

From a Manual Portfolio to an ePortfolio: A Way to Assist Student Teachers of Languages to Become Reflective Practitioners

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Abstract

Over the past years, in many educational institutions worldwide, there has been a growing interest in language teacher professional development. Several studies show that when teachers reflect, they enhance the repertoire of pedagogical knowledge. The STeP ePortfolio can be an excellent tool to assist language teachers in enhancing their professional development from the early days of their teaching course by helping them to reflect critically, to improve their teaching qualities and pedagogies and to be able to be autonomous learners. The objectives of the ePortfolio developed and created by the Faculty of Education of University of Malta include enhancing teachers' professional development, enabling easy access to personal teaching records anywhere via the Internet, organizing teachers' work efficiently, encouraging student teachers to personalize their own data and share their professional knowledge and competences with trusted partners. To enhance competence and improve professional development, student teachers must reflect critically on both the theory and practice regarding teaching. Reflection is, in fact, a critical questioning of one's own practice. Student teachers can be helped and encouraged to initiate self-assessment and reflection by developing an ePortfolio as part of their teacher trainer course. In the absence of self-assessing skills, the ePortfolio helps provide students with guidelines for self-assessment by incorporating examples of self-reflection and guidelines regarding the preparation of reflective writing and prompt feedback. It is also an important individual growth experience, offering student teachers the chance to collaborate with mentors and other colleagues.

Today teaching has become far more complex than it was in the past and teachers are not simply tasked with forming the citizens of tomorrow (which, in itself is a mammoth task) but, above all, to be agents of change in classrooms that are characterised by diverse populations and which in turn present multilingual and multicultural challenges. This diversity in the language classroom makes teachers' work difficult since cultural diversity poses a pedagogical and social challenge to educators. Teachers as well as students bring into the classroom their own personal cultures, institutional cultures, and even cultures from specific social realities, and it is no easy challenge for the teacher to somehow integrate all this into a "class culture" to produce an environment that is conducive to learning. Teachers need to be knowledgeable about how students coming from different countries, backgrounds and life experiences perceive the world and how they process the language/s and intercultural aspects being taught in class [1]. This makes it necessary that future teachers are prepared not only with knowledge in their discipline but also with the ability to assume multiple roles in a multi-cultural society.

Unfortunately some, if not many, individuals looking to get into the teaching profession still do not realise that being a good teacher does no longer merely mean having a sound understanding of the subject matter that one would like to teach. Teaching is much more than this. Teachers need more than ever before engage with their students, ask the right questions, motivate students to learn in a way that lasts, and above all they need to be able to look at their own abilities and the way that they connect with their students. Teachers need not only understand well what they do in class but also why they do it. In other words they have to be reflective practitioners and be able to use critical reflections to improve instruction by identifying weaknesses and strengths and improving their practice.

Impedovo and Khatoon Malik argue that the objective of reflective practice in teaching is to ensure a more precise and meaningful understanding of a situation and to provide effective, applicable actions for strengthening performance [2]. This embraces the concept of the teacher as a learner and the teacher as a professional. Every teacher has a professional responsibility to reflect and evaluate his/her practice in order to be able to identify how to improve the quality of pupils' learning. Reflection causes teachers to evaluate what happened and why; it encourages teachers to try out new ideas

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and promote changes in pupils' learning behaviour. Being reflective allows one to take a step back, look more holistically and try and understand both the success and potential failings of a lesson, a situation or a way of doing something.

Reflective teaching is much more than just summarizing what happened in the classroom. By simply discussing the events of the lesson, it is possible to jump to abrupt conclusions about why things happened as they did. Reflective teaching therefore implies a more systematic process of collecting, recording and analysing our thoughts and observations, as well as those of our students, and then going on to making changes. Reflective teaching is a cyclical process, because once we start to implement changes, then the reflective and evaluative cycle begins again and as a result of our reflections we may decide to do something in a different way or just decide that what we are doing is the best way. And this, after all, is what professional development is all about. And this explains why teacher educators should facilitate the reflection process and promote opportunities for student teachers to engage in reflective conversations and reflect on their teaching experiences. Pace (2014) argues that encouraging reflective practice is important for preparing thinking practitioners who show that they can adapt to new technologies, new standards, and new environments [3]. The emphasis on reflective practice is viewed as an attempt to merge theory and practice in teacher education (Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007) [4]. Reflection is a highly valued attribute of effective teachers for without the disposition to reflect on their performance, teachers are less likely to improve their practice or to be able to see the links between theory and practice. To enhance competence and improve professional development, teachers must reflect critically on the actions performed in instruction. In fact several studies show that when teachers reflect, they enhance the repertoire of pedagogical knowledge and to do this prospective teachers rely only on cooperating teachers and university supervisors to provide them with feedback about their work [5]. Reflective teaching means looking at what one does in the classroom, thinking about why s/he does it, and thinking about if it works - a process of self-observation and self-evaluation. By collecting information about what goes on in the classroom, and by analysing and evaluating this information, the student teacher identifies and explores his/her own practices and underlying beliefs. This should lead to changes and improvements in teaching since, as Wajnryb (1992) says, "it takes a skilled and trained eye to perceive, understand and benefit from observing the proceedings of learning/teaching" [6].

Many different approaches can be employed to help student teachers become critically reflective teachers, One very effective approach is the use of reflective writing by means of a reflective ePortfolio STeP [7], the web-based Student Teacher's ePortfolio system for the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta has, as one of its primary aims, to enhance student teachers' professional development through reflective writing by means of electronic discussions, self-assessments, and peer coaching. Student teachers are encouraged to initiate self-assessment and reflection by developing an ePortfolio (STeP) through the PDP (Professional Development Portfolio) sessions as part of their four year course. In the absence of self-assessing skills, the ePortfolio helps provide students with guidelines for self-assessment by incorporating examples of self-reflection and guidelines regarding the preparation of reflective writing and prompt feedback. Reflection is a crucial part of the ePortfolio process and without it, the ePortfolio becomes merely storage. Through the ePortfolio, student teachers are invited 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 give information about and interpret his/her practising 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 student teacher is taught how to write reflectively about aspects of his/her professional development as a teacher, not simply by providing evidence about his/her practice, but above all, by thought and reflection, showing the process of growth and development from a prospective teacher to a reflective practitioner.

This portfolio 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. Student teachers are invited to carefully assess their own practices and to be critical so as to nurture a reflective attitude. The portfolio 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. Among the main advantages of using an electronic portfolio is that it enhances teachers' professional development through reflective writing, enables easy access to personal



teaching records anywhere via the Internet, allows authorized personnel to assess students' work, organizes teachers' work efficiently, provides 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 ePortfolio embraces the concept of the teacher as a learner and the teacher as a professional. It aims to help student teachers of languages be able to identify how to improve their professional activity in order to improve the quality of pupils' learning, evaluate what happens in class and why and it encourages them to try out new ideas and promote changes in pupils' learning behaviour. It also encourages peer mentoring partnerships that help support individual teachers in reflecting on and describing their practice. Such a reflective approach to teaching involves changes in the way teaching is perceived as well as the teacher's role in the process of teaching since teachers themselves are invited to develop changes in attitudes and awareness which they believe can benefit their professional growth as teachers, as well as improve the kind of support they provide their students.

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