

E-portfolios for Scotland's teachers – Seminar Report

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“This was an inspired, and inspiring, day” – *seminar participant*

“A very useful day. Should be influential in relation to further 'interoperability' issues”
– *seminar participant*

The “E-portfolios for Scotland's Teachers” seminar was held on 27 June 2006 at Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh. Forty participants attended from all over Scotland, and these included a broad mix of teachers, students, lecturers and programme co-ordinators, CPD and quality improvement officers, learning technologists, and representatives from the General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS), Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).

The seminar was organised by the ERDEE project at the University of Edinburgh, and was chaired by Professor Pamela Munn, Dean of the Moray House School of Education.

Professor Munn began the day by welcoming the group and stressing that this would be a forum for discussion and exploration, and that there were no experts with all of the answers. Rather, this would be an opportunity to discuss how we might wish to see e-portfolios taken forward in Scotland. In this spirit, she spoke about the importance of e-portfolios as *personal* learning and reflective tools for teachers. She asked the group to consider reflection – what does it mean? Is the purpose of reflection the same at all stages of a career? What are the qualities of reflection and how are these affected by its context? Finally, how can the potential of e-portfolios be realised by those with differing levels of technical ability and confidence?

Morning Speakers

Erika Cunningham, an experienced nursery teacher and a participant on the Chartered Teachers programme at the University of Edinburgh, then spoke about her own experiences of reflecting upon and recording her professional development. She compared her previous recording activities (and those of other teachers she questioned informally) – describing these as writing down ‘date, title, hours’ for CPD – with the extensive reflective writing she now does as part of the Chartered Teachers programme. She discussed how her understanding and practice of reflection had changed, and that reflection is not just a matter of finding time (though this is a significant hurdle for busy teachers), but also about having support of peers and mentors, and understanding and valuing the process itself. Her suggestions about what is needed in an e-portfolio reflected these concerns, as well as the role of ICT literacy and the need for systems to be simple (but rich) and user-friendly. Seminar participants then talked about how it might be possible to modify existing materials and resources (Chartered Teacher learning logs, for example) to reach a wider audience of teachers. A discussion of quality vs quantity, and the vital importance of practicing and of receiving feedback while learning to reflect, followed. Jim Buchan, from the Scottish Schools Digital Network (SSDN) team, asked Erika if she felt that the reflection she had been doing had changed her practice as a teacher. Erika explained how deeply she felt this to be the case for her, and that deep reflection could make teachers question their most basic beliefs and teaching

practices, and that this can be a profound and disturbing experience. This led the group round again to the importance of providing adequate support for teachers in their reflective practice.

Erika was followed by **Jim Grant**, Director of Educational Networking at the University of Aberdeen, who talked about self-evaluation, the Pathways CPD Project, and his vision for e-portfolios in Scotland. Starting with the analogy of driving (“all drivers think they’re good”), Jim wondered how often experienced drivers question their own knowledge and practice, or bother to refresh their skills or understanding. He compared this with teaching, and went on to stress the importance of not only recognising one’s own training and development needs, but also being able to self-evaluate in context – ie: know what the expectations are. He also stressed that self-evaluation had, by definition, to be self-directed – information, resources and feedback can (and should) be given, but in the end individuals have to apply this themselves. Moving on to talk about the Pathways CPD Project (<http://www.ed-net.org.uk/>, in the Software Catalogue section), Jim gave some background information about the project and its philosophy. In particular, he noted that the development team made special efforts to ensure that the tool is clearly and unambiguously private and confidential, that it caters for the entire school community and facilitates transition within it, that it encourages deep reflection but allows the user to choose at what level they will record and reflect upon their CPD, and that it does not ask users to start from a ‘blank sheet of paper’. In setting out his vision for e-portfolios, Jim stressed that e-portfolios will be come a reality in Scottish education, and that we have a chance at this moment to get things right in terms of quality, depth and support. He added that his vision for e-portfolios was that they could extend beyond the boundaries of reflection and recording and feed into the provision of CPD training itself, and provide scaffolding and links, as needed and in context, to materials and resources. In other words, the e-portfolio could be a vehicle for action and learning as well as reflection.

Gillian Brydson, Education Officer (CPD) at Dumfries and Galloway Council, spoke next, and started by pointing out that reflection and portfolio-building is not new. She referred to the shelf of boxes of evidence in her own office. She admitted to not keeping an e-portfolio herself, despite being involved in providing these for teachers in her local authority, and asked the other participants how many of them had an e-portfolio. Several hands went up, but the majority didn’t. Gillian discussed Dumfries and Galloway’s online CPD management solution, which is aimed at being a one-stop-shop for teachers to self-evaluate, prepare for professional review, book and evaluate courses offered by the authority and access resources and research. Along with the self-evaluation tools, there is also some limited e-portfolio functionality. Gillian emphasised the role of context in reflection and portfolio-building. As the context grows, reflection becomes deeper – and guidance in the form of ranges of questions, rather than different portfolios for different stages of experience, is the way to make an e-portfolio valuable to different groups. She then talked about how to make the portfolio ‘live’ – more than a crate into which things get dumped – a sense-making tool. She gave her own perspective on some previously raised concerns about confidentiality and IT-readiness, and went on to talk about the essential purpose of an e-portfolio. Is it a ‘critical friend’? How can teachers feel confident that their privacy will be protected when they engage with the tool? How can they ‘get the worms back in the can’ if reflection provokes the kinds of fundamental questions Erika discussed? Gillian stressed, as did the other speakers, how vital appropriate support is in this context. She also discussed portfolio-building as a culture, and suggested that the change in form represented by e-portfolios would also change the content and culture of portfolio-building. Discussion follows about how to model excellence, the irony of teachers supporting pupils to reflect but not always doing it

themselves, and the difference between reflection 'in action' and reflecting 'on action' – how can both be facilitated?

Discussion Groups

Participants then broke into small groups to carry on discussions. Some of the key issues raised by the groups were:

- What is an e-portfolio? What is CPD?
- Why an e-portfolio? what value does 'e' add? – how do we 'sell' it to users?
- Confidentiality and privacy. If the e-portfolio is fundamentally learner-owned, how can this be explained and proven? Is just understanding the functions of the e-portfolio enough?
- There are a large number of existing systems, representing major intellectual and financial investments – in order to achieve a consistent approach throughout Scotland, these either have to be made to work together, or be replaced.
- Support – two kinds are needed: technical, and pedagogical/professional. How can these be provided, by whom, and at what cost?
- Quality – the importance of acknowledging and drawing on existing good practice (on and offline), maintaining quality in a new medium.
- Should e-portfolios be compulsory? Should they be assessed? How to distinguish between assessed and non-assessed elements of a single portfolio? Should assessed portfolios be separate from reflective portfolios?

Lunch was followed by three short talks about different systems currently in use: the Pathways CPD project (**Jim Grant**), the University of Dundee's PGDE Secondary e-portfolio (**Bob Doig**) and the SQA Academy (**Brendan Tierney**). There was also an SQA Academy display, along with an SSDN display, in the seminar room throughout the day.

The afternoon panel and large group discussion was chaired by Professor Munn. The panelists were **Jim Buchan**, SSDN Interconnect Development Manager, LTS and **Fiona Taylor**, CPD Advisor, National CPD Team. The panel introduced themselves and their work, and then the group discussed the following questions:

1. What is an e-portfolio?

There was general agreement that an e-portfolio is a web-based tool, learner-owned and personal. Debate focussed around two opposing views: the e-portfolio at its simplest level - a digital box or crate into which material and evidence can be placed, vs a structured, reflection-oriented toolkit. Some participants felt that to define an e-portfolio at repository level was to invite provision which would de-prioritise support and structure. Others felt that in order to understand the flexibility of an e-portfolio one had to consider it as an empty box which could be filled in any number of ways (including with tools and structures to facilitate reflection).

2. What support is needed and how should it be provided?

Technical support is very important, particularly for teachers with lower levels of IT readiness. The University of Dundee's experience is that technical training is better provided separately from other kinds of training about

reflection, and structuring and maintaining an e-portfolio. It was pointed out that guiding users is relatively easy compared with embedding e-portfolio use as a regular practice. Making things easier for users by, for example, providing simple authentication and ensuring that the e-portfolio links in with other tools and services (SSDN, for example) was suggested. The question of how to make claims about e-portfolio effectiveness and usefulness was raised, and it was thought that initiatives like the Curriculum for Excellence might be a hook, and also that the better e-portfolios could be personalised and be seen to target individual contexts and needs, the more useful they would appear. Additionally, the potential of e-portfolios to be shared makes them useful community-building tools, which might also increase their appeal. This was countered by the claim that most teachers already understand the value of reflection and portfolio-building – what they are missing is the space and time in which to *do* it.

3. How should assessed and non-assessed portfolio sections/items co-exist?

It was agreed that there shouldn't be different portfolios for assessed and non-assessed items. However, e-portfolio research has shown that providing space for personal reflection and critical self-evaluation alongside space for high-stakes, assessed evidence creates a tension and often limits what users are willing to reflect upon and include in their portfolio. Adequate training and support so that teachers understand how sharing, access, privacy and confidentiality work within an e-portfolio context would be vital in this regard, but may not be sufficient to overcome psychological hurdles associated with conflicting purposes. It was suggested that an audit trail, so that the e-portfolio owner could see who had viewed aspects of their portfolio, would be a useful feature of a national system.

Tom Hamilton, Director of Educational Policy at the General Teaching Council Scotland, gave the closing remarks and talked about 'where we go from here'. He emphasised that it is difficult at this point to be able to see very clearly where this technology should go, or where it could lead us. The technology can help us achieve some of our goals, but it is not a panacea for everything. E-portfolios are best seen as part of a movement since the Dearing report (and before) to create a shift in teacher professionalism and reflective practice. The problems of support and time for reflective practice are not e-portfolio-specific. We still need to change the culture in Scotland so that reflection is seen as work, teachers are seen as learners, and thinking is not a 'waste of time'. The ability to take a step back – to bare one's soul – and not to be afraid of the uncertainty and discomfort this can cause, is profoundly challenging in any context, and requires a supportive environment.

This doesn't, however, mean that the technology doesn't present its own problems and opportunities. The act of using an electronic medium changes reflective practice. Whether we see e-portfolios as 'crates' or as 'process' will affect how we proceed. The Dundee model of e-portfolio-building where the portfolio is first personal and private, then developmental and supported, then finally locked and assessed, looks promising as a way of addressing conflicting purposes. Evidence is showing that teachers want CPD recording which is personally meaningful to them – not just box-ticking exercises designed for corporate quality assurance. The promise of getting this right may be that, as Professor Munn said earlier in the day, teachers feel better about their teaching practice and self-efficacy and, fundamentally, about themselves. This would be a worthwhile goal for all involved in e-portfolios for teachers in Scotland to aspire to.

Tom asked participants to go back to their respective communities of practice and 'prepare for compatibility'.

With that in mind, the email list being set up will allow us to keep in touch as things proceed. Contact info@erdee.org.uk if you would like to be added to the email list.