

Bloggging for beginners? Using blogs and eportfolios in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of an eportfolio and an educational blog within, and beyond, a professional pre-service teacher education programme, the Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) for the post-compulsory sector. Writing within dialogic storytelling practices in an online environment allows student teacher development and identity to be seen “as a gradual ‘coming to know’” (Winter, 2003, p.120) dependent upon connections and interactions with others through both text and non-text formats such as metaphor, music and video. The authors explore their personal experiences as teacher (Julie) and learner (Emma) and eportfolio’s potential for longer term impact on and in their professional teaching lives.

Keywords

Educational blogs, electronic portfolios, collaborative learning, reflective practice, reflexive thinking

Introduction

The University of Wolverhampton, a post-1992 teaching-intensive university, was the first UK Higher Education Institution (HEI), to make an electronic portfolio system available to all staff and students in September 2005. The in-house system, pebblePAD (www.pebblepad.co.uk), was developed initially in response to the UK Personal Development Planning (PDP) agenda, informed by the Dearing Report (1997) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) policy statement (2000). The QAA recommended the introduction, over the medium term, of HE Progress Files (PF) to standardise the recording and transcription of student achievement. Simultaneously, required PDP learning activity was defined as, “a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and / or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development” (QAA, 2000). The latter activity was viewed by the QAA as a problematic and long-term challenge for HEIs who were initially given a five year lead-in period to implement and embed PDP. The dual drivers of providing a more personalised learning experience through engagement with new technologies and the need for electronic progress files to support transitions provided the arena for the development of eportfolios in the UK. This paper will consider the tensions inherent in becoming/being an eportfolio teacher and learner within these, at times contradictory, discourses and will offer an exploration of how the use of an eportfolio system with an in-built blogging tool on a professional programme such as a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) might support the

development of collaborative learning cultures based upon the sharing of narratives which extend beyond the University into the workplace.

Situating (e)portfolios - policy and pedagogies

When teachers began developing portfolios over a decade ago, we knew what we were about – with process writing and collaborative pedagogies and, not least, portfolios – was pretty ambitious; it was, in fact, nothing short of changing the face of American education. (Yancey & Weiser, 1997, p.1)

In the UK, vocational and professional programmes, such as Teacher Education, have utilised the portfolio structure for learning, assessment and presentation for several decades. Baume (2001, p.6) suggested that portfolios had “filing, learning, assessment and employment” functions and went on (2003) to identify their potential for repository, development, and presentation. The developmental function was conceptualised as, “a compost heap... something refined over time, enriched by addition, reduction and turning over” (2003, p.4). Baume’s (2003, p.7) focus on the benefit of this iterative format for the student is weighted in favour of the developmental portfolio as a valuable collation activity in which feedback from colleagues and tutors plays a major part. In 2003 however, Baume could only envisage an electronic portfolio as a digital repository allowing greater storage and access opportunities within virtual and managed learning environments.

Concurrently, a wider discussion of the possibilities of electronic portfolios in HE was growing despite there being no clear or shared understanding or definition of what an electronic portfolio actually was or was for. The Burgess Report (2004) tentatively envisaged that all HE students should have an electronic personal portfolio by 2008 and the Tomlinson Group (2004) identified the need for transferable transcripts between the compulsory and post-compulsory sectors. Technology, or the addition of ‘e’, had simplistically replaced the collation of paper evidence with a focus upon the eportfolio as an electronic ring binder which demonstrated of the product(s) of learning. Richardson and Ward’s (2005, p.34) first comprehensive review of eportfolio software applications within the UK identified that there was, by this date, evidence of “a high level of representation of support for PDP.” However, the thrust of the recommendations still concerned technological issues such as interoperability, usability compliance and data protection rather than comments upon the learning and teaching experience. This was despite their acknowledgement that “eportfolio has become a buzz word associated with reflective practice” (Richardson and Ward, 2005, p.11). In the same year Ward and Richardson (2005, p.1) developed the debate in describing eportfolio as having “a range of meanings. Here we are using it to describe a collection (or archive) of reflective writing and associated evidence, which documents learning.” Too much of the focus at conference and peer review level within the past three years has however continued to be upon the technical system and/or software used rather than an exploration of eportfolio use as lived and experienced by teachers and students.

Yancey & Weiser’s (1997) articulation of their explicit adoption of portfolio pedagogies of collaboration and process writing offers a stark reminder of how far behind the UK education system may be in its conceptualisation of the potential of a portfolio *approach* to learning and reflective writing development, whether paper or electronic. However, recent studies adopting an emergent ethnographic approach to online learning research, such as that described by Creanor *et al.* (2006) and Mayes (2006), have identified gaps in earlier research and suggest that, “stories or narratives that capture the diversity of how students use learning technologies in their formal studies and attempts to elicit beliefs and intentions” (Mayes 2006, p.4) are key

concerns for future research. Concurrent with this, commissioned research by the British Educational Communications Technology Agency (BECTA, 2007), is shifting to a focus upon the impact of eportfolios on learning.

This paper offers a case study of the use of an eportfolio tool as a developmental learning landscape drawing upon Baume's developmental model and Yancey and Weiser's emphasis upon a portfolio's potential for collaboration and process writing. Inherent in this approach is the movement away from reflective writing undertaken as a monologic (Lillis, 2001) solitary activity submitted summatively to a tutor/assessor. Instead, the use of weblogs within the institutional eportfolio system, supports an approach whereby patches of writing/narratives (blog entries) shared with others build into the larger summative piece. Borrowing from Winter's (1999, 2003) patchwork text writing format, learning and reflection, like teaching practice, are recognised "as a gradual 'coming to know'" (Winter, 2003, p.120). The use of a patchwork approach to writing development within the eportfolio space offers unlimited peer and tutor 'talkback' (Lillis, 2001) spaces as opposed to institutional summative feedback 'spaces for telling'. The emphasis upon learning through the sharing of narratives and dialogue with others (Winter, 2003) offers the opportunity to explore the use of the eportfolio as a social practice and situated literacy (Street, 1995) which offers a tangible example of what Clegg (2005, p.416) identifies as "the messy realities of practice."

Barrett (2005, p.19) suggests that reflection and "the metaphor of portfolio as story" offer "a powerful environment in which students can collect and organize the artifacts that result from engaging in these challenging, real-life tasks, and write reflections through which students draw meaning" (Barrett, 2005, p.21). Winter (1999, p.213) identifies, "(w)e do not 'store' experience as data, like a computer: we 'story' it" and "(o)ur lives are 'steeped in stories'" (Winter *et al.*, 1999, p.21). Story making, Bruner (1996) argues is a key component to an individual's sense of understanding of the world in which they will feel able to fit. The telling and sharing of narratives of professional development therefore may be seen as a meaning-making activity crucial to the transition from student teacher to qualified status. Returning to Baume's organic portfolio model we can envisage personal and professional narratives than develop and are enriched over time. The narratives and the context in which they take place can help us to understand by making the abstract more concrete and accessible. Making meaning of the narrative "is created by noting that something is a 'part' of a whole, and that something is a 'cause' of something else" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.6). As a data capturing 'tool' and metaphor, an eportfolio submitted for assessment on a professional programme can therefore tell powerful stories of learning and development and offer an illumination of the theory/practice link capable of facilitating the often painful process of professional reflection which values and draws upon the 'emotional realities' of students' lives (McDrury and Alterio, 2003). Van Maanen's (1988, p.204) suggestion that storytelling is "a form of everyday theorizing" is supported by Whitehead's (1989, p.41) assertion that reflective practitioners can create "a living educational theory of professional practice constructed from practitioner's enquiries." However, we must be sensitive to what Doyle (2004) in Bolton (2005) identifies,

A story is an attempt to create order and security out of a chaotic world. But for our experiences to develop us - socially, psychologically and spiritually - our world must be made to appear strange. We, and our students, must be encouraged to examine our story making processes critically: to create and recreate fresh accounts of our lives from different perspectives, different points of view, and to elicit and listen to the responses of peers. Listening critically to the stories of those peers also enables learning from that their experience. It is in exploration of experience, knowledge, values, identity that matters, rather than any attempt to arrive at a 'true' account. (Doyle, 2004, in Bolton, 2005, p.3)

Context

Teacher Education, like many professional vocational courses, has long been concerned with the development and *evidencing* of reflective practice. New teachers are required to reflect upon the development of their practice in a theoretically engaged manner drawing upon identified critical incidents. However, as Clegg's comment on the messy realities of practice reminds us, reflection is difficult (Clegg, 2004, p.292). Engaged reflection, "a research process in which the fruits of reflection are used to challenge and reconstruct individual and collective teacher action (Ghaye & Ghaye, 2001, p.5) is an ideal which may be difficult to achieve within a 9 month content-heavy PGCE course. The adoption of an eportfolio tool within such a content-heavy and demanding course may be perceived as a high-risk strategy. As eportfolio use within the School of Education at the University of Wolverhampton was not a compulsory component for the PGCE in post-compulsory education until 2007 all engagement with both the system and the process writing pedagogies was voluntary. The use of the system was initially piloted with a single tutor group in 2004 (Hulme and Hughes, 2006). However, despite staff enthusiasts and an engaged eportfolio research group the University has been slow to engage with the wider eportfolio/elearning agendas. A lack of strategic commitment and policy has resulted in piece-meal, often unsupported use of the system or externally funded short-term projects. Asking students to engage with any eportfolio activity was and is still therefore in many instances additional to what is required from others on the same programme.

The data for this study was drawn from one tutor group of PGCE students who graduated in September 2006. All of the 12 members of the group submitted an eportfolio for assessment and engaged in blogging activities. 7 of the group are still blogging in 2008, at times intermittently or perhaps strategically as they are now working full time, but their comments upon the blog's value as a transition tool and 'safe space' for the sharing of workplace stories suggests that this technology has a role to play in our conceptualisation of new teachers' Continuous Professional Development (CPD) needs. The eportfolio system was introduced to the tutor group in September 2005 at induction. At this point there was no wider support within the curriculum area or School to allow the eportfolio to be embedded in mainstream activities. It was vital therefore, that the eportfolio activity was 'sold' as a meaningful way to add value to the student experience. Workshops were held within the timetabled module to support the technical skill development. Initially all students created individual journal blogs which were shared with the tutor. This reflective socialisation activity acted as a warm-up exercise for the collaborative reflection which was planned for later in the semester. The sharing of critical incidents (stories of self and practice) took place initially in weekly face-to-face sessions and created the conditions (netiquette) for reflective dialogue that would support online interactions and connections. The dialoguing, or talking back to the story and storyteller, was an important part of the education of the new teachers within this situated practice model. The group were learning how to be reflective practitioners as a social practice.

Telling stories - Method/ology

Reflection, or research into reflective narratives upon professional practice, is a difficult and contested activity. Encouraging *critical* reflection within pre-service teachers is as Bolton identifies, "only effectively undertaken and understood by becoming immersed in doing it rather than reading about it or following instructions" (Bolton, 2005, p.xiii). The immersion of the researcher in such activity allows "the reflexive practitioner to see experiences... as open to contradictory and conflicting interpretations...which can

nevertheless disrupt habitual and mechanistic ways of being” (Brown and Jones, 2001, p.6) as, “there is no such thing as “the” evidence: evidence is a contested domain and in a constant state of becoming” (Nutley, *et al.*, 2003, p.133). Lather’s (1991) claim for post-positivist enquiry suggests that we should tell research stories that attempt to transgress and subvert and in doing so adopt methodologies and methods that are self-consciously enacting this. In this way validity, as a research enterprise, within “praxis-oriented research” (Lather, p.68) may be re-conceptualised in terms of what Lather examines as catalytic validity which,

Represents the degree to which the research process re-orient, focuses and energises participants towards knowing reality in order to transform it...the argument...lies not only within recognition of the reality-altering impact of the research process, but also in the desire to consciously channel this impact so that respondents gain self-understanding, and, ultimately, self-determination through research participation.” (*ibid*)

In narrativising and “locating the story” (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989, p.214) within a “particular location...over a defined period of time” (*ibid*) the approach to researching the impact of online learning activities sits within that suggested by Creanor *et al* (2006) and Mayes (2006) who proposed a method termed ‘*interview plus*’, where the ‘plus’ represents some artefact or activity chosen to guide recall or aid thinking aloud (Mayes, 2006, p.4). The use of a dialogic approach or interview plus, as catalytic validity tool, within an eportfolio system may be seen as an appropriate method to online data gathering as it utilises online discussions, reflections and the artefacts (blogs and eportfolios) created by students to stimulate further reflections/data including summative essays across a nine month period. This approach allowed issues and themes to be explored and developed ongoing both with individuals and in groups using the eportfolio learning *space* at times like an online interview or focus group. Eportfolio assets, as data, were collected and curated throughout the period of the PGCE. This paper will now attempt to tell the story from the point of view of the teacher/researcher, Julie and the learner/researcher, Emma.

The Teacher’s story

This was my second year as an eportfolio teacher and I hoped to be able to repeat and build upon the experience of the previous pilot year. I was aware of the need to model and value dialogic modes from the start of the PGCE and I anticipated that the turn-taking would take a while to establish. Initially individual students shared their blog journals with me. I provided encouraging feedback including prompts and questions to move these new reflectors to a more critical stance although comments were rarely responded to in the blog format initially. During the weekly face-to-face session there was evidence of shifts in roles as story listeners became more engaged with the storytelling of their peers. Simultaneously, 4 weeks into the programme, which coincided with the beginning of teaching practice, students began to talk back (Lillis, 2001) online to my feedback. It does not seem to be co-incidental that the need to talk, to share feelings and experiences increased in the group once they were in situated in practice.

The need to tell and share the stories of and from practice pushed the timescale forward for the creation of the online shared blog. I had assumed and planned that the sharing would begin when the block teaching placement began in January 2006. However, 5 weeks into the programme the group suggested that the face-to-face critical incident sharing could be moved to its online forum. In creating the conditions for reflective storytelling and dialogue within a community, structural and institutional factors of imbalance, power and competition must always be considered and as teachers we must be sensitive to this. Of course there was diversity within this group and some evidence of strategic use of the group blog as was to be expected. All of

the group did contribute to the shared posts over the course of the PGCE and our weekly sessions at times discussed the blog participation patterns to check that all participants were comfortable. Lurking/listening was fine as long as face-to-face classes were attended and there was ongoing reflection with the tutor. However, I had no mechanism for controlling the turn-taking or the content of the dialogue and as such it was beginning to offer exciting multi-linear and associative dialogue spaces.

Winter *et al.* (1999) suggest that storytelling may be viewed as an exploratory discursive and interpretative practice and Freire (1972) challenged the educator to encourage their learners to tell their stories critically. Brookfield and Preskill (1999) push the metaphor further in their emphasis upon dialogue as the key to developing a questioning and exploratory reflexive capacity. Bernstein's warning that dialogue is also, "a powerful regulative ideal that can orient our practical and political lives" (Bernstein, 1983, p.163) must be remembered by the critical educator as Brookfield (1995, p.143) challenges us to challenge the assumption "that adults – particularly teachers – know how to talk to each other in ways that are respectful, inclusive and democratic." What must also be emphasised is that this group of eportfolio learners was also a group of becoming teachers who were bound by the professional expectations of the course and the profession which they hoped to enter. I was dialoguer, researcher and assessor and as such inhabited a potentially regulatory and contradictory space. Barrett and Carney (2005, p.2) warn that this reader/assessor tension should be explicitly identified for, "unless the conflicting paradigms and competing purposes underlying portfolios are recognised, their value for learning may be subverted." However, the notion of audience for this reflective storytelling was shifting and I became aware that the group were not writing for me as tutor but were instead calling out to each other.

At this point I had to learn to sit on my hands at my keyboard and allow the group blog to take on a life of its own. I felt both excited and bereft. Now that the shift of addressivity was established we began to explore the creative potential of storytelling in this online environment. The group shared metaphors, music, image and video as their reflective confidence grew. The digital/digitised stories were explored with reference to theories and lived experiences and rooted in the ongoing shared story of becoming a teacher. In March the group was asked by ESCalate, the HEA Subject Centre for Education to write about their experiences with blogs and eportfolios. They used the blog tool to create a shared bank of reflections which became a reflective commentary that stated,

Using the weblog as an online journal became *a big part of our growth as reflective writers...* because it was a shared space we could see the *value* in the perception of thoughts and beliefs of others in the group...We would share *war stories* from the frontlines of teaching and by discussing and commenting on each other's journeys as teachers *we were becoming reflective writers and practitioners without even knowing it!* *Sharing the reflections of others has enabled us to look at ourselves differently.* Without the eportfolio and the dialogue with peers and tutor the journey to becoming reflective writers would have been much harder and definitely much lonelier. (Karim-Akhtar., *et al.* 2006) (Italics mine)

The group continued to blog into their first year as qualified teachers and in September 2007 reflected back upon their continuing use of the blog. One of the bloggers commented that this was still, "a safe and supportive place to go to escape the culture of cynicism whenever needed, we can shout, scream, cry, laugh, talk, listen in the company of those with the same teaching values and the same will to support and encourage each other in whatever we going through". The continued *need* for the blog in this group of new teachers

offers an interesting insight into the role that technology, and the communities it facilitates, might play in the transitions between education and the workplace.

The Learner's story

The journey to becoming a teacher is exhilarating. It is both exciting and terrifying in equal measure. I had always wanted to be a teacher; my siblings can confirm this as they have many childhood memories of being forced to 'play' schools. However, different life choices meant that I did not pursue my teaching goal immediately and worked in industry for 15 years before returning to education in my late twenties. I joined the Post Graduate Certificate in Education course for the Post Compulsory sector in September 2005 and that was when my eportfolio adventures began. I was introduced to the University eportfolio system as a tool that we were going to use to create our individual digital teaching evidence portfolios, instead of a traditional paper teaching portfolio. A blog tool, which was part of the system, was also introduced as a collaborative discussion space that we could use.

My eportfolio experiences were situated in the area of reflective practice and though I was excited about the opportunity to use new technology I was nervous about writing and reflections, as I felt these were not my strengths. However, using the eportfolio provided writing frameworks which helped structure my thoughts and experiences, that otherwise would probably have remained jumbled in my mind. Whilst working on my first eportfolio, I found that by giving a brief context to the pieces of evidence being presented meant that a story was emerging. The eportfolio gave me the space to creatively stitch together evidence and experiences to form a narrative of my learning as (Barratt 2005) suggests. More excitingly, the evidence being stitched together did not have to be purely text based as I had originally anticipated. eportfolio had the flexibility to allow for a multimedia story. Reflections and experiences shared, evidenced and supported through video, image, audio and music.

Reflection is difficult. When you look at yourself or your experiences in the mirror, it can sometimes be hard, even painful to articulate what you see and feel just using the written word. Experiences are multi-dimensional; having a tool to support these dimensions was eye opening. With the continued support and encouragement from my tutor, eportfolio allowed me to explore the boundaries of academic conventions in the ways I could evidence my learning. In addition to this I experienced rapid, online formative feedback and I was encouraged to interact with and talk back to this feedback as one way of developing my work further, which was most refreshing as previous feedback experiences before joining this course had not been reciprocal opportunities.

Being an eportfolio learner gave me the opportunity not only to explore new ways of learning, but to become part of a community that has supported and encouraged each other throughout our journey to becoming new teachers. The blog tool within the eportfolio allowed us the safe space to share thoughts, feelings, anxieties, laughter and tears and because it was a shared space we could see the value in the perception of thoughts and opinions of others in the group. The intensity of experiences was a constant throughout the course and there were sometimes that I felt like I was in the dark, both emotionally and academically, but by being part of this community, the blog provided a reassuring glow of a nightlight that was always there. Somewhere I could go anytime, with anything and know there would be someone there to listen. The ongoing dialogue with my

peers and tutor was fundamental in my development as a reflective writer and new teacher. It was a creative collaborative learning space, a lifeline on what could sometimes be a bumpy road.

Using an eportfolio gives you the opportunity to tell your story, the way you want to. You have control of what goes in it, how it looks, the voice you use, whether you want it to sing and dance and who you want your audience to be. It brings your experiences to life. Using eportfolio gave me a sense of pride in my work, different to anything I'd ever felt before, I could see, hear, feel and interact with my experiences, they were no longer just words on a page.

Not the end

Blair and Takayoshi (1997, pp.364-5) astutely recognised that as eportfolio teachers/assessors we need to “change our ways of engaging with text. In a sense, we became more than mere graders of the work; we became actual users of the work, a real-life audience interacting with the document.” This notion of exploring the active construction of eportfolio learning with the learner is a seductive one which it might be argued creates the conditions for storying and an exploration of the construction of eportfolio selves. The construction metaphor may also be extended to our methodologies as the researcher, engaged in the storying, theorizing and mapping of the eportfolio learning experience, (Kincheloe and Berry, 2004, p.2) views “research methods actively rather than passively, meaning that we actively construct our research methods from the tools at hand rather than passively receiving the ‘correct’ universally applicable methodologies.”

The practice and research undertaken suggest that the new landscapes may offer exciting ‘openings’ (Stronach and MacLure, 1997) for learning and teaching that support the shift from traditional anxious academic literacy practices of monologic addressivity to a more fluid and exciting literacy ‘infidelity’ allowing for increasing dialogue and exchange within student groups. The creation of reflective and reflexive communities is a movement to ‘situating’ the eportfolio within a framework which supports the possibility of multiple readers and writers of ‘taking control of the page.’ (Blair and Takayoshi, 1997, p.360). The nurturing and enabling of such communities of practice within a learning landscape such as an eportfolio within a professional course has the potential to create politicised and engaged reflective practitioners who view risk and uncertainty as positive factors – necessary survival strategies in the Post Compulsory Sector.

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