

Chapter 30

Enabling Professional Development with E-Portfolios: Creating a Space for the Private and Public Self

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ABSTRACT

Portfolios have been used for assessment in higher education as an alternative to exams and assignments. E-portfolios offer staff a digital technology that can be both a personalised learning space, owned and controlled by the learner, and a presentation tool which can be used for formal assessment purposes. However, this can result in a tension between process and product, where e-portfolios become electronic repositories of resources that simply tick boxes for career progression. The paper reports on a project that investigated the use of e-portfolios by teaching practitioners developing a critical portfolio of evidence for an award-bearing academic development programme. An e-portfolio had been adopted to address criticisms that conventional assessment fails to take account of the context in which teaching practitioners operate. The project aimed to enable teaching practitioners to access and gain familiarity with pedagogically sound e-portfolio opportunities. In addition, it aimed to foster a reflective approach, promote critical thinking focused on learning and teaching and enhance continuing professional development.

INTRODUCTION

Portfolios have become an increasingly familiar method for assessing the professional development of teachers (Milman & Kilbane, 2005; Seldin

et al., 2010; Lee & Herner-Patnode, 2011). As policy in the UK has increasingly focused on the professional development of university teachers, the use of portfolios as a way of facilitating this has grown. A quick review of academic development programmes aimed at enhancing learning and teaching in the UK shows how the use of

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portfolios has become a familiar method through which academic staff are expected to demonstrate learning. The use of a portfolio tends to be based on a rationale that argues for 'reflection' through a narrative that is supported by evidence drawn from practice. The essential attributes of a portfolio are therefore the collection, organization and presentation of evidence that is then critiqued. It has been argued that portfolios offer an alternative to traditional forms of assessment and that they may address a significant criticism, namely the failure to take account of the context in which practitioners operate (Baume, 2001; Cotterill et al., 2005). The increasing use of e-portfolios is supported by the view that the process makes continuing professional development "a more natural process" (JISC, 2008) that is portable and easy to update. However, there are concerns that policy has "privileged the technology over the pedagogy" (Hughes, 2008, p. 438).

As use of technology enhanced learning develops in higher education, so too does the opportunity for e-assessment. In its broadest sense e-assessment involves the use of information and communication technologies for any assessment activity. As Gipps (2005, p. 174) suggests, "if teaching and its associated resources become electronic, then assessment too will need to take that route, to ensure alignment between the modes of teaching and assessment". However, this 'constructive alignment' (Biggs, 1999) and its rationale need to be based on sound pedagogy rather than merely the availability of e-assessment software. There is a danger that without such, the flexibility and full facility offered by electronic resources will remain largely unfulfilled. As Tomei (2011) suggests, before teachers include technologies into their teaching there is a need for them to understand and experience their application.

This article reports on a project that investigated the use of e-portfolios for teaching practitioners who were in the process of developing and assembling a critical portfolio of evidence for an award-bearing programme within a UK research-

led higher education institution. The project aimed to enable teaching practitioners to access and gain familiarity with e-portfolio use for learning. The intention was to offer an opportunity for teachers to demonstrate the change in their practice (an assessment of what they have learned) and learn from the process of construction. The aim of the programme was to foster a reflective approach, promote critical thinking focused on learning and teaching, and develop strategies to facilitate assessment of outcomes on a Masters programme that promoted continuing professional development.

ASSESSING LEARNING THROUGH PORTFOLIOS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the UK, stimulated by national policies (Dearing Report, 1997; HEFCE, 2003; Browne Report, 2010), the pressure on academic staff to be able to demonstrate continuing professional development in teaching has grown. Becher (1996) had shown that academic staff recognised a range of development activities, such as courses and networking. However, demonstrating how any new knowledge gained from these engagements has informed practice has always been problematic (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004). The portfolio, already used in a range of other professions to demonstrate the maintenance and development of learning (Stefani, n. d.), has increasingly been turned to in efforts to resolve this difficulty. The rationale for using portfolios for assessment of academic practice has been encouraged by the recent framework of national professional standards that the UK's Higher Education Academy (HEA, 2006) has developed. For teaching practitioners in the UK, the HEA has been the body that accredits teaching and their focus has increasingly been on methods to demonstrate continuing professional development following the format used by a range of professional accreditation organisations.

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