities and learning of the students who are spread across different continents, VIA decided to implement a collaborative e-Portfolio system. This paper addresses the unique features of VIA's XSEL program and how they were enhanced by utilizing an e-Portfolio system.

Keywords: e-Portfolio, study abroad program, international education, collaborative learning, social entrepreneurship, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan

Introduction

VIA Asia/US Exchange Programs (formerly Volunteers in Asia) is a private non-profit organization dedicated to increasing understanding between the United States and Asia through service and education. Founded in 1963 on the campus of Stanford University in California, VIA offers an array of international study programs that take place in Asia and in the U.S. In order to make the programs it offers relevant to students engaged in contemporary society, VIA strives to offer study abroad programs that match the needs and interests of the students of today. The Exchange for Social Entrepreneurs and Leaders ("XSEL") program was innovative and responded to students' growing interest in social entrepreneurship and development of leadership skills, which enabled them to become leaders capable of enacting positive change in the world.

In order to extend the reach of the directors to the students and to enable effective and efficient communication among the students themselves, VIA decided to implement *manaba*, a cloud-based e-Portfolio system that integrated selective functions of portfolio, cour se management and social networking. It is unique in that it integrates an e-Portfolio system with key functions of course and resource management and academic social networking and enables students to collaborate, accumulate, and reflect on their work.

2. Overview of XSEL

In 2012, VIA's XSEL brought together college students from Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan to study design-thinking, social change leadership and business tools in Silicon Valley in California. These students all aspired to become change-makers in the world, and the goal of the program was to equip them with the skills needed to become responsible and proactive leaders who are capable of bringing those changes into being.

The 36 participants came from 9 different universities (3 in Hong Kong, 4 in Japan, and 2 in Taiwan). Many of them were in the second and third years of undergraduate programs, but the cohort also included a few seniors and graduate students. In addition to the participants from Asia, there were students from Stanford University and University of California, Berkeley who attended the program as mentors. There were also 3 additional members from Asia (one in each country) who contributed to the program as local coordinators. The coordinators, who were VIA's alumni, held important roles in organizing the logistics and pre-program meetings in each of the three countries the students were coming from. In total, there were a little over 50 members who were part of the XSEL program and had access to the e-Portfolio system.

XSEL consisted of three periods:

- **Pre-program (6 weeks)**
  The pre-program ran from May through July in the students' home countries in Asia. The participants and the local coordinators gathered as a group for orientation and to meet with local organizations that were engaged in solving social issues by transforming education, environment, health, and poverty. Students formed project teams, listened to the lectures given by the partner organizations, held discussions, and tried to identify specific problems that the partners were facing. The XSEL program encouraged students to conduct human-centered design research in order to identify the true needs of the organizations and to reframe the social problems the project teams intended to focus on. As a group, they conducted intensive research during this pre-program period in order to gather information that educated them on the background of the issues these organizations were trying to tackle. They also shared the information among themselves in order to have a common understanding of the chosen topic by the time they flew over to the U.S.
- **Main program (4 weeks)**
  The main program took place in August over 4 weeks at Stanford University and in the San Francisco Bay Area. The students studied trends in public service and philanthropy by listening to lectures given by social entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley and they worked alongside local leaders in the community to learn how they challenged and developed solutions to the problems they faced. The students also took design-thinking classes at Stanford University to enhance their creative thinking and action designing skills and actually started developing solutions for their projects utilizing the knowledge and skills acquired. At the end of the program, project teams presented the findings and topics they wanted to continue to investigate further.
- **Post-program (4 months)**
  Between September and December following the main program, students work in project groups to refine team project ideas and address local challenges. The continuing discussion and reflection are crucial for students to truly digest their xperience during the program and to fully master the ability to put the leadership and design skills to use. With this philosophy, XSEL asks all the participants to continue working even after the program completes and encourages them to do so by setting up a conference at the end of the post-program period to give presentations in front of their local partners. The participants will present the solutions to the partner organizations for them to consider actually implementing in the operation.

3. Implementation of manaba

VIA is an organization that has been offering various study abroad programs between Asia and the U.S. over the past 36 years, and they always strive to remain innovative in order to stay competitive. The organization is run by a small group of staff and it is essential for them to utilize tools that enable them to become both efficient and effective simultaneously. As one of the solutions to bring together an innovative program such as XSEL, VIA decided to implement *manaba,* a collaborative e-Portfolio system that combined the key functions of an e-Portfolio, course management with discussion boards and assignment functions, and an academic social networking capability. Aware of limited resources, VIA was looking for the technology with the minimal cost and the least amount of training.

As described above, XSEL is a short but intensive program. It requires students to be engaged and committed in learning well before the in-person program starts. For example, the program directors who are based on the Stanford University campus in California used to create course readers and delivered the physical copies to students overseas. Students were responsible for reading the materials beforehand so that they had a common understanding of the issues they were going to be exploring during the program. Program staff used to spend a lot of time printing and binding those books and bear the financial costs of delivering the books to the students. They had to figure out a way to digitalize this process quickly to save time and costs. While they found blogs to be one solution to digitalize this process, the program was left with some concerns with privacy of the information exchanged. In addition, blogs only had limited functionalities that didn't satisfy the needs VIA had in order to organize communication with the students as well as that among students. At that point, VIA decided to implement *manaba,* which removed the privacy concerns due to its flexible security settings and provided a safe environment for students to freely discuss what was on their mind.

4. Key Functions that Benefited XSEL

The XSEL program took advantage of several functions of the e-Portfolio system. Here are some of the ways XSEL effectively used the system and the key aspects that enabled its successful implementation:

4.1 Intuitive interface for intensive use during pre-program

Due to the intensity of the program, the preparation work during the pre-program period was crucial to the success of the students. In order to prepare the students and bring them up to speed quickly, it was critical that the program directors were able to distribute materials efficiently and have students respond to various surveys in order for the directors and support staff to learn about each student's interests and past experiences.

In order to accomplish this, the program directors issued accounts in the e-Portfolio system for the students well before the program. The system's intuitive interface enabled the program directors to collect information from the students in the most timely and efficient manner without having to give students much training on how to use the system.

One of the surveys the program directors conducted asked students to identify which projects they were interested in out of the three partner organizations. Based on their responses, program coordinators set up teams to match each student's needs and interests. In addition, the program directors asked the participants to fill out a goals-setting worksheet which encouraged students to share their individual goals for participating in

the XSEL program and the goals they wanted to accomplish on the team projects. During the orientation sessions held in their home countries, the students discussed these goals in groups. The intention of this exercise was to have students reflect back on the place they started before the program when they complete it in order to further nurture the understanding of themselves by observing their own progress objectively.

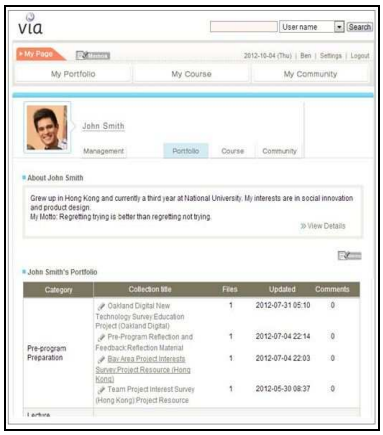

Fig.1. Survey Results

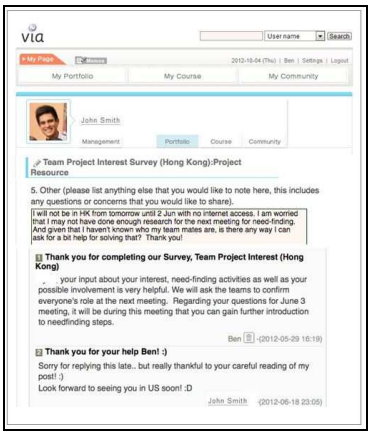

Fig.2. Discussion Thread

In addition to collecting information from the students, program directors also posted descriptions of the organizations in Silicon Valley that the students would be working with over the summer by using the discussion threads. They gave a brief introduction of the organization and attached PDF files that gave more detailed explanation. This was a useful way to give structure to the resources shared and add a context to them. Some students raised questions and concerns about their research, and the directors were able to promptly answer them by using the comment features. The students immediately responded back with notes of gratitude for paying close attention to them.

4.2 Accumulation of work and peer-to-peer learning

Human-centered design was a design process that VIA incorporated into the XSEL program. Students spent some time with the partner organizations and tried to gain a deeper understanding of the problems they were facing. The students engaged in intensive observation, interviewed the customers, conducted thorough research, and reflected on their work. They continue this exercise during the program in Silicon Valley while they interact with partner organizations in the area.

This human-centered design process required students to complete various assignments that included worksheets that guided students through exercises such as empathy mapping, identifying factors that contribute to the problems, and coming up with precise definitions of problems they are going to address. These worksheets and ideas had to be shared among the project team members and the e-Portfolio system was used as the central location for students to manage and organize the resources.

The community functions within the e-Portfolio system were actively and voluntarily used by the project team members to share interview questions, notes, and reading materials relevant for their team projects. When the students visited sites with the local communities in their home countries, they uploaded the photographs they took. This was partially a way for students to document the insights and knowledge they captured during those visits, but also a way to keep the program directors updated on the activities they were engaged in locally. The continuing peer-to-peer learning that happens throughout the program contributes greatly to the uniqueness of this study abroad program and the use of a collaborative e-Portfolio was essential in promoting the activities.

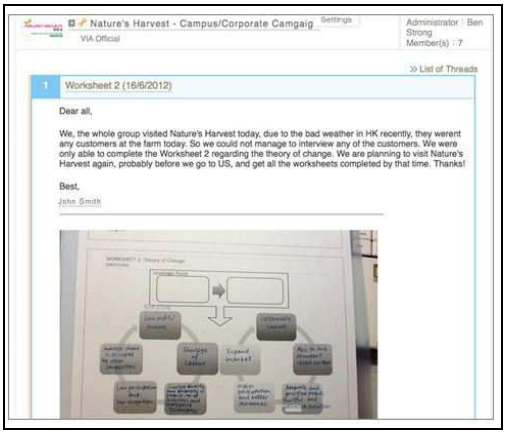

Fig.3. Worksheet Shared among Team Members

4.3 Progress tracking and assessment

The implementation of the e-Portfolio system also enabled the program directors to track the students' experience and feedback in an efficient manner. During the program, they conducted daily surveys that asked students to reflect on their day of learning and provide feedback to the organizers. The responses with comments that students submitted were automatically stored into their respective portfolios and were available for them to reflect on. From the directors' viewpoint, the responses were shown in a list inside the e-Portfolio, or could be downloaded into an excel sheet in a batch for further analyses. This process eliminated a few days of work that staff members were putting in before for printing and handing out hard copy surveys, collecting them, and entering the data electronically. In addition, the program directors could view the activity levels of each participant by checking the number of page views, the number of assignments submitted, the number of comments made, and the date and time the student last accessed the system.

Fig.4. Tracking of students' feedback

4. Conclusion

At VIA, the implementation of a collaborative e-Portfolio system was not only important for streamlining administrative work and for making the operation of the program smoother, but also had meaningful educational implications. The program directors were physically located across the ocean from the participants, the local coordinators and

mentors were dispersed in different locations, and the students themselves were coming from different universities and had no one location to gather. Despite this, the e-Portfolio system brought them together to communicate closely and frequently. Regardless of their location, the program directors were able to track the history of students' conversations and the learning progress and give feedback in a timely manner. The students were able to push out necessary information to their teammates, receive their feedback, and reflect on their own work in one central space. VIA also believes that the implementation of the e-Portfolio system improved the content and the structure of the program which ultimately contributed to the retention of the students, encouraging them to be engaged in the program and the individual team projects before, during and after the program.

Acknowledgements

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