

0659

To what extent does an e portfolio embedded in a virtual learning environment support reflective practice- and what kind of reflective practice?

Alison Messer

Roehampton University, London, United Kingdom

Background

The Masters Level Secondary PGCE programme at Roehampton University seeks to develop teachers who are: 'Able and willing to reflect upon their own teaching in a positive, systematic and open-minded way' (Ford, 2007). This paper is designed to explore what this model of reflective practice means in the context of 'a Masters PGCE with its extended demands for critical awareness...' (Jackson, 2009), because 'if the ideal of an all Masters profession...is to be translated into meaningful reality ... it must be at the forefront of teacher educational research...', (Jackson, 2009, p65).

Research Questions

The focus is a Roehampton project for the TDA (2008-9) investigating an e-portfolio within a virtual learning environment and reflective practice. There is an extensive literature exploring e portfolios in teacher education, including JISC a summary reporting on case studies that suggest 'the most important skills fostered by e-portfolio use are those of reflecting and forward planning in response to an experience or episode of learning', (Gray, 2008, p 9). Less well researched are the issues around developing an effective, reflective e portfolio embedded in the virtual learning environment (VLE), itself embedded in the structure of a PGCE course. Hence the first question: is the e-portfolio bundled in WebCT (the VLE system used at Roehampton) more useful as a scaffold for reflective practice because it can be embedded in existing online learning during the PGCE?

It is important to consider another question, however. In their overview *Reflective Teaching*, an Introduction, Zeichner and Liston (1996) imply that reflection for reflection's sake is insufficient. They argue: 'Our conception of reflective teaching entails the critical examination of experiences, knowledge and values, an understanding of the consequences of one's teaching, the ability to provide heartfelt justifications for one's beliefs and actions and a commitment to equality and respect for differences', Zeichner and Liston (1996). Further, Ward and McCotter argue for a need to avoid 'merely using reflection as a means for reporting other professional outcomes' rather than 'a means toward growth', (Ward and McCotter, 2004, p255). The second question is: what kind of reflective practice(s) are supported by an e-portfolio embedded within a VLE? Is it reflection that promotes the 'critical awareness' we need (Jackson, 2009)?

Methods

The e portfolio within the VLE at Roehampton (WebCT) was based on Jay and Johnson's (2002) typology of reflective practice, with a range of questions designed to move beginning teachers on from descriptive and comparative reflection to critical reflection. They defined critical reflection as 'carefully considering a problem from a number of perspectives...', and 'taking in the broader, historical, socio-political, and moral context of schooling', (Valli, 1990, cited in Jay and Johnson, 2002, page 79). Activities related to this typology were used throughout the course and incorporated into the design of the VLE as well. In the analysis phase of the project, the dimensions of reflective practice defined by Griffiths and Tann (1992) were used to analyse the different types of reflection observed, ranging from everyday reflection-in-action (rapid reflection and repair) to reflection over a period of time (review and research) to re-theorizing, (long term reflection informed by public theories), (Griffiths and Tann, cited in Zeichner and Liston, 1996).

Frame

The methodology in the investigation was based on appreciative enquiry, first coined by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), and defined by Marks -Maran and Fergy (2006) as 'interested in capturing what is working well, why it is working well and how we might translate success in one aspect of an educational endeavour to other aspects of that endeavour'. The data collected included focus group insights from students from across the PGCE Secondary programme willing to describe a range of strategies designed to support reflection, from assignment writing to online problem-solving and discussions in school. This data was compared to evidence from participants who had used the e-portfolio extensively, those who used other online tools such as blogs and wikis, and others who collected paper reflections. School mentors were invited to comment both on the reflective practice observed and to suggest the form of a future e-portfolio that might support the aims of the programme. A characteristic of appreciative enquiry is 'using past and current achievements ... to envisage an ideal future' (Elliott, 1999, cited in Marks -Maran and Fergy (2006)).

Research findings

The findings suggest that, as Ward and McCotter's study (2004) predicted, the types of reflective practice shown by the participants did vary, and few participants engaged in all the dimensions of reflection identified by Griffiths and Tann, (1992). It does appear to make a difference which online tools participants use, and that the e-portfolio tools embedded in WebCT was unsuitable for our purposes. On the other hand, participation through appreciative enquiry prompted significant developments from students and mentors, suggesting ideas for the design of a better e-portfolio, more closely aligned with both the (critical) spirit and the (paper-driven) letter of the Secondary programme at Roehampton University.

References

- BERA Ethical guidelines (2004) Available <http://www.bera.ac.uk/files/2008/09/ethica1.pdf> accessed January 22nd 2010
- Ford, C et al; (2007) Roehampton ethos (unpublished)
- Cooperrider, D and Srivastva, S (1987) Appreciative Enquiry in organizational life in Woodman, Passmore eds. Research on organizational change and development Vol 1 JAI Press, 1987
- Gray, L (2008) Effective practice with e-Portfolios Bristol, JISC
- Griffiths and Tann (1992) Using reflective practice to link private and public theories Journal of Education for Teaching 18:1, 69-84.
- Jackson, A (2009) Perceptions of Masters Level PGCE Cumbria, ESCALATE
- Jay and Johnson, (2002) Capturing complexity: a typology of reflective practice for teacher education Teaching and Teacher Education 18 (2002) 73-85
- Marks -Maran, D and Fergy, S (2006) Challenging evaluative research orthodoxies: undertaking appreciative enquiry research 2nd Annual teaching and learning conference Middlesex University; available at: <http://www.mdx.ac.uk/aboutus/fpr/clqe/docs/a1doc.pdf> (accessed October 2007)
- Ward, J.R. and McCotter, S (2004) Reflection as a visible outcome for preservice teachers Teaching and Teacher Education 20 (2004) 243-257
- Zeichner and Liston (1996) Reflective teaching: an introduction Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey.