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From a Manual Portfolio to an ePortfolio: Assisting Languages Teachers in Enhancing their Professional Development



ABSTRACT: In the contemporary sphere of teacher training courses, especially in the area of teaching and learning languages, the emphasis is placed on current teaching approaches, introduction of new teaching strategies, the design, planning and delivery of lessons, classroom management techniques, subject content, autonomous learning and more student-centered approaches to teaching. Teaching effectiveness is developed not just through a careful selection of teaching/learning activities and good practice in classrooms, but above all through reflection, especially in the initial stages of teacher training. To become good and effective teachers, student teachers must be reflective practitioners by continually evaluating, not simply, the effects of their choices and actions on students, parents, and other professionals in the learning community but also their philosophy and goals in teaching. The ePortfolio can be an excellent tool to foster self-reflection.

Keywords:

STeP, the Student Teacher ePortfolio for which I am responsible, is a tailor-made web-based student teachers' ePortfolio system for the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta. It has replaced the Professional Development Portfolio (PDP), a compulsory study unit for B.Ed. (Hons) [1] students reading for a Bachelors degree in Education with a secondary track at the University of Malta. It can easily be developed with all other teachers and future teachers of languages and foreign languages. STeP is a

Developmental Portfolio. It demonstrates the advancement and development of student skills over a period of time. It is considered work-in-progress and includes both self-assessment and reflection/feedback elements. The PDP sessions with student teachers usually consist of tutorial sessions spreading over the third and fourth year of the B.Ed. (Hons.) course and are intended to be interactive forums where concerns, successes and achievements can be shared. Student teachers are taught how to write reflectively about aspects of their professional development as a teacher and are asked to collect artefacts which will provide evidence of the skills they have acquired especially during their teaching practice experience. Towards the end of the final year, student teachers actually develop and present their final PDP, providing evidence about their practice, thought and reflection that show the process of growth and development from a prospective teacher to a reflective practitioner. This should enable the student teachers to come to know themselves as individuals as well as professional teachers.

Retallick and Groundwater Smith (1996: 13)² describe portfolios as

a compilation of evidence which demonstrates the acquisition, development and exercise of knowledge and skills in relation to [...] work practices. It offers information and interpretation about a practitioner's philosophy, plans, methods and the student learning outcomes they produce.

Lorenzo and Ittleson (2005: 2)³, on their part, describe an ePortfolio as a

personalized Web-based collection of work, responses to work, and reflections that are used to demonstrate key skills and accomplishments for a variety of contexts and time periods.

In very simple words, Portfolios allow present and/or future teachers to become reflective on action and in action. They also provide the opportunity to teachers to document the practices they would like to preserve and pass on to others as well as disregard those practices which prove to be less effective. Fundamentally, a teaching portfolio should demonstrate one's own vision of teaching and learning. For these reasons, the most important objectives of our web-based STeP, as described by Farrugia and Al-Jumeily (2012)⁴ are first and foremost to enhance teachers' professional development through reflective writing, enable easy access to personal

teaching records anywhere via the Internet, allow authorized personnel to assess students' work, organize teachers' work efficiently, provide an easy to use user interface (UI) to encourage student teachers to personalize their own data and share their professional knowledge and competences with trusted partners.

The creation of an ePortfolio requires careful effort, not just from the point of view of its design and implementation, to transform a paper-based format portfolio to a new complete and secure ePortfolio system that enhances the learning process through constant tutor and peer feedback, self-regulation and reflection, but also from the point of view of its contents.

The above-mentioned issues were discussed with the web developer⁵ who, on his part, managed to develop STeP on NetBeans IDE V7.01 using Java, JavaServerPages, JavaScript, HTML, CSS and JQuery functions. And Since the majority of the students in our Faculty use Google Chrome, the latest JQuery functions were used, given that these work best on this type of browser. Special attention was also given to the fact that some students and/or tutors might not be so computer literate. For this reason, the web developer produced an easy to use and difficult to misuse screen layout, with helpful prompts and a minimum number of clicks required to perform a particular task. It was also ensured, by means of a login procedure, that only authorised users would be able to use the new ePortfolio user account. Another very important feature in the system is the provision of an automatic e-mail file upload notification when students upload their files. This is of fundamental importance as it helps avoid having students uploading material at the very last moments. As stated by the web developer himself (2012)⁶ STeP targeted

to change the way how the module is currently being taught and examined, lessen communication barriers between students and their PDP tutors, reduce paper work, store students' data online and provide a 24/7 online service to all its users. In addition, to provide room for further improvement, STeP will have a tailor-made Content Management System to allow the administrator to manage its content, users and user files.

The new ePortfolio is now hosted at the IT services at the University of Malta and can be accessed on: <https://euceport.research.um.edu.mt/>

This ePortfolio aims to help student teachers to reflect personally and discuss with others their professional development in the hope that they become more effective teachers and be in a better position to improve learning. We invite student teachers to carefully assess their own practices and to be critical so as to nurture a reflective attitude. The ePortfolio is intended to be the appropriate tool for the student teacher to enable him/her to give information about and interpret his/her practicing philosophy as well as to show the characteristics of effective teaching practice. It is an important individual growth experience, offering student teachers the chance to collaborate with mentors and other colleagues. In this way STeP places the responsibility for learning, professional development and career direction on the practitioner.

The successful development and implementation of STeP requires the combined effort of the teacher trainer and the student teacher. The ePortfolio, as suggested by Pace and Navarro (2012: 178-179)⁷

should neither be an exhibition of unfairly selected glossy presentations of the student teacher's own best works, or one which celebrates only the triumphs, nor a detailed résumé of achievements and experiences without any direct evidence of the quality of teaching or of the teaching ethos. It should essentially be a compilation of the assessments of the student teacher, both summative and formative, and also a collection of work produced. This process, which is carried forward from year to year, should include formal evaluations, teaching and learning artefacts and descriptions and illustrations of classroom interactions. All of these should be contextualized by means of a statement of the teacher's own philosophy, as well as by an overview of the teacher's teaching methods and responsibilities.

This means that the ePortfolio should never be considered a record of achievement or a profile of a student but a process of reflection and self-evaluation that includes various stages, namely: the planning of the process; the gathering of the information and interpreting it; making judgements; and communicating the results. The content is divided in six major sections as follows:⁸

ePortfolio

Get to know me

1. What is an ePortfolio?
2. Why do I need a portfolio?
3. What should my portfolio include?
4. About STeP V1.0
5. Reflective writings

6. What should my reflections include?
7. Examples
8. Help

Process

The teaching and learning process

1. Scheme of work
2. Lesson plan
3. Self evaluations
4. Class/student profiles
5. Tutors' reports
6. Resources and use of ICT
7. Assessment tasks and feedback
8. Incident anecdotes
9. Other materia

Philosophy

My teaching philosophy and goals

1. My philosophy and goals

Knowledge

My professional knowledge

1. Example of an assignment
2. Abstract of my dissertation
3. Inspiring texts
4. Seminars participation

Qualities

Professional qualities and community involvement

1. School activities
2. Community activities

Development

Professional development

1. Self evaluation
2. Tutors' feedback
3. Friends' feedback

The ePortfolio has two primary aims, namely to help student teachers reflect on their practice and to use it in their job interviews. It is built over a period of 2 years through a series of tutorial sessions and interactive forums where concerns, successes and achievements can be shared. During these one to one sessions, sometimes referred to as conferencing sessions or tutorial sessions, which are of fundamental importance in the successful execution of student-centered portfolios, both the tutor and student teacher are given the possibility to discuss the work displayed in the portfolio and to reach new learning goals. Furthermore, in such sessions, the student teacher does not only have the opportunity to discuss, clarify and reflect on what has been learnt but, above all, realize that his/her opinions count and this in turn builds up his/her self-respect, providing the tutor the possibility to familiarise him/herself with the student's feelings. This also helps the student teacher build his/her self assessment skills and develop the powers of reflection and self criticism. It also reminds students that they are responsible for the progress made as much as their tutors and

helps build a sense of partnership in the process of the production of the document.

At the end of the first academic year in which the faculty made use of STeP, the web developer carried out a qualitative evaluation with a number of student teachers and tutors, by means of different exercise tasks and one-to-one interviews. It resulted that, notwithstanding some initial teething problems, all students felt that apart from the fact that their work was made much easier and more productive, the ePortfolio was very user friendly and made it easy for them to share their personal resources with their trusted colleagues. On their part tutors agreed that the ePortfolio saves time and paper, is very easy to use and that the comments and feedback mechanism should enhance the relationship among students and tutors and among the students themselves. All this augurs that the new system will have a positive impact on students as it allows more collaboration, sharing of ideas, critical analysis, communication between students themselves and communication between students and tutors.

University of Malta

NOTES

¹The course leading to the Bachelor of Education (Honours) at the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta is a 4 year full time course. Students can choose between 2 different courses of studies, one leading to Primary Education and another one leading to Secondary Education. The B.Ed.(Hons.) degree qualifies to Professional Teacher Status and the award of the Teacher's Warrant. Further information about the Faculty of Education (Univ. of Malta) or about the B.Ed(Hons) course can be found on:<http://www.um.edu.mt/sas>.

²Rettallick J., Groiundwater-Smith S., (1996) The advancement of teacher workplace learning: a professional development module for the recognition and accreditation of extended workplace learning of teachers, Wagga Wagga, N.S.W., Charles Sturt University, Centre for Professional Development in Education.

³Lorenzo, G. & Ittelson, J. (2005). An Overview of ePortfolios. The EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, (July 26). Available at : <http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI3001.pdf> (Accessed on 17th August, 2013).

⁴Farrugia, A. & Al-Jumeily, D. 2012, "The design, implementation and evaluation of a web-based student teachers' ePortfolio (STeP)", <http://www.um.edu.mt/contact/anthonyfarrugia>

⁵The Web developer in charge of STeP is Anthony Farrugia.

⁶Farrugia, A., Al-Jumeily, D. (2012). The design, implementation

and evaluation of a web-based Student teachers' ePortfolio (STeP). IEEE Conference Publications. Available at: <http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/Xplore/home.jsp>. (Accessed 7th September 2013).

⁷ Pace, M., Navarro, J. (2012) "The Professional Development Portfolio of the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta" in How to Train Language Teacher Trainers. Edited by Pierangela Diadori. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Newcastle Upon Tyne.

⁸ Chetcuti D. (Ed.). (2003). *A guide to the Professional Development Portfolio*. Msida: Faculty of Education, University of Malta.

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