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‘I felt like I saw myself reflected in an institution for the first time’:  
making academic and personal learning in teacher education visible  
through an e-portfolio. A case study of a graduate teacher.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes case study research focusing on the creation of an e-portfolio by a recent graduate of a teacher education program. The e-portfolio provided a powerful learning space for ‘Selena’ in which she was able to integrate her social, emotional and academic learning, and ‘grow into herself’ through drawing on, expressing and sharing her experiences with the teacher educator/mentor/researcher in ways not previously available to her during her studies. Findings from this case study research suggest that with mentoring support e-portfolios can be a vehicle for deep personal and professional learning and can assist pre-service teachers to make meaningful connections across and between formal and informal learning in the university, practicum settings and community experiences. While e-portfolios can play an assessment role through the demonstration of achievement of high professional standards they also have the potential to facilitate pre-service teachers’ journey toward being and becoming throughout their program of study, and their lives. It is therefore suggested that teacher educators encourage their students to take up the opportunity provided by the e-portfolio to make learning across topics more creative, connected and visible.

## KEYWORDS:

e-portfolios, authenticity, creativity, holistic, personal learning, reflection

## INTRODUCTION

My state of mind fluctuates constantly. Sometimes I wonder if I am ready for this job. I feel like I don't know enough to teach. I am still trying to figure out who I am and how to use my most positive assets to bring the best out in students. Truthfully...I am scared. Hope to hear from you soon.  
(email from a final year student teacher to the author 16/5/11)

Teacher education programs tend to focus on developing knowledge of curriculum content and teaching methodologies rather than on the development of the person of the teacher. Day (2004) has argued that traditional approaches to pre- and in -service teacher education do not take enough account of the need for ‘developmental links between cognitive, emotional, social and personal development in the journey towards expertise’ (p.69).

According to Barnett (2007) there should be more emphasis in higher education on students becoming personally and authentically involved in their studies and students’ ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ needs in their university courses should therefore be addressed as much as their need for knowledge . One way of creating these connections for Hulme and Hughes (2006, p191) is to ‘blend the language of abstraction with the language of story’ through ‘bringing the self’ into discussion of professional practice. In this paper I explore a process of ‘self-storying’ engaged in by a recent graduate teacher and a teacher educator through the vehicle of an e-portfolio.

The use of e- portfolios in teacher education can provide a powerful opportunity for pre-service teachers to authentically express: ‘This is how I am as a teacher’ according to Carney (ND). It has been claimed that the use of e-portfolios can promote more profound, reflective, engaged and personalised learning (JISC, 2008). Chen (2010) has argued that learning can be made more visible and meaningful through the use of an e-portfolio since it can reflect:

the individual student's view of the breadth of his or her education – including what was learned both inside and outside the classroom and as the learning was experienced by the student and not just as it was delivered or packaged by the college or professor (p21).

Similarly for Sutherland (2008) e-portfolios give individuals the opportunity to draw together all their learning experiences, not only those experienced in an educational institution.

When I heard that the Pebble pad e-portfolio platform was being trialled at my university I became interested in exploring the extent to which it could assist students to creatively integrate their teaching evidence, practice and philosophy to tell a rich and connected story about their learning across the whole degree program. After reading about e-portfolios in teacher education I realised there was a need to explore e-portfolio development as lived and experienced by teachers and students in contrast to the focus in recent years at conference and peer review level on the technical system and/or software used in portfolios (Hughes & Purnell, ND). I therefore decided to approach an ex- student who had completed her study the previous year to see if she would be interested in taking part in relational case study research on the use of the e-portfolio. I knew she had collected various artefacts throughout her study so I thought she would be an ideal subject for this study.

This paper is focused on a recently graduated teacher's experience of retrospectively developing an e-portfolio to reflect her learning over the course of a teacher education program. Since the participant was no longer a student at the university, provided informed consent and was aware that her involvement was entirely voluntary and she had complete control over what she shared with me for publication or presentation, ethical clearance to conduct this study was readily granted.

## CONTEXT

The aim of the relational case study project was to explore the extent to which developing an e-portfolio could assist the recent graduate to integrate her academic and personal learning, something she felt she begun to do privately but had not previously had the opportunity to do formally as part of her study. In relational case study research, as in relational professional practice 'we seek to build a bridge to the other, using our special awareness, skills, experience and knowledge' (Finlay & Evans, 2009, p3). In accordance with this research approach the participant was asked to select her own pseudonym: 'Selena'.

Although she was no longer a student and was now working part-time as a teacher while caring for her young family Selena agreed to establish an e-portfolio over a period of a semester and to regularly send me selected items such as blogs, reflections and webfolios which I would comment on through the Pebblepad platform. We also communicated by email in order for me to gather regular reflections from her about her perceptions of the process. Data for this study were generated through sharing webfolios, blogs and reflections created within the e-portfolio as well as email reflections sent to the researcher. Both James (2007) and Meho (2006) have argued that a strength of email interviewing lies in its potential to increase reflexivity in research participants by providing both the time and the space for construction, reflection and learning from their stories of experience.

## EMERGING INSIGHTS

In this section I explore some of Selena's insights into her learning journey using selected verbatim emails and reflections to allow the self of the participant to emerge through her own language (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). While space does not allow me to include my responses

to her emails and webfolios the role I played as responsive teacher educator/mentor is implicit in many of her quotes.

For the purposes of this research Selena was asked to try to connect her collected artefacts and evidence with her teaching practice, perspective and philosophy. In an early reflection she wrote:

I have often wondered about how students' academic and personal learning could be integrated into something quite meaningful. To me, the personal learning (my social and emotional development) is what has transformed me as a person, not so much the formal degree. More significant than any training was the opportunity to grow into myself. For the most part there was no way to have this recognised or valued in what felt like a very narrow window of valid tertiary work. This is one of the noticeable gaps across the academic curriculum – there were few that branched out and made sense across semesters and across pracs (email, 27/3/201).

She was enthusiastic about the potential of the e-portfolio from the outset, observing that:

The e-portfolio seems like a way to bring it together....make the learning visible (email 27/3/201).

The e-portfolio rapidly became become a rich learning environment that included Selena's own reflections on particular coursework topics, childhood experiences of schooling, experiences on placement and the connections she was increasingly able to make across all of these.

An example of how Selena learned how to make her learning visible is evidenced by a webfolio focusing on a teaching placement entitled 'What a young boy taught me about being and belonging'. This multilayered presentation incorporates a child's drawings and handmade card, paintings, photographs and different forms of reflective writing. In this piece she reflects on her own sensitivity and nervousness as she met the 3 / 4 class she would be working with and her encounters with a vulnerable child with Asperger's Syndrome. In her webfolio she reflected that:

At the end of the practicum I was very surprised when Leigh (my university liaison) was so interested in how I connected with this child. What was unusual was that I had a deep feeling of regard for Michael and I very much noticed his sense of not being completely seen by the other students and teachers. Think I noticed this because I have at times also felt this myself at different times in my life.

This theme of visibility/invisibility has continued to be one that I have contemplated since this prac.

I didn't realise it at the time, but this child would become part of the 'purpose' of my practicum experience. Michael would help me make sense of my teaching philosophy, allow me to revise my old painful story about schooling and ultimately transform how I view education (e-portfolio, 3/3/11).

As Selena continued to work on her e-portfolio she commented that:

I would have loved to have been able to document my early thinking and work and see how it has evolved over time. I did a lot of personal writing and drawing to help me make sense of what I was discovering about myself and who I was becoming over the 3 years. To have this process valued and seen in the form of an e-portfolio would have been deeply rewarding. Having the e-portfolio as a forum to express ourselves metaphorically, symbolically and spiritually shows others that it is safe to be truly ourselves. When we are seen being authentic and speaking and acting with integrity, it allows others to be the same. It allows us to bring this quality to other areas of our lives (email, 9/5/11).

She highlights however that something else was needed:

To further enrich this process I feel having a mentor staff member witness my changes and growth as a teacher via the e-portfolio from the beginning would have given me a steadfastness and confidence in my ability to expand and develop as a person and as a professional (email, 9/5/2011).

That there was an audience in the form of a trusted lecturer and mentor who had worked with her in previous topics and placements was clearly important since:

much of the work I have done on PP was with you in mind as the single reader. I tried to write for a wider audience when you mentioned that you would like to show it to others but it restricted me because I wasn't sure who it was going to be (email 15/5/11).

A more recent email from Selena indicated the value of the e-portfolio process:

This was the only way to acknowledge my learning across disciplines and semesters, academically, professionally and personally. The e - platform is a great 'leg in' because so many people are already familiar with the social networking sites which have a similar feel. Of course, what is also needed is not just the 'e', but also a respected mentor to witness what is going on for the student and reflect back to them their learning. As that person for me, you have shown where possibilities lie amidst dilemmas and disappointments, and how to create spaces in and around the challenges to allow personal transformation to occur. Even if students do not go as deep as that, I sense there is a greater chance of them feeling really solid as a beginning teachers and navigating the 'unknown' when it is obviously normal to feel so shaky (email, 12/6/2011)

These excerpts clearly demonstrate the potential of the e-portfolio to integrate the formal in and informal dimensions of a teacher education program through drawing on and expressing the personal significance and relevance of a range of learning experiences. As an approach to supporting and encouraging self direction and meaningful and integrative reflection the e-portfolio has been shown through this small study to have much potential, even in a relatively short timeframe.

The educational implications of this study will now be discussed.

## EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Teacher education courses often tend to be fragmented, with little opportunity to link personal learning gained through experience in different disciplines, topics, year levels and placements and with different lecturers. While reflection is generally acknowledged to be an essential feature of teacher education programs it is often quite narrowly and instrumentally conceived according to Korthagen and Verkuyl (2002) and tends to be focused within rather than across topics.

This case study has demonstrated the capacity of the Pebble Pad e-portfolio to retrospectively capture an ex- student's lived and experienced curriculum over a whole program, rather than the delivered curriculum in one topic. During this course of this study it has been possible for a graduate teacher to get more in touch with her creative forces and willpower through engaging in a powerful learning journey. The e-portfolio project successfully built on her existing strengths, interests and resources as she worked her way through a non-linear process of reflection, self expression and the ordering and arrangement of selected artefacts. The outcomes of Selena's e-portfolio work are nicely captured in Barnett's (2007) hope for a 'higher' education in which:

The student imparts her own framing to her experiences so as to bring them into herself and so as to have some degree of command of those orderings. This is a creative moment and it is a moment of authenticity (p 47).

The study has highlighted the need for higher education institutions to provide such alternate curricular spaces in which students can make their own explorations, in a deeper and longer timeframe than is afforded within a single topic or practicum experience. According to Barnett (2007) without this space 'they cannot come authentically to their judgments,

findings, observations, actions and exchanges' (pp149-150). In this case, the e-portfolio project did provide a curricular space but demonstrated that this in itself is not enough since having a supportive mentor was an integral contribution to the successful outcomes of the study. Witnessing Selena's reflective journey as it unfolded was also a powerful experience for me as a teacher educator. It assisted me to more fully appreciate the holistic, relational and developmental journey towards becoming a teacher and to see how the links between different aspects of the program could be more effectively linked and integrated. It also reinforced for me the importance of the teacher educator/student relationship and the significant role we can play in students' development when we have the opportunity to be involved in a deeper way and are supported to do so by university structures.

Barnett (2007) argues our role as academics is to actively assist our students to become 'beings-for-themselves' who can engage authentically with their educational experiences and come into a relationship with these experiences which is *theirs*. According to Korthagen and Verkuyl (2002) however, it is not possible to help others to look more closely at their own inner selves unless we have ourselves embarked on this journey. The relational case study research conducted for my PhD (Burrows, 2010a) required me to inquire deeply into my own being and to engage on intellectual, physical, emotional and intuitive levels to assist me to connect with students, teachers and parents. Similarly, when we can adopt such a stance with our teacher education students via the vehicle of an e-portfolio there is a shift in which we become more than mere graders of their work but a real-life audience that interacts with the document (Blair and Takayoshi (1997). Barnett (2007) quotes a lecturer's view that:

for them (students) to be inspired, they need to be with someone who is enthusiastic and communicative of some ideas in such a way that they know they can take them on board. And speak with them in their own voice (p177).

Selena also noted the importance of feedback for students from staff and peers with the aim of facilitating awareness of:

The journeys they have taken between 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year and what they have found, developed, discovered about themselves and where they are now (email,14/2/2011).

That this study provided an opportunity to give an authentic account of Selena's journey is confirmed in an email I received from her after she read a draft version of this paper:

It expresses so accurately the themes that were important from my perspective. I feel like my experience has been valued and 'seen', and now it may be of use to other students. Thank you! I now feel inspired to add more things to my PP collection this weekend!! (email, 10/6/11).

This relational research has supported the findings of previous studies (Burrows, 2010a; 2010b) in highlighting that the development of growth fostering relationships with others can be of assistance in developing self efficacy, relational competency and mutual empowerment. It has clearly shown that there is a need for teacher educator involvement to be factored into the e-portfolio development process and that ideally this person would be able to embody care for her students, enthusiasm for their learning and a determination to enable them to come into their ideas in their own way.

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper has described relational case study research focusing on a recent teacher education graduate's development of an e-portfolio. While this pilot study was small and highly exploratory it has clearly demonstrated the potential for the e-portfolio to draw upon and integrate formal and informal learning through the space it can provide for users to come to

their own understandings authentically and relationally through the support of the teacher educator/mentor/researcher.

It would appear that as suggested by the Joint Information Systems Committee (2008) that the e-portfolio can help to develop understanding of self and curriculum through personalising learning and promoting reflective practice in the context of a small community of practice. Through this process of developing an e-portfolio the participant in this study was able to 'grow into herself' through drawing on, expressing and sharing her experiences in rich, reflective, holistic, multidimensional and connected ways not previously available to her during her studies.

Findings from this small study suggest that e-portfolios can be a vehicle for deep personal and professional learning and could potentially assist pre-service teachers to make meaningful connections across and between formal and informal learning in the university, practicum settings and community experiences when supported and facilitated by teacher educators. While e- portfolios can play an assessment role through the demonstration of achievement of high professional standards they also have the potential to facilitate pre-service teachers' journeys toward being and becoming throughout their program of study, and their lives.

Although these findings are promising there is a need for more research into the efficacy of a combined e-portfolio/mentoring approach in teacher education. It is intended that this work be extended in the future with the aim of assisting other student teachers to engage with the e-portfolio alongside meaningful mentoring as occurred through this project. In addition it is hoped that other teacher educators will also be inspired to accompany their students on the journey of making learning across topics and teaching practice more creative, holistic, connected, reflective and visible.

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