

New Designs for Teachers' Professional Learning

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PORTFOLIOS FOR LEARNING: TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH M-LEVEL PORTFOLIOS

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In this chapter, we report on Portfolios for Learning as part of the Master of Teaching. We begin with a review of the issues related to portfolios for professional learning and then provide an overview of the design and purposes of the Mteach portfolios. The philosophy that underpins our portfolios is identified and fundamental tenets related to the literature in the field. We then report on an empirical investigation into portfolio construction from the perspective of the learner. A rationale for the research is provided, methods of data collection and analysis are explained and findings are presented. The chapter ends with a discussion of issues that will require our future attention.

Introduction: portfolios for learning and portfolios for assessment

A portfolio is often defined as a 'collection of work' or a 'collection of evidence' (Paulson, Paulson & Meyer 1991; Snadden & Thomas 1998; Hoel & Haugalokken 2004). Just as the collection of any artefact is varied and built up gradually, implicit in the term 'collection' is the idea that the material presented shows change and development in different contexts over time and is not a product of the moment. Portfolios as a showcase for an individual's work have a long established history in the world of art, design and photography. In these portfolios, a practitioner collects examples of work of particular personal importance to illustrate practical skills and the development of ideas.

Since the early 1990s, portfolios have been used to showcase professional skills and knowledge in other fields such as medicine and education. In teacher education, portfolios have served two purposes: assessing performance and supporting

professional learning. In a portfolio designed to assess performance, the collection of evidence must demonstrate (that is, prove) the achievement of professional standards prescribed by external agencies such as the Teacher Development Agency (standards for Induction, Performance threshold and Advanced skills teacher). Such evidence could, for example, include improved results in national assessments or curriculum materials which demonstrate the application of government strategy but it would not include any sort of critical review of centrally imposed systems and initiatives. On the other hand, in a portfolio designed to support professional learning, the ability to question, analyse and reflect on that evidence is seen as fundamental to understanding ‘the complex, messy, multiple dimensions of teaching and of teacher learning’ (Lyons 1998a p15). A learning portfolio allows teachers to ‘engage in professional dialogue with colleagues’, ‘to collaborate and develop understanding and ideas on teaching and learning’ (Klenowski 2002 p25).

Herein lies a major difference between a competence portfolio and a learning portfolio. In the former, teachers must show they have acquired a set of generic ‘context-free’ teaching skills considered necessary to all those who seek recognition for a particular level of teaching expertise. In contrast, a learning portfolio is personalised and richly contextualised; it acknowledges the teacher as an individual with a personal philosophy of education, working in a particular context with specific challenges. A learning portfolio involves thinking, talking and knowing about teaching; it is self-directed and involves a process of discovery (Grant & Huebner 1998). The process of coming to understand better the complexities of teaching involves asking questions, sometimes difficult ones which challenge the status quo and which query why things are the way they are. For some of these questions, there

may be no easy answers. Scott (2000 p126) refers to this as ‘taking up a position of reflective scepticism’ and it includes identifying and challenging assumptions and imagining and exploring alternatives. Underlying the two types of portfolio are very different perspectives on teacher professionalism. The competence portfolio reflects a view of the teacher as ‘technician whose primary function is to develop the skills to put into practice a set of behaviours determined by policy makers’ (Scott 2000 p4). Advocates of the learning portfolio would see the teacher as an autonomous professional, theoretically informed and able to make independent judgements about effective practice (Furlong et al 2000).

When portfolios are used for both assessment of performance and professional learning, there are tensions (Klenowski 2002) which can lead to the neglect of learning in favour of tick-lists of standards. Such tensions are inherent in our own portfolios.

The Mteach portfolios

Two portfolios form a compulsory part of the assessment process in the Master of Teaching making up one third of the total credits. They were designed to serve the dual purpose of assessment and scaffold for professional learning. This dual role is part of the history of the Master of Teaching which was created to engage teachers in continuous professional development through higher level scholarly reflection and the evaluation and analysis of their classroom teaching. In this context, assessment is not concerned with the demonstration of standards but with understanding of the academic literature and engagement with theory in relation to practice in school and learning on the core modules of the Mteach.

The definition of a portfolio is shaped by the purpose it serves and by the philosophy of the course to which it belongs (Hoel & Haugalokken 2004; Dollase 1998). The philosophy informing the Master of Teaching is that of teaching as an act of enquiry in which classroom experiences are interrogated and complex issues identified. Learning is seen as an act of co-construction and participants are part of a dialogic community of learners who teach in different cultural settings which provide the context for their professional development during the course. This philosophy is clearly evident in the definition of the portfolio as it appears in our course documentation:

'A portfolio is a structured collection of evidence of a teacher's best work that is selective, reflective and collaborative and demonstrates a teacher's accomplishments over time and across a variety of contexts'

Reflection and collaboration, then, are fundamental to both the course as a whole and the portfolios.

The first portfolio, Professional Development Portfolio 1 (PDP1), is submitted during the early part of the first term of the course and is the first piece of assessed work. Professional Development Portfolio 2 (PDP2) is submitted at the end of the first or second year of the course depending on the sequence of modules taken. The first portfolio therefore is concerned with accreditation of prior learning. As our teachers begin the course with varying amounts of professional experience, the first portfolio might involve looking back over the recent past (the training year or the induction year) or a much longer period of time. The second portfolio focuses on learning during the Mteach course and requires a review of theoretical and practical learning.

In between the two portfolios, teachers have been involved in on-line modules where they have read background papers and the related academic literature, contributed to on-line discussions, worked with response partners. They have attended face to face sessions, presented drafts for peer review and written course work assignments.

These are the experiences which form the basis of PDP2 which also includes evidence studies that draw on both literature work and practical teaching.

Each portfolio requires a philosophical statement. This is concerned with personal and professional values and the wider role of the teacher as educator. When teachers write the second philosophical statement, they begin by returning to their first statement written one or two years earlier. Some teachers may go further back to a statement produced during the initial training year. This returning to a particular point in time is an invitation to see whether amidst all the changes, the initiatives and strategies, fundamental beliefs about the purposes of education remain the same. This can be a transforming or a re-confirming process. The philosophical statement involves looking back over time and looking beyond the confines of a particular subject or phase specialism. Both looking 'long' and looking 'wide' are considered to be key elements in critical reflection.

For the purposes of consistency in assessment, the contents of the portfolio are prescribed but within the prescriptions there is choice and flexibility and we believe teachers have 'scope and discretion (.....) to demonstrate individual capability and achievement' (Dinham & Scott 2003). The essential components of the two portfolios are as follows:

Professional development portfolio 1:

In addition to the Philosophical statement, teachers must include:

- A critical appraisal of an article from a professional or academic journal
- A piece of reflective writing related to an oral presentation by applicants to peers at the course interview
- Three pieces of evidence showing professional development prefaced by reflections on the way the evidence contributes to development. These pieces might include schemes of work, lesson observations, projects.

Professional development portfolio 2:

In addition to the Philosophical statement, teachers must include:

- A Review of their on-line learning as part of an electronic tutor group (see chap x in this volume)
- An Evidence Study which is carried out in school and reviewed critically. The study might relate to development as a subject or phase specialist, to development as a researcher, to the study of pupil progression, to the use of teacher narrative in understanding professional development

These two elements forge strong links between school and university, between practice and theory because they require critical review of practice in the light of understandings of the academic literature.

- Finally, the second portfolio requires a summary of achievements and evidence of engagement in research and scholarship.

The requirements of the portfolios are such that teachers must engage with those intellectual activities identified earlier as being essential to professional learning. Moreover, such activities are the very essence of M-ness. At masters level, teachers are assessed, amongst other things, on their capacity to *'refine professional knowledge through scholarship and critical reflection, to analyse pedagogy within immediate and wider professional contexts'* and on their *'ability to draw from appropriate intellectual perspectives through their knowledge of the related academic literature'* (Assessment criteria for Masters degrees, Institute of Education, University of London 2005).

There is then, a degree of synergy between the requirements of the portfolio as a vehicle for assessment at masters level and as a vehicle for professional learning. Nevertheless, as new module leaders conscious of inherent tensions in the dual purpose of our portfolios, we were concerned that teachers might feel constrained in their construction of the portfolio. It was possible that teachers would be more focused on trying to compile a quantity of documentation that would address assessment requirements rather than concentrate on critical reflection and analysis.

Our empirical investigation

With the graduation of our first cohort of teachers in September 2004, the moment seemed right to review portfolio work. We wanted to know whether the portfolios were playing the dual role they were designed for and we wanted to understand more about the construction of the portfolio from the learner perspective. Our research was therefore, both evaluative and exploratory. Mindful that many teachers' experience of professional development focuses on the demonstration of skills and evidence of

performance because this is what is required for promotion, we wanted to explore their perceptions of portfolios and determine whether they had assimilated the professional learning purpose.

An initial review of the literature related to portfolio construction (Lyons 1998, Lyons 2002, Klenowksi 2002) confirmed that in theory, our portfolios included three important tenets fundamental to learning, namely:

- selection of material by the learners (albeit within limited ways)
- collaboration with others
- critical reflection

In practice, we did not know how Mteach participants constructed their portfolios around these elements and the value they gave to each. The research aimed to explore our teachers' perceptions of the portfolio with respect to these elements in the context of the portfolio they had most recently constructed. Our understanding of the importance of the three aspects outlined above shaped our investigation and the questions we asked our teachers. We were interested to explore how our teachers

- selected their material for the portfolio and what critical analysis was evident in the decisions they made about what to include;
- collaborated with others and what kinds of collaboration had been helpful in the reflective process;
- perceived what it meant to be critically reflective.

Our investigations began with a review of the literature related to the three key elements we were interested in so that we had a better understanding of each. We report first on this before providing details of the interview study.

Selection of materials

A final portfolio is often a judicious selection from a much larger number of entries and artefacts that have been gathered over time. Selecting from all that might be available those pieces which best reflect one's work whether to prove competence or to demonstrate learning requires critical evaluation and an awareness of what learning has taken place and how. It requires a degree of autonomy and self-awareness (Klenowski 2002). The final portfolio 'tells a story' of a teacher's teaching and learning experiences over a particular period of time, yet to tell an interesting story, the different artefacts that are chosen need to cohere in some way. Narration is concerned with interpretation and the construction of meaning; it is a way of knowing, which can capture the complexities of teaching (Lyons 2002). It is this meta-understanding of how knowledge of teaching and learning has developed over the year that enables a teacher to make a whole out of a number of disparate pieces. Such artefacts might include work by pupils, audio or video-recordings, lesson evaluations, lesson observations as well as the more academic pieces. For this reason, definitions of portfolio often qualify 'collection of work' with the word *purposeful* and writers talk of *constructing* or *creating* a portfolio.

Collaboration with others

When thinking and learning are viewed as social as well as intellectual activities (Cochran-Smith 1991), we expect collaborative practice to be fundamental to pedagogy. Moreover, working together, talking about issues, advising and mentoring are important aspects of belonging to a profession (Shulman 1998). Collaborative working affirms the value of one's experiences and invites other perspectives (Orland

Barak 2005); supports higher levels of thinking and leads to improved grades (Hoel & Haugalokken 2004). Collaborative reflection, a process which involves articulating one's own ideas and listening to the views of others (Glazer et al 2004) scaffolds understanding of personal practice and opens the mind to different perspectives. Glazer et al see this as fundamental to the formation of a personal philosophy of teaching and learning.

Critical Reflection

Reflection is 'a purposeful, systematic enquiry into practice' (Schön, 1983) with a view to its improvement and which allows for doubt and perplexity (Hatton & Smith 1995; Pedro 2005). According to Furlong et al (2002), it is a way of coming to know by capturing practical experience in order to learn from it. Reflection involves both doing and thinking, looking back and looking forward and is concerned with learning in order to be a better practitioner. *Critical* when used with reference to academic writing, might be defined as careful and well-informed and it includes healthy scepticism and a personal standpoint (Wellington et al 2005).

When critical and reflection are put together, *critical* has other specific meanings. Critical reflection is placed in contrast to lay reflection (Furlong et al 2002) or technical, descriptive and dialogic reflection (Hatton & Smith 1995). These lower levels of reflection are characterised by recounts of personal experience that do not go beyond the self or which focus on the effectiveness of skills without any broader critique or which provide some reasons for action but which are limited to personal judgement. Critical reflection, by contrast, is a wider and longer term. It goes beyond the personal to review experiences in the light of other forms of professional

knowledge such as the findings of research and theoretical insights derived from the foundation disciplines (Furlong et al 2002).

For some writers, critical reflection extends to a consideration of the socio-political context and includes moral and ethical issues in teaching (Hatton & Smith 1995, Scott 2000, Pedro 2005). Lyons (1998b, p116) uses the metaphor of weaving and threading to illustrate how critical thinking can connect different experiences to bring into consciousness teachers' beliefs and values. This aspect of critical thinking might involve going beyond the conventional to challenge 'taken for granted notions about education' and developing 'alternative modes of practice to those intended by policy-makers' (Scott 2000 p126). In these ways, critical reflection is 'transformational' (Barnett 1997) and involves becoming 'a critical being' rather than being critical (Askew et al 2006).

The interview study

We conducted an interview study involving five teachers; two teachers (Angela and Nathalie) had completed their PDP2 eighteen months prior to the interview and had graduated from the Mteach course. Both Angela and Nathalie had entered the course as newly qualified teachers, having just completed their Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). They had submitted PDP1 at the very beginning of the course and PDP2 at the end of the first year so they had experience of working on two MTeach portfolios at the time of the interviews. Three teachers (Ellen, Jane and Valerie) were coming to the end of their first year of the course and had submitted their PDP1 during the first term. These are experienced teachers; Ellen has worked for many years in post-16 education, Jane had one year's teaching experience in a secondary school, and

Valerie has worked for a number of years with adults in further education. These five teachers were chosen as they represented a range of experience, both of teaching and of the Mteach course, as we wanted to different perspectives of the Mteach portfolios.

The interview questions were similar for both sets of teachers (see Appendix). We focused on the purpose of the portfolio, as we wanted to establish whether the teachers perceived a learning purpose beyond the need to submit the portfolio for summative assessment. The interview also elicited the kind of learning the teachers experienced from constructing the various components of the portfolios and whether they worked collaboratively, in any way co-operating, sharing, or co-constructing their portfolios with others. The teachers were asked about their understanding of what it meant to critically reflect, and what the portfolio demonstrated about their professional development.

All five interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. We then undertook a thematic analysis, as did Pedro (2005) in her study of pre-service teachers' meanings of reflective practice. Each of us read and coded the transcripts independently, focusing on teachers' overall perceptions of the portfolio and the themes identified above. We then compared and discussed our coding, and wrote an interpretive account that captured the essence of the data, particularly addressing each theme.

Interpretations and discussion

The opening questions of the interview were phrased to stimulate responses that captured each teacher's overall perception of what the portfolio was about. This was

an important step for us in seeing whether each participant had assimilated the learning purpose of the portfolio within the context of the assessment requirement. We begin here by identifying these overall perceptions, focusing on whether teachers emphasised the portfolio as a process or talked about it as a product. Setting the scene in this way, we go on to discuss each theme, selection of materials, collaboration and critical reflection. Finally we report on how the teachers perceived their professional learning through the portfolio and how they envisaged its influence on future activity.

Perceptions of the portfolio: process and product

We found that all of our teachers made a clear distinction between the assessment and learning functions of the portfolio. They had slightly different perspectives, but experienced few tensions of the sort that we envisaged might be problematic. Angela perceived the portfolio as a means of professional development as well as assessment; not only did she talk about collecting and showing evidence, but also about reflecting on how the evidence demonstrated development, including explaining the choice of evidence. She also valued the portfolio as a record of professional development that enabled her to subsequently reflect and analyse how she had changed and developed as a teacher. She could see the extent to which she had changed and developed professionally. In contrast, Nathalie viewed the MTeach portfolio as a showcase of her work for the year, as a record of what had been achieved. Her main emphasis was on the portfolio as a product, however as she looked back through her philosophical statements, she was able to see how she had changed and so the portfolio enabled her to identify her progress. She, like Angela, valued the portfolio as a record, or landmark, of her professional knowledge at that time. For these two teachers there

was clearly a difference in interpretation as to the purpose of the portfolio, yet this difference does not seem to have hampered their learning from the portfolio progress.

Jane perceived two purposes for the portfolio; first as a means of reviewing progress and seeing changes in practice or development, second as:

a way of working that we've used again and again on the MTeach, that sort of reflective style of learning and going back over evidence that you've gathered over a period of time and examining it summarising it and saying what you've learned from it and how you've changed

She referred to other MTeach modules where she had exercised the same kind of reflective process. She saw the construction of the MTeach portfolio as an important process, as distinct from the PGCE portfolio where reflection was tokenistic, and which was produced to get through the course assessment. For Jane, constructing the portfolio led her question the rationale for DfEs requirements. It also enabled her to consider how she would mentor an NQT in her department and support her portfolio, reflecting together on the reasons for carrying out different practices. Initially, the assessment aspect of the MTeach portfolio had driven Jane to believe she had to 'prove' everything through the portfolio. However, once she became engaged in the Leading Learning module she understood the value of reflection and its role in the portfolio became clearer.

Like Jane, Valerie viewed the portfolio in professional development terms, as she saw it as a means of 'reflecting on reflection' in the sense that she had to organise her thoughts and put these in a written form for others. Through reviewing past

experiences she had been able to think more about how to do things in the future, so the portfolio provided a means for future planning. Like Angela and Nathalie, the portfolio also provided Valerie with a 'picture' of where was as the start of her masters course. For Valerie, the assessment aspect of the portfolio was not uppermost, she wanted to present her portfolio well for someone else to look at, but in terms of the content she was more concerned with thinking about her practice rather than the fact that it was assessed. She saw the MTeach portfolio as very different from the PGCE portfolio, which was a collection of artefacts that show what you are doing, rather than being reflective.

Ellen also perceived the portfolio process as a vehicle for reflection, not only on past experiences, but also on reasons for teaching. The need to produce reflective writing and a philosophical statement acted like triggers that encouraged Ellen to ask herself fundamental questions about her reasons for teaching, going beyond the recent past to her original childhood desires. She reflected on all of her work experiences and how they influenced her current practice as a teacher. On completing the portfolio she realised how much she had achieved and it was good for her morale to have completed the process. Ellen also saw the benefits of the portfolio for assessment and recording progress. She planned to introduce the use of portfolios to her students as a means of 'moving away from exams'. Though she intends to use the student portfolio for assessment purposes, she will also expect them to reflect on their learning.

These perceptions of the portfolio served to demonstrate that the dual purpose we had been concerned with was not too critical for our teachers, and that four of them clearly

perceived the portfolio as a means of professional development through being reflective.

Selection of materials

We were concerned that teachers would feel constrained by the prescriptive nature of most of the contents of the two portfolios but this was not born out in the interview findings. Opinions varied about the degree of structure in the latter sections of the portfolios; Ellen liked the open-endedness of the last section of the portfolio which she organised first and then used to shape the earlier sections, whereas Nathalie did not like the more unstructured nature of the last two sections. She preferred the guidance of the more directed earlier sections and so provided ‘pretty things’ like photographs and classroom displays in the second section. All the teachers reported being involved in a process of collecting widely from a range of sources, of sifting and sorting, of deciding on a personal criterion by which to shape the final selection.

Angela and Nathalie archived the discussions from the on-line modules for the first section of the portfolio and made final selections based on different criteria. Angela, for example, selected conversations that illustrated how others had responded to or learned from her postings. Nathalie, on the other hand, chose examples of extended, threaded on-line conversations, which showed how ideas had developed. We learned from these teachers that they regretted not annotating their on-line discussions at the time they were taking place. Annotations at the time would have supported retrospective evaluations and helped them to see more clearly how thinking and ideas had developed and changed.

Ellen and Jane looked back through a large collection of artefacts and chose those which were personally significant. This evaluative process supported the tracing of change over time and was a self-affirming activity, which brought to mind good things that had been forgotten and a realisation of just how much had been achieved. Valerie focused on the recent past and used the portfolio as a catalyst to review management responsibilities that had only recently been taken on. Through reflecting on new experiences for the portfolio Valerie hoped to deepen her understanding of them. Making sense of them in order to write about them in the portfolio required her to go beyond her own experiences to the background literature.

Our conclusions are, from the responses to questions about how materials were selected, that the act of portfolio construction is a learning experience in itself. It requires a stepping back and a review over time. This is a powerful process, which appears to have had a profound effect on those interviewed.

Collaboration with others

We wanted to know whether teachers had shared their portfolio work with others as a matter of course and whether they felt this had been beneficial. We found that all the interviewees had shared some aspects of their portfolio work with others. Angela and Nathalie had worked with each other, and found that discussion had helped them to make the final selections for the portfolio.

Jane talked to her PGCE mentor about the task of constructing her portfolio, and received advice about how to create a dialogue about her artefacts. Jane also found it valuable to talk to another MTeach student. Valerie was able to share her portfolio process with a teacher friend who discussed different aspects with and who also read the portfolio before it was handed in. Valerie found these discussions very helpful, because through exchanging ideas with her friend, it was like ‘seeing yourself in the mirror, your practice reflected in somebody else’. This statement really demonstrates the power of sharing in reflective analysis. Ellen felt the need to share her MTeach experience with someone and so shared her work with her partner who had trained as a teacher. He read her work and made suggestions, pointing out her strengths as a writer of resources materials for non-specialists. She thought it was useful to share her portfolio with ‘someone who knows me well’.

Thus the interviews demonstrated that some form of collaboration was important to all our interviewees.

Critical reflection

In this section we report not only on the ways in which teachers talked about ‘critical reflection’, which demonstrate varying perspectives on what this term means, but also about how they viewed the philosophical statements written for their portfolios, as these demonstrate how they reflected through the portfolio process. Teachers did not refer to those longer, wider elements of critical reflection found in the literature in their answers to the question about critical reflection but in talking about their philosophical statements they did.

Angela's understanding of what it meant to 'critically reflect' on her practice involved looking back over at what she had done, evaluating what went well, getting information about how to improve, then reviewing the process again. She emphasised that critical reflection focused on the purpose of the improvement, examining how and why the change was valuable. For Nathalie, critical reflection meant looking back and thinking about what happened in a lesson, analysing moments from the lesson. She used video-recordings of herself to reflect in this way, thinking about how she could have improved her different aspects of her practice. These different views do not seem to encompass the wider notion of critical reflection that we have seen in the literature (Hatton & Smith, 1995), rather, they are couched in terms of what is identified as descriptive or dialogic reflection.

In defining critical reflection, Jane, Valerie and Ellen also demonstrated an understanding that is more akin to descriptive or dialogic reflection, but with some essential differences. Jane's account of what it means to critically reflect is similar to Nathalie's in that she looked back at instances within a lesson and examined what went well and what went badly. However, she also questioned why things happened the way they did. For Jane, the process of critical reflection involved thinking about ways of changing things and why. This view of critical reflection again does not include reference to wider structures (Hatton & Smith, 1995), but is more than an individual's internal dialogue. It is linked to collaborative acts of reflection, identified as important in the process of developing more advanced forms of reflection.

Critical reflection, according to Valerie, meant thinking deeply about something, asking herself questions about what she was doing and thinking further about what has happened after the event. Such thinking has helped her to understand whether something was working and to identify gaps and problems. For Ellen, critical reflection was a personal, introspective act of asking oneself ‘why I do things the way I do them.what made me do things in this way?’ She made little reference to other perspectives.

The philosophical statement made all the teachers think more widely and required them to look back long term. Engagement with the readings enabled Angela to apply ideas from the literature to her practice. She was aware that she could gain more from revisiting some of the course readings and interpreting them again in the light of her experience. Nathalie found that having to construct a philosophical statement enabled her to clarify her own reasons for being a teacher and what she would want to ‘concentrate on’. She found that engaging with the readings was daunting at first, but appreciated that it ‘gets you into the mind set of thinking critically’. Her experience of thinking in this way has enabled her to take a critical view of recent developments in her school that she perceives as simply ‘glossy and pretty’. She has continued to engage in the literature, extending her understanding of recent developments in her subject area and theories of learning.

Jane liked engaging in critical analysis of research and considering its value to her own practice. She found it interesting to review a philosophical statement from her PGCE year, realising how much she had changed and that she was now more concerned with ‘big questions’ about practice. She found the practice of presenting

her own critical commentary useful, and further study on the MTeach module enabled her to link classroom learning experiences to research. Writing the philosophical statement was new to Valerie and enabled her to think deeply about her reasons for teaching:

It made me analyse who I am actually as a teacher and why I am doing this job and the positive aspects...I don't think many teachers get the chance to deeply think about why they are where they are..

Valerie's engagement with scholarly reading and writing for the portfolio was also a new experience and helped her with forward thinking and planning in preparation for her research approach for the second module. Ellen, who writes widely about her subject specialism, found the portfolio provided a stimulus for engaging in more scholarly reading about education than she had been used to.

Our conclusions from these responses are that the incorporation of readings into the MTeach and the construction of a philosophical statement that encourages a reflective analysis that draws on the readings helps to achieve that fusion of theory and practice that characterises the Mteach. In doing so, we begin to see what critical reflection means within the Mteach.

Professional learning, future activity, and the value of the portfolio

In response to questions about the professional learning gained from the portfolio, teachers were able to identify their learning and also express how they would take the experience forward. Angela and Nathalie had more to say in this regard, as they were

now looking back over 18 months of practice since the completion of their last portfolio, and were able to analyse the learning from that distance in time. They expressed their learning in connection with the PDP2 evidence study, which included observation of their practice by others and also of others by themselves. Angela identified personal change and development by reviewing how her analysis of other people's lessons changed over the year: 'I had to think about how I'd changed and what evidence there was about how I changed'. Nathalie also realised the value of this evidence study as she had been recently engaged in carrying out observations of colleagues. She felt she had become much more 'advanced' in her ability to observe, critically analyse and feedback on practice with junior colleagues.

The portfolio provided Jane with a sense of professional development, and Valerie found that the process of constructing the portfolio made her realise how much she had developed in the five years she had been teaching. The reflective elements, such as the philosophical statement, indicated her development as a teacher, but essentially the portfolio product served to show 'a picture of a certain time'. She was already looking forward to the process of constructing the second portfolio. Ellen was also looking forward to constructing the second portfolio as she wanted to begin thinking about where she 'was going' well in advance. She was already working on the next portfolio 'in my head', showing that the portfolio process had become a way of life because it was perceived to have value.

Conclusions and implications

This small-scale study set out to explore the perceptions of portfolios held by some of our Mteach participants, our concern being that the tensions between assessment and learning purposes that are identified in the literature would be apparent for our teachers. Yet the synergy between requirements for M level assessment and a portfolio for learning means that both can be successfully achieved; that's why the teachers we interviewed do not experience conflict between the dual role played by the portfolio. However, it is possible that not all the teachers undertaking the masters course would find the concept of a learning portfolio that is also assessed unproblematic. We should continue to be aware of possible tensions in this regard.

Our research showed that teachers considered the first portfolio as both a review of the past and a critical evaluation of their experiences and beliefs at a particular point in time, a sort of landmark, as they set out on a course of study for a higher degree. This 'landmark' is the point to which they return when constructing the second portfolio which focuses on learning during the Mteach course and requires a review of theoretical and practical learning. This includes experiences directly related to the Mteach and those outside it related to school-based experience. The notion of a landmark that serves to locate change over time is one we had not explicitly foreseen, and provides us with better knowledge of how to relate the second portfolio to the first. We now encourage our teachers more forcefully to review the first portfolio when moving on to the second, to appreciate their own developmental process.

Our interviews and analysis were influenced by three tenets of portfolios identified in the literature: selection of materials, collaboration with others and critical reflection. We have found that selection of materials was purposeful according to each teacher's

perception of what the portfolio was for. To some extent all perceived a learning purpose, which guided their selection of materials. Moreover, they had continued to collect evidence for possible inclusion in a future portfolio even if, as one of the graduates pointed out, she was not sure how she would use it. The PDP1 teachers had begun to collect materials for the second portfolio but two of them had also extended portfolio work to other aspects of their professional lives. Other teachers on the course may have difficulties perceiving the learning purpose behind selection of materials and we need to be aware of ways in which their selection does not result in a glossy showcase with little reflective analysis.

In pursuing our teachers' experiences of collaborating with others, we concluded that portfolio construction is not a lone activity but currently possibilities for sharing are dependent upon circumstances. All our interviewees needed someone to talk to, the two graduates in particular were dependent on each other for support and for bouncing off ideas. The need to collaborate at some level is an important message, and as we currently rely on the on-line participation as the main mode for discussion, participation is important. We were able to distinguish between three different kinds of collaborative working, which will inform our future guidance within the portfolio modules. Mteach participants are involved in **co-construction** in the work they do in the on-line modules (see chap ...). where they read background papers and academic literature to which they respond in their on-line discussion groups. An analysis of this co-construction of meaning is a required element of the portfolio. They **co-operate** with university tutors by submitting draft entries of the portfolio for comment. For organisational reasons, we do not currently have formalised procedures for teachers to **share** draft elements from their portfolios with Mteach peers even though this is

established practice in other parts of the course. Hoel and Haugalokken (2004) attributed improved grades in portfolio work on the Art of Teaching Norwegian to peer response groups. Their student portfolios contained both response texts to peers and response texts from peers on which individuals had to comment. The process involved therefore both individual and collective reflection. An implication of our findings for course development is that we make formal arrangements for peer review, so that the collaboration needed for enhancing reflective processes (Glazer et al 2004) is encouraged.

In developing the portfolio within the MTeach we were asking our teachers to be critically reflective about their practice. Reflection is fundamental to the two portfolios and in setting out on this research we wanted to consider in particular the meaning of ‘critical ‘ reflection in a portfolio at masters level. Much of the literature reported on portfolio work in the field of education refers to pre-service teachers but critical reflection seems to us to be an aspect of the Mteach portfolio which plays a significant role in the M-ness of the work. Our guidance notes use the term critical reflection, for example in PDP1:

‘a portfolio is a working document which records work in progress and critical reflection on it’; and in PDP2:

‘the portfolio contains evidence and critical reflections of that evidence’

but we do not specifically define the term. When we asked our teachers what they understood by critical reflection, they made reference to looking back, thinking deeply, or introspecting so as to evaluate good and bad to improve practice. The process involved asking *why* questions and seeing change and it was bound up with reflective scepticism. For some, reflective scepticism was a *result* of analytical

reflection, so that having been reflective for their Mteach work, they took a critical stance on recent developments in school. They were able to identify some initiatives as being ‘glossy and pretty’ and take a more analytical approach to initiatives like accelerated learning that may be promoted unquestioningly in school. There is some evidence here of the transformational effect of critical reflection with teachers starting to move from being critical to critical beings (Barnett 1997; Askew et al 2006).

When we embarked on this enterprise, our own understanding of critical reflection was less informed by the literature, and has developed in the light of our work. We emphasised that teachers’ reflections on practice should be informed by their scholarly activity, but had not made explicit what ‘critical reflection’ meant. We now have a somewhat better understanding of what we mean by critical reflection in the portfolio to share with our teachers, but plan to extend our research to the documents themselves in order to clarify our understanding further. Also, we have to think about how to nurture and develop powers of critical reflection which are not innate. We believe this issue is relevant to the whole course, not just our portfolio modules. Jane’s response clearly shows that her perception of the portfolio was influenced by the emphasis on reflective practice she experienced in her first MTeach module. The message for us is that all teachers need such an experience, and that beginning modules have a role to play in helping teachers to understand what reflective practice means.

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Appendix

Interview Study Questions

What purpose do you think the portfolio serves?

Does the portfolio have value?

What did you gain from producing a portfolio?

Have there been any positive consequences?

A pay-off beyond the actual completion of the document?

What have you learnt from constructing the different components of the portfolio?

Philosophical statement

Reporting on-line tasks

Critical writing/evidence studies
Review of an article
Selecting and documenting personal evidence

How did you go about constructing your portfolio?

Did you work with or talk to anyone else about the pieces you selected or your reflections on them?

What does the portfolio show about your professional development?

The portfolio requires you to reflect critically on your teaching. What do you understand by 'reflection'? What do you do when you critically reflect?

Were there problems in producing a portfolio?

How did the knowledge that it would be assessed influence your portfolio?

Have you constructed a portfolio for any other reasons? Was the process the same?