

Professional Portfolios to Demonstrate 'Artful Competency'

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ABSTRACT

A complaint of, and about, professionals is that they often have no way of "accounting for the artful competence" (Schon, 1983: 19) displayed in their daily work. A portfolio approach to learning (Leslie, 2012) offers educational practitioners processes through which to both demonstrate professional competencies and continue to learn from their own work. This study uses observations, surveys and interviews with teacher-participants from a six-month project in a primary school in the UAE. It examines how the teachers begin to employ a portfolio approach in their own practice to transform the traditional portfolio into an experiential, lifelong learning process. Findings discuss how the teachers developed a greater sense of community, a range of associated skills, and allowed stakeholders including supervisors to play a much greater role in the skills development of the teachers.

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Introduction

E-learning and learning are increasingly becoming integrated into a single term and distinctions between the two are becoming less important. Within the United Arab Emirates (UAE), numerous initiatives attest to the integration of technology at all levels of Education. The Sheikh Mohammed Smart Initiative, as an example, is placing tablets and mobile devices in all levels of schools from kindergarten to high school (Government of Dubai, 2012). Along with these new tools will be expectations of innovative new methodologies.

As a result, educational practitioners will require new skills and will have to demonstrate to a widening audience their competency to manage the 21st century classroom effectively. Educators need practical processes that allow them to adopt and master new methodologies and blend them into their existing schema. Schon (1983) comments that professionals often have no way of "accounting for the artful competence" (p. 19) that they bring to their profession, thus drawing attention to the fact that a professional's ability to perform their work often relies on such intangible qualities as intuition or the ability to extrapolate from past experience and function under new circumstances. He worries that the professional cannot adequately capture and demonstrate these skills for stakeholders. A portfolio approach to one's own learning activities (Leslie, 2012) may help to alleviate that concern.

Research Focus

Previous research on portfolio learning has suggested a direction for further research:

"The challenge for portfolio learning, and indeed for any educational change is to ensure that the people who will be at the forefront of implementation have the resources and training necessary to both appreciate the philosophy of the approach and the ability to manage the technical aspects of creating and managing the approach" (Leslie, 2012: 161).

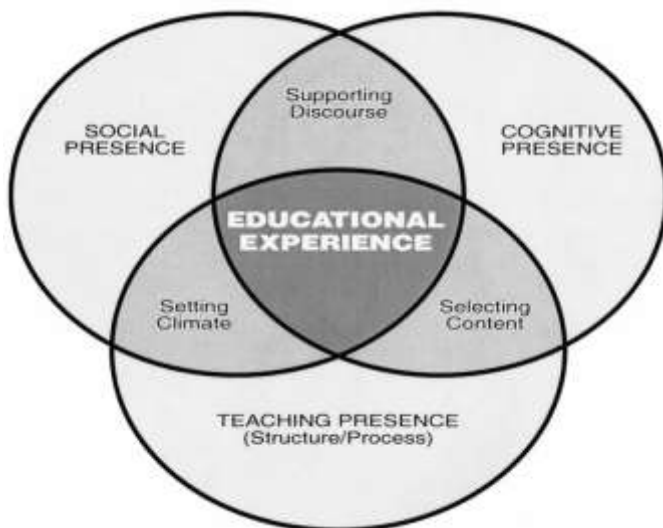
These comments inspire the current research project. They are noted here to provide a sense of context, purpose and continuity between research projects. Previous projects were focused on student-teachers who were completing portfolios as part of their regular curriculum and were motivated by grades and graduation. This particular project sought to investigate how professional teachers and supervisors would respond to the portfolio approach and the time required to learn the requisite skills, while continuing their regular work.

Philosophy of Approach: The Social Construction of Knowledge

In relation to McLuhan's (1964) notion that the medium is the message, 21st century skills and technology force us to consider the "...impact of access to new mediational means in terms of a reorganization of some underlying way of acting in the world" (Crook, 1994: 40). In terms of cognitive load and focus on process, we are now able to organize our collective thoughts in ways that allow access to each other's ideas on a global scale. In the context of the direction of study for this research, how can we best introduce to educators an approach that allows us to not only more readily share our ideas with a larger audience, but receive feedback from that larger audience? How can we best leverage new technologies to support the social construction of knowledge? Through the effort to compile, collect and curate one's own materials into a selection of best practices, educators also create a repository of shareable materials for the benefit of colleagues and the wider educational community, allowing others to see our work and offer us new and different perspectives on that work. In such ways, the portfolio learning approach helps transform us into a new way of being educators and

teachers, not only of students, but of each other. The traditional view of a portfolio as a showcase of one's abilities becomes not less important, but rather one aspect of the wider portfolio approach where we are participants in each other's portfolios. Gergen's (2009) statement that, "Education in a relational key is critical to the global future" (p. 243) supports this notion. A portfolio approach can help to frame our thoughts under guidelines that are suitable for different audiences and thus facilitate the wider discussion and make more apparent the relationship between ideas. Indeed, "the tradition of individual-centered education is ill-suited" (Gergen, 2009: 244) for the 21st century educator. Crook (1994) discusses similar issues, noting that in contrast to Vygotskian views about the social nature of learning, individual centered or student-centered learning activities "obviate" (p. 69) the social aspect of learning. Through a portfolio approach supported by a community of inquiry model (Leslie 2012; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer 2000), educators can transform their traditional showcase product into a portfolio learning process and approach, enabling the educator to produce numerous showcases depending on the particular audience, thus offering more focused showcases. The ability to communicate with people worldwide allows our community of inquiry, within which we interact and grow, to take on global proportions. These various overlapping audiences can then offer greater teaching presence, shown in Figure 1 as the supporting base of the community of inquiry. Although teaching presence is commonly provided by one individual, in a robust community the teaching presence can be provided by all members to each other through questions and directed discussions (Leslie, 2012, 2013). Helping all members to provide greater degrees of teaching presence through a portfolio approach gives greater direction to the community and its shared purposes as a whole.

Figure 1:
Community of Inquiry



(Source: Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000: 88)

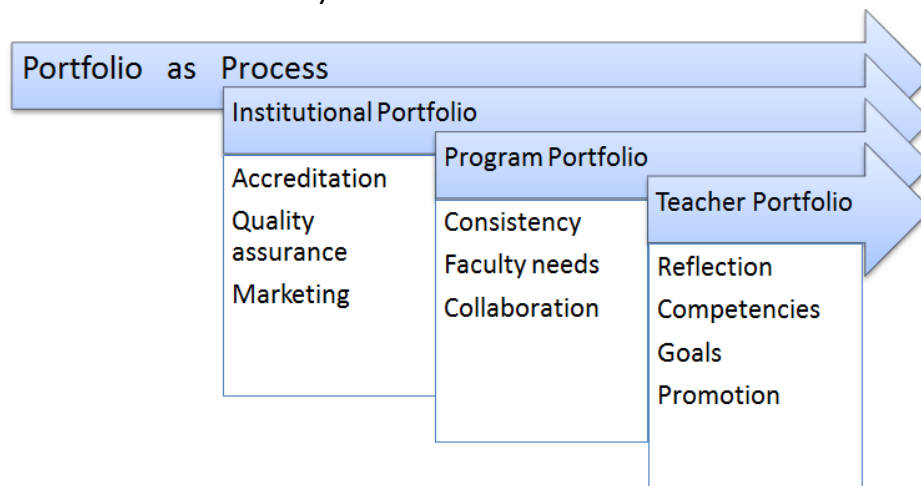
Lifelong Learning

Glastra, Hake and Schedler (2004) consider lifelong learning as essential to professional life in the 21st century. They note that with an increase in the ability to work collaboratively comes an increase in individual responsibility for one's own actions. Such responsibility, while not new, is becoming increasingly noticeable as physical barriers of distance between individuals and groups break down. Conversely then, "rather than social or moral conformity, individual distinction is the new postmodern imperative" (Glastra, Hake, & Schedler, 2004: 292). They ask how professionals can "learn to deal in critical and innovative ways" (p. 303) with the changes being faced in the 21st century professional world.

To participate in such circles as equal and distinct members, we should inspire confidence in ourselves through the presentation of our work. The concept of 'biographicity' (Alheit & Dausien, 2002) loans itself to portfolio learning. A resume or CV has always been a portrait of one's professional life. However, in terms of lifelong learning the biographical nature of a CV becomes more evident as traditional lines between professional and personal life become increasingly blurred. Social networking, as an example not only keeps an educator in contact with their students for a much greater percentage of the day, but also presents a larger portion of the educator's life and activities to other stakeholders and colleagues.

Van Wing and Notten (2004) also discuss the concept of biographicity as a means of detecting the needs of the practitioner. Going beyond the more traditional view of portfolios as outward demonstrations of competency to stakeholders, the portfolio approach provides greater opportunities for inward interactions and feedback from stakeholders to practitioners. Practitioners gain a controlled method of exposing to stakeholders where their own competencies need to be developed further.

Figure 2:
Embedded Portfolio System.



Source: adapted from Leslie (2012)

Figure 2 illustrates the concept of a portfolio process in which each level of the institution from the teacher to the program and upwards is represented by a portfolio, or collection of curated documents, including goals and needs. In this manner, stakeholders at various levels can have access to documents and information that allows for better decision making throughout the institution. Hase and Davis (2002) note that there is a general assumption that people will have a better working life if they are "deliberately and systematically involved in their future" (Perspectives and Theoretical Frameworks, para. 8). The vision of a two-way portfolio process involving practitioners and stakeholders allows a wider range of input into not only a practitioner's future, but to the future of any school or community that is able to build on the potential of its members.

We are all lifelong learners regardless of our awareness or acknowledgement of this fact (Bouverne-De Bie & Piessens, 2004). Lifelong learning as a focus of research is gaining prominence as a consequence of globalization and the spread of ICT and technology (Glastra, Schedler & Hake, 2004). Many institutions now require their workforce to be much more flexible in terms of their capabilities and styles of work. In educational settings, issues surrounding the increasing reliance on technology include concerns from student-teachers who tried to use portfolios for reflective thinking while at the same time trying to develop the skills needed to do so, and ended by doing

neither well (Strudler & Wetzel, 2008). From an educational technology standpoint, educators need to both learn the technology, and learn the application of the technology to their work. A portfolio approach can provide a context for this application.

Research Project

In the UAE, all teachers in the public school system are expected to maintain a professional portfolio, comprised of a profile, two sets of competencies - behavioural and technical - and a yearly set of professional goals, built on a selected subset of the competencies. The manifestation of this portfolio varies between education zones.

The development of teacher - practitioner portfolios was conducted with a variety of groups. This paper is concerned with The Ramaqia Portfolio Project, that included 10 native Arabic-speaking, female teachers of varying ages and nationalities from a primary boys' school in Sharjah, UAE, in weekly, one-hour sessions over a six month period. The starting base-level of e-skills varied between participants, but all were motivated by the prospect of learning the skills required to make the e-portfolio and by avoiding the perceived long hours of toil required in the past to create a paper-based portfolio.

A cohort of female student-teachers, in preparing for a 10-week internship at a variety of schools across Sharjah, Ajman and Umm al Quwain, also went through a rigorous portfolio development process. These students were familiar with the skills needed to develop a portfolio and were also familiar with the concept of a portfolio process since they had participated in previous iterations and studies of this process.

Evidence for this stage of the research project comes from weekly observations, feedback from weekly development sessions, artefacts from the range of portfolios, and the results from a survey conducted with approximately 450 teachers from around the UAE, within which the initial 10 teachers from Ramaqia form a subset.

Findings

As each member of the two groups involved in the study became more familiar with their own needs, they developed a greater sense of community as evidenced from discussions, anecdotal evidence from the weekly meetings and classroom instruction, and reviews of the individual portfolios. Many of the members were able to contribute a greater teaching presence to the group, complementing the social and cognitive presence already present. These contributions were most evident during the face-to-face meetings which often resembled collaborative workshops.

One example was the ability of members to share their success in integrating further tools into their portfolios. The two-fold learning that arose from these successes included both the skill of using the tool and integrating it into the portfolio, but also, and perhaps more importantly, new ideas about the use of the tool for educational purposes. During one instruction session, a math teacher in the Ramaqia group successfully embedded her Instagram photo stream into her portfolio. At first, the group discussed the process of embedding the Instagram feed, with the math teacher leading the discussion and offering her teaching presence. However, the group then quickly switched to discussing the use of Instagram as an educational tool. At this point, members of the group, by directing the discussion through specific questions on the actual content of the Instagram feed, also demonstrated a depth of teaching presence. The showcase portfolio and collection of work provided a starting point for a discussion about an educational tool, giving a context for the work and offered the math teacher valuable feedback on her use of the tool.

Similarly, a discussion about how to best present evidence for the 'artful competency' the teachers hope to demonstrate through their showcase portfolios led to a greater presentation for all teachers. A discussion arose about how granular the demonstrations should be – should they link a folder of documents or a single document? Should they link several smaller documents or one larger document? By being able to actually view examples that the various group members had showcased, they were able to compare the styles and arrive at a rather complex combination of documents and folders, which was eventually presented to the school Principal for her approval. The arrangement is one that could not have been predicted or preplanned, but arose from the situational and contextual arrangement of examples.

In professional practice, the demonstration of competencies is personally a very high stakes issue. Educators must be able to address multiple needs among their students, and are expected to demonstrate a variety of competencies. The strength of this demand is evident across the school system in the UAE. Although over 72% of the more than 300 teachers who answered this question believed that e-portfolios were not compulsory, 69% said that they plan to use e-portfolios in the future and 70 % said they felt e-portfolios were worth creating. However, 69 % noted that they felt they needed training to be able to develop an e-portfolio. More importantly for a portfolio process, 73% said that they felt e-portfolios will create opportunities for them to incorporate more technology into their teaching.

The concept of associated skills in portfolio development arose from the development of skills seen in the Ramaqia group. Many of the teachers, by their own admission had very limited technical skills and thus even more limited knowledge of their educational value. Once the group had developed a range of embedded tools, and based on a review of the student portfolios, the following collection of skills was derived.

Figure 3:
Associated Skills of the Portfolio Process

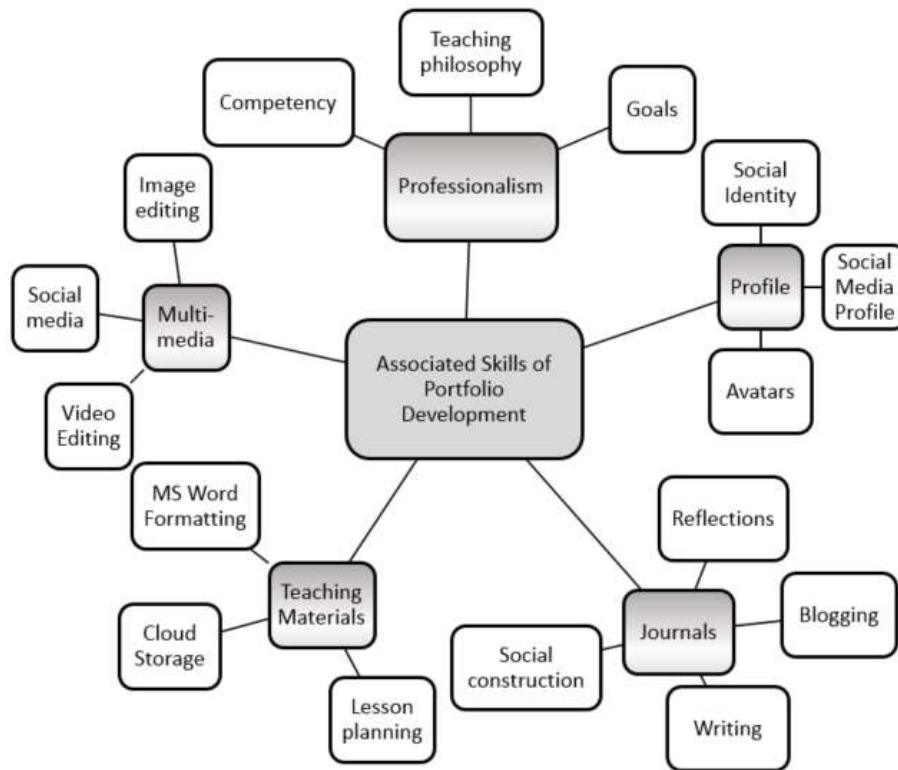


Figure 3 highlights the wide range of skills required to pursue a portfolio approach. Some are purely technical in nature while others are much more demanding in terms of the cognitive skill required to produce quality artefacts. The development of such skills contributed to numerous examples of 'spontaneous innovation'. In one case, while exploring the technical side of Google Drive in order to embed 'goals' documents, several of the participants took their new skills to the school administration and developed an online filing system for both academic and administrative documents including lesson plans that previously had been shared only in hard copy. Certainly, Google Drive was designed for this purpose, but this cohort of teachers made their own links between processes and initiated a sharing process suited to the particular needs of that environment.

One solution offered by a portfolio approach is that artefacts can be used for multiple purposes including multiple assessment purposes. This in itself presents efficiencies in that practitioners are able to see bigger or higher level connections between instances of their work. This loans a sense of integrity (Kolb, 1984) to the work. With a greater skill-set than the Ramaqia teachers, the student-teachers were able to create curations of their work to serve a variety of assessment requirements for different teachers. These different curations overlapped and some of the work was included in more than one section. From the assessor's perspective, having different curations available on the same profile, and being able to scan the curations that were not so relevant to a particular assessor or stakeholder nevertheless gave the whole work a greater context by relating the individual components more completely to the totality of the work and to the 'biographicity' of the practitioner who created the collections of work.

In both instances, whether involved with the community of inquiry or directly involved with stakeholders and assessment, the curator or practitioner was able to receive feedback on their work and then to incorporate that feedback back into their overall work. Feedback on the presentation was almost immediately acted upon whereas more substantial feedback on the actions and materials portrayed by the practitioner naturally require much more time in order to represent the feedback meaningfully and incorporate it into classroom practices or other professional activities.

During this study, one key to the popularity of the platform was that the contents of the portfolio in the form of documents, reflections, images and other formats are 'embedded' in the portfolio, not actually stored there, allowing the practitioner to control and if desired, remove access to any section of the portfolio. Such access is not merely an 'off-on' switch, but a relatively complex set of variables that can include partial access, view or edit access, timed access and selective access. All of these fine-tunings allow for a greater range of collaboration and construction of knowledge.

Figure 4:
Profile page of the author using the Mahara Open Source Portfolio Platform



Source: (Leslie 2014a)

Figure 4 demonstrates the aggregator effect of the software. In the screenshot, the profile is from LinkedIn (Leslie 2014b) and the slideshow is from Flickr (Leslie, 2014c). Also on view is a link to Instagram (Leslie, 2014d), an RSS feed of the author's blog, a Twitter feed (Twitter, 2014) and numerous documents such as individual goals, housed in Google Drive (Google Drive, 2014). None of the artefacts or evidence are stored in the Mahara site. A secondary security feature of this arrangement is that should the site be compromised or discontinued due to institutional changes, the work itself is not lost, merely the small percentage of time taken to arrange the profile page.

Conclusion

The goal of the training sessions and ultimately of the process is to motivate teachers to be self-determining in their own learning and development. Embedded within a portfolio learning approach is a heutagogical approach (Blaschke, 2012; Kenyon & Hase, 2010) to lifelong learning. The central tenet of heutagogy is that the learner becomes more aware of their own needs and thus develops a greater motivation and

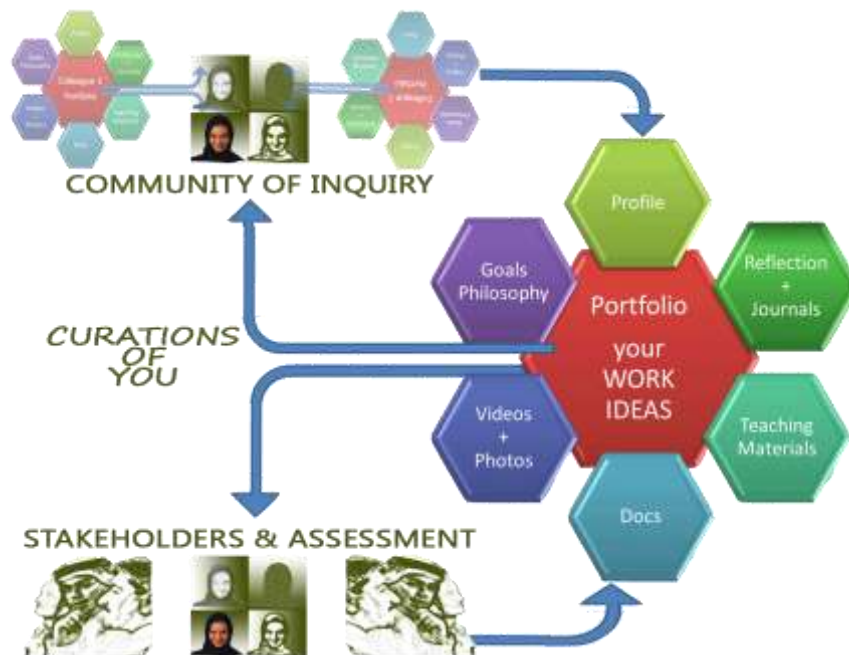
becomes more self-determining in what they want or feel they need to learn. The community of inquiry that arose from the shared purposes of the portfolio and with the confines of associated skills for assessment and demonstration of competencies pushed each member of the group to further examine their own needs as they benchmarked themselves against each other.

The training sessions for portfolio development followed an andragogical approach which draws on the rich experiences of the adult learners - the teachers. While both the Ramaqia group and the student-teachers participated in training sessions on the use of the tools, the demonstrations of competencies were discussed openly, with all members able to provide meaningful examples of what they actually did in the classroom or institution to demonstrate a particular competency.

The portfolio learning process also incorporated feedback from the school through the goals documents. Yearly goals are set by each teacher in consultation with the principal. By having the a greater and more accessible view of the teachers' existing skill sets and ambitions, the principal is able to better gauge and influence the future direction of the school through a more focused development of skills. Such quality assurance processes can be greatly influenced in this manner.

As a result of further investigation into the portfolio learning approach, and drawing upon the work previously done on this topic (Leslie, 2012), two clear processes have been discerned.

Figure 5:
The Portfolio Process



The portfolio as an object is in a state of constant development and renewal. Figure 5 shows the two facets of the portfolio process. As the portfolio is developed, the educator is constantly curating the collection of work in order to create 'curations of you'. As observed with both pilot groups of teachers, they were keenly interested in each other's work, but not in its entirety. As a group, they were able to indicate to each other their particular interests which were then highlighted through the showcase facility. Feedback on these sections then contributes to further and continuous portfolio development in a continuous process.

Similarly, based on guidelines from stakeholders and assessors including the school principal and college instructors, participants were able to create curations that reflected the demands of particular assessments. In both groups, feedback from the assessors was regularly and vigorously incorporated back into the portfolio either in terms of personal development on specific competencies, or more simply on the presentation of existing competencies. The ability to see specific curations of work in a larger context that is not part of the curation allows the stakeholders to get a much better understanding of the educator's plans, goals and reasons for specific actions. This contributes greatly to confidence in the educators and allows for more constructive feedback.

Further studies

A natural progression of investigation into a portfolio process could involve the social nature of the portfolio. One observation that seemed to hold true for any practitioner regardless of age was that of social identity. The development of opinions about people depending on the profile of evidence that they portray on their portfolios seems to happen almost unconsciously. When questioned about what type of profile they felt they were presenting to the world, many practitioners responded that they had not given much thought to their overall identity. Certainly the development of a portfolio is done with the intention of presenting to the world segments of ourselves in terms of anecdotal evidence, specific documents and images from the classroom, but the overall aspects of one's personality and general impression as created by the observer, colleague or stakeholder was not considered.

A second and related concept is that of social capital. As certain practitioners establish themselves as better or more thorough portfolio users, what social capital do they develop as 'go to' people when others are seeking help. We might ask two questions: how can we increase our social capital through the development of our portfolio? How does an increase in social capital reflect back on to our work as a motivating factor?

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