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Doctoral students' conceptions of online teaching portfolios. An exploration of the authenticity and performativity spectrum

Abstract

This paper outlines findings from a research project on the reflective processes involved in the creation of online teaching portfolios by doctoral students of an international, graduate university in Europe. The study was conducted to identify conceptions of online teaching portfolios and to explore how these conceptions relate to notions of academic professionalism. Fifteen doctoral students who took part in an academic development programme were interviewed. The semi-structured interviews were analysed qualitatively using a grounded theory approach. Students were found to oscillate between performative and authentic repertoires of reflective work. Their conceptions were also found to reflect notions of academic professionalism, along a spectrum from instrumentalist-performative to reflective-authentic notions.

Keywords

Teaching portfolio, conceptions, doctoral students, reflection, authenticity

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1 Teaching portfolios and the development of new university teachers

The teaching portfolio, that is, a structured collection of artefacts created across contexts and over time with the ultimate goal of advancing one's expertise in teaching has been demonstrated to promote reflection on academic practices (SELDIN, 1997). Reflection, moreover, has been acknowledged as important in the induction of novice academics and doctoral students into the academic profession (MCALPINE, WESTON, BERTHIAUME, FAIRBANK-ROCH & OWEN, 2004). This entrance or integration into the academic community is supported by various institutional practices, including academic development programmes and activities which have been lauded for their contribution to the development of a repertoire of teaching skills (FEIXAS & EULER, 2013), to changing conceptions and approaches to teaching and learning, and to adoption of the student learning approach (GIBBS & COFFEY, 2004).

Previous research on the development of conceptions of university teaching (FOX, 1983; KUGEL, 1993) and a related field of inquiry into academics' professional development (ÅKERLIND, 2005) also supports the claim that reflection is crucial for any development of university teachers. The general assumption of all this work, shared with other domains of teacher education, is that successful reflection is a transformative process that best proceeds with conscious self-monitoring of professional growth (JÄRVINEN & KOHONEN, 1995). Reflection, as FREESE (1999) defines it, based on LOUGHRAN (1995) and SCHÖN (1983), is thus "the process of making sense of one's experiences by deliberately and actively examining one's thoughts and actions to arrive at new ways of understanding oneself as a teacher" (p. 898).

Further, research has also shown that the teaching portfolio helps to facilitate this type of reflection (JÄRVINEN & KOHONEN, 1995). Online teaching portfolios, like their off-line counterparts, provide scaffolding for reflection and offer even more flexibility for integrating and updating a broad variety of portfolio artefacts in several media types (e.g. audio, video, text, graphics) (ONER & ADADAN, 2011).

Nevertheless, there is the distinct possibility that teaching portfolios, online or off-line, follow an instrumentalist rationale and are simply used as *post hoc* justification for already existing teaching practices. Reflection in that case becomes ego-centric, unchallenged and self-limiting (MACLAREN, 2005), and may lead to practices of performativity. Performativity, in this context, is understood as inauthentic behaviour of teachers necessitated by pressures of an external educational policy context that employs judgements, comparisons, and displays as means of control, attrition and change (BALL, 2003).

Opposed to this, a scholarly approach that may result in a profound understanding and development of one's teaching is grounded in "authenticity" (CRANTON & CARUSETTA, 2004a, p. 288) and "academic professionalism" (KREBER, 2013, p. 61). Authenticity in teaching refers to self-awareness and self-understanding developed through reflection, that is, the "open, questioning, mindful, consideration of how we think about ourselves and our teaching" (CRANTON & CARUSETTA, 2004b, p. 21). Similarly, academic professionalism is characterised by critical reflection on various aspects (such as policies, practices, processes) and purposes of university teaching and learning, "with the goal of arriving at shared ideals, or horizons of significance, according to which academic teachers develop their identities and orient their practices" (p. 61).

This orientation is also shaped by teachers' conceptions of teaching portfolios, which vary according to the motivations for creating them (DE RIJDT, TIQUET, DOCHY & DEVOLDER, 2006)². In other words, teachers' motivation is also re-

² We rely on PRATT's (1992) notion, according to which conceptions are "specific meanings attached to phenomena which then mediate our response to situations involving those phenomena. [...] In effect, we view the world through the lenses of our conceptions, interpreting and acting in accordance with our understanding of the world" (p. 204). Orientation is defined as a broader level of categorisation encompassing two or more conceptions (KEMBER, 1997, p. 257).

flected in their portfolio work: whether they are responding to external demands, or are reflecting on teaching and the development of authenticity in teaching. TIL-LEMA & SMITH (2000) view the internal drive, such as self-reflection and the often externally motivated ambition for promotion or employment as the two extreme ends on the continuum of the conceptions that surface in the creation of teaching portfolios.

Previous studies on teaching portfolios used by early-career academics have often been somewhat schematic in approach and manual-like, and rarely are based on empirical studies of the experiences of the academics. Thus, it is unclear whether reflection is actually accomplished or is simply urged in relation to novice academic teachers. Exceptions to this are a few auto-ethnographic accounts of development that mention the role of teaching portfolios (BLAIR & MONSKE, 2009), a study of actual portfolios of new lecturers at a UK institution (MCLEAN & BULLARD, 2000) and at an Austrian university (NEUBÖCK, 2013). There is a particular lack of systematic inquiry into how these developmental processes are actually experienced by new academics or doctoral students themselves. Hence, it becomes fundamental to study how such different conceptions or purposes of reflection may or may not apply in different institutional contexts.

2 Research context and methodological approach

This study focuses on the construction of reflective “academic professionalism” (KREBER, 2013, p. 61) through the creation of online teaching portfolios in the institutional context. In particular, we explore doctoral students’ conceptions (cf. PRATT, 1991) of online teaching portfolios, that is, how they define them for themselves and how academic professionalism is reflected in these conceptions. The following are the research questions:

- How do doctoral students conceptualise online teaching portfolios?
- How are these conceptions related to notions of academic professionalism?

- What are the implications for supporting novice academics?

The study took place at a research-intensive, highly international, graduate-only university in Budapest, Hungary. The university is accredited both in the United States and in Hungary; hence, it is American and European in terms of major policies and practices. Students and faculty come from nearly 100 countries and engage in interdisciplinary education in the social sciences and humanities. The language of instruction is exclusively English.

Doctoral students involved completed the University's Certificate Programme for Excellence in Teaching in Higher Education, an academic development programme designed for doctoral students in the social sciences and humanities. Participation in this programme is voluntary. Completion takes an academic year. Doctoral students are prepared for university teaching through foundational courses in higher education pedagogy including more focused areas, such as classroom communication, teaching critical thinking, designing for student learning and technology-supported teaching strategies. The final programme artefact is an online teaching portfolio that documents doctoral students' teaching philosophy, teaching materials and reflections on their development as novice teachers. Online teaching portfolios are created and archived in the university's online portfolio platform provided by the Mahara system.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 doctoral student participants from the first three cohorts of the academic development programme. Interviews ranged from 30-45 minutes in length. All interviews were voluntary and underpinned by informed consent. The interviews were conducted in English.

Our choice of conducting interviews is embedded in the notion that interviewing research allows for surfacing, in a co-constructed discursive situation, the personal meanings and norms associated with an experience or practice (SEIDMAN, 2006). By semi-structured interviews we mean a process similar to that described by ALEXIADOU (2001, p. 52) as "an interview agenda shaped by the operationalization of the research questions, but retaining an open-ended, and flexible nature" in

order to allow the participants to move the interview situation towards those aspects of their experience they see as the most relevant.

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed in full. Two researchers conducted independent analysis. The analysis aimed for categories to emerge from the data using a grounded approach (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). A qualitative comparison took place; hence, the two coders compared, discussed and resolved their disagreements in order to improve the reliability of the coding. The analysis followed an iterative process (COFFEY & ATKINSON, 1996; CRESWELL & MILLER, 2000):

1. First reading and holistic analysis of the transcribed interviews.
2. Defining “chunks” of interview data that related to the specific research questions.
3. Identifying and naming the categories that seem to represent valid, bounded, and relevant conceptions of a portfolio.
4. Analysis of the internal components of those conceptions.
5. Cross-examination of the interconnections of these conceptions within the whole relevant interview material.

Conceptions thus identified have been separated below for analytical clarity, and not as a way of classifying and comparing individuals’ differences in thinking or orientation.

3 Results and discussion

Based on the qualitative analysis described above, we identified four main conceptions of online teaching portfolios: (1) a digital professional profile; (2) a professional teaching history; (3) an archive of teaching artefacts, and (4) a personal thinking lab. We used three interrelated discursive dimensions to clearly highlight and discuss the features of each conception: (1) primary functions of an online teaching portfolio in this conception, (2) central features of an online teaching portfolio in the given conception, and (3) actions or processes connected to construct-

ing such an online teaching portfolio according to the respective conception. Table 1 highlights the three interrelated analytical perspectives (function, features and processes of construction) and also describes how the particular analytical perspectives are embedded in the respective conception. The table reflects the researchers' synthesis of interviewees' verbalised conceptions and does not include verbatim quotations.

Table 1: Conceptions of online teaching portfolios

Conception	Primary function	Central features	Processes of construction
Digital professional profile	A 'PR' function Attract or impress future employers or colleagues Showcase achievements and career potential	Technologically up-to-date Attractive Prestigious Professional Marketable	Constructing a complete digital professional profile Showcasing one's skills (similar to a CV or professional website)
Professional teaching history	Document improvement of teaching skills Summarise professional growth through each teaching experience	Authentic Reflective Linear Narrative Integrates pedagogical concepts	Writing about one's teaching principles based on actual, completed teaching experiences Presenting as a text with relevant and well-linked attachments
Archive of teaching artefacts	Display a repository of significant teaching Store teaching artefacts, reflections,	Project-based Constructed over time Useful for future	Creating a database of own teaching Organising various existing teaching-related documents,

	designs and other materials that stem from various completed teaching projects Manage one's learning and display it as needed	work and for external presentation Up- to-date Helpful for reflection and for planning new teaching	projects, artefacts Retrieving and displaying documents for reflection or for review
Personal thinking lab	Learn and develop in a personalised environment Undertake on-going reflection on one's teaching approaches, teaching designs, teaching history	Creative Reflective Fluid and changing Meta-cognitive Continuously developed Personal Oriented to ones' teaching-identity	Creating a learning space Preservation, re-thinking and reflection on one's teaching

3.1 Digital professional profile

In the first conception, doctoral students equated an online teaching portfolio with other available tools that are used essentially to showcase skills and achievements to relevant external audiences. The portfolio takes on a self-promotion function, especially with a mind to impress potential future academic employers looking for evidence of some teaching qualifications:

Yes, the PR aspect of it. I think that was my first impression about the portfolio. That it is more a self-promotion surface, which it is, I think still, partly. [Student 5]

I have a blog, I have twitter running and I think portfolio was just part of this whole thing, making myself visible and selling myself. [Student 7]

This conception was often already held by students before they came to the formal seminar on developing an online teaching portfolio, and it is this conception that they reported to have moved away from or amended (fully or partially) afterwards. This understanding of an online teaching portfolio focuses on its digital and thus seemingly attractive features, which were assumed to promote its predominantly external orientation:

For me it was important the cosmetics. How it looks on the pictures. To be very seductive, I want to be selective and to prove what is more important and what is secondary. I am thinking that someone who looks has only few minutes, and the first 10 seconds are the most important in making an idea of the person or whatever, a page, and a profile. [Student 7]

Overall, there was a strong sense that students who held this conception largely accepted the performative drive to showcase oneself in the academic market place, in which it is critical to become highly visible, attractive, and well-rounded as young scholars for the purpose of securing an academic job or a related professional post:

E-portfolio helps you to present yourself in a very broad way and you have different parts, like a teaching portfolio and working experience. Different parts that you can include and depending on whom you want to show it, you can choose what to show and what not to show. [Student 2]

3.2 Professional teaching history

Another clearly identifiable conception was of a written history as a teacher in higher education. As such, it was reflective in that it was linked directly to the developing teaching skills and identity. This conception seemed to mirror written (offline) teaching portfolios. It also necessitated documentation of teaching and asked for an engagement with already acquired pedagogical goals, theories or concepts:

I like to see how I change through time, because I develop and as a PhD student I should identify what is development for myself. Like all these theoretical concepts. [Student 2]

The most fundamental feature of this conception was its close link to the teaching philosophy (values, preferences, aims, key concepts) and its strong dependence on the actual teaching experience as the primary material for this form of writing. Interviewees voiced concerns that although they were developing a vocabulary and a set of concepts about teaching, they simply had not had enough actual teaching experience in which to put these to the test. In their understanding, this situation diminished the usefulness and the authenticity of an online teaching portfolio at this point in time in their development:

...because I don't have too much experience and I don't know what should I put there. Only fictive [imagined] things, or what I would like to do. I am a bit hesitant. [Student 6]

I can probably write something of how I imagine it to be or reflection on teaching, or my position on it, but I somehow still feel that it's not authentic, or it's not really meaningful until I tried out the teaching. [Student 5]

3.3 Archive of teaching artefacts

The third conception was that of an archive of teaching projects. This understanding stressed more fully the digital-database aspect of an online portfolio as a fluid and dynamic tool. The central features were storage, access and organization of relevant documents, projects, artefacts, and teaching designs. Above all, its' perceived usefulness was in allowing for reflective practice and future teaching development, as well as for other project development purposes:

When you have the portfolio just with a click you access all this information. So, then you can do this reflection much more easily. [...] So, I would be interested in how it would be to adapt teaching portfolio as a tool from

teaching as such to broader enterprise, like what I do in a professional context... [Student 10]

This conception thus encompassed the notion that there is more to the whole endeavour than simply the storage or database aspect; that issues of display, selection and reflective commentary are the next steps that render this a meaningful tool. This conception appeared simultaneously as personally meaningful, in allowing for on-going reflection, and also as a potentially useful tool for constructing external representations of one's teaching skills:

It's practical to have material about you or your teaching or your research in order and up-to-date [...] It's good to have a discipline about those things and it is good to realize that you are changing and your ideas, and maybe you have a new view on certain things and also it's good to have an archive for the ideas that you have. [Student 12]

Unlike the "professional teaching history" conception, which according to the students, was inspired by reading offline teaching portfolios of other teachers, the "archive of teaching artefacts" conception stemmed directly from engaging with a specific online portfolio tool. The former conception thus reflected a summary of professional growth demonstrated through a linear narrative, whereas the "archive of teaching artefacts" conception depicted a more dynamic approach to managing one's development and reflected a ubiquitous learning experience (cf. HWANG, TSAI & YANG, 2008) as a teacher. In this particular context, ubiquitous learning means the integration of high mobility into learning about one's teaching. Notably, the option of "anywhere and anytime learning" integrated in the online teaching portfolio enables a more flexible, sustained and on-going reflection. Therefore, the "archive of teaching artefacts" conception encompasses the continuity aspect of reflective portfolio work, whereas the former suggests a *post hoc* synthesising effort to document professional teaching history.

3.4 Personal thinking lab

The fourth portfolio conception suggests a personal thinking lab, a design space, or playground, in which teachers perform on-going self-reflection, analysis and even change in terms of the otherwise raw and fleeting experiences of teaching:

...And then it is also important to keep track of the whole process. So it's not just having a magazine [storeroom], it's a working place where you not only work physically but you, most of the time, work intellectually to see why I have this here? Do I have to throw this out, or do I have to leave, do I have to reuse it?" [Student 4]

The idea behind this conception was close to a design studio. The fundamental features were its internal orientation, its creative, on-going and scholarly character. This was the first conception that explicitly brought an orientation to student learning as the very basis for reflection and documentation. In this, it combined the features of an archive with those of reflective and future-oriented personal development as the main purpose of the portfolio creation:

That's why the portfolio creates [an] idea to collect facts but [to] collect documents, whatever I can collect from my own teaching and also from the learning of the students and make it meaningful for my own professional development, either by retaking [reworking] the same experiences and thinking why [it] doesn't work anymore, what should I change...
[Student 4]

The legitimacy of this undertaking derived from its authenticity as an expression of the already provisionally established teaching persona and from the acceptance of the need for on-going, structured pedagogical development. In fact, the purpose of this engagement appeared to allow for the construction of a new teaching persona and the creation of new teaching goals and orientations:

It's not about criticising me it's about improving myself. [...] My personal involvement in it but also the possibilities of developing this and that, or adjusting the course in this and that way; it's a creative process. It's not just about self-evaluating it's also about cleaning out the content and just

having the naked structure and engaging to play a bit and to see, to create other versions of it [one's teaching]. [Student 13]

I think [it is] the basic tool to recirculate [re-use] my teaching experience, my own teaching in general and to re-create, re-identify myself, to re-identify my teaching. It's like going back to my own me and my teaching...[Student 4]

This conception was associated with a high degree of self-reflection, sustained through significant previous teaching experiences and, importantly, it resonated with references to the scholarship of teaching and learning (BOYER, 1990) or similar notions of on-going engagement with student learning.

4 Discussion

Our first major concern was to explore doctoral students' conceptions of online teaching portfolios. The conceptions, as verbalised by the students in the interviews, can be put on a complex scale, related to a focus on the self or others (external assessors) and a focus on a completed and bounded product versus an on-going and never-ending process of personal development. These conceptions, when analysed as a spectrum, may be seen to follow a pattern of variation from the more simple and static (a digital professional profile) to the more developed and dynamic (a thinking lab), and from the more externally-oriented to the more internally-oriented. The former conceptions may be generally judged as less reflective and less long-lasting as a vehicle for on-going professional development of doctoral students, whereas the latter hold a promise of becoming a relevant tool in reflective practice of novice university teachers.

We also aimed to explore how these conceptions relate to notions of academic professionalism. The different conceptions appear to function as relevant and productive mental constructs that reflect a personal theory of what an online teaching portfolio is. In doing so, the conceptions seem to also mirror an orientation or a

certain notion in relation to what is understood as academic professionalism in teaching.

The conceptualisations allowed for a possible distinction between notions that promote authenticity in academic professionalism and those that steer towards performativity. This resonates with CRANTON & CARUSETTA's (2004b) finding that becoming authentic was strongly related to being reflective about one's professional identity and practice. Further, these portfolio conceptions suggest a performativity-authenticity spectrum that operates on the tenet that authenticity is not a finite state, or a stable and core self, but it denotes a continued "process of becoming" (KREBER, 2013, p. 24). It is also notable that relying on repertoires that are geared towards performativity (seemingly the least reflective approach to online teaching portfolio construction) may also be associated with emotional tensions precisely for the reason that performativity often operates on the principles of judgments, comparisons and external control (BALL, 2003) of professional practice.

In terms of implications for supporting novice academics, notwithstanding the general acceptance of the need for reflection in academic development, our findings suggest we need caution and on-going research in order to understand how online teaching portfolios are actually experienced and understood. In relation to the development of university teachers, major concerns have been raised about constraints to developing reflective practice or a scholarly orientation to teaching in institutional cultures, which increasingly are steered towards research productivity, teaching audits and related managerialist policies (FANGHANEL & TRAWLER, 2008). Our work suggests that practices intended for personal professional development and reflective practice, such as much of the work on online teaching portfolios, may end up resonating as part of an internalised external assessment agenda (CLEGG, 2009).

On the other hand, through participation in an academic development programme novice academics may well begin to build a significant understanding, a vocabulary of the scholarship of teaching and learning, and pedagogical principles of prac-

tice. This experience allows them to reflect on their very early career stages as university teachers. In many cases, they construct significant principles for their own personal teaching style, even when they are only projecting their ideas onto hypothesised future teaching. Our findings, although based on a particular institutional context, thus reinforce the notion that “through a particular form of engagement with their teaching, teachers themselves become more authentic” (KREBER, 2013, p. 41).

5 Conclusion

Although this study relies on a self-selected group of students and self-reported data, as is the case with much research on academics’ professional development, our findings imply that structured opportunities for reflection mobilise conceptual understandings, which may contribute to the beginnings of personally significant constructions of “academic professionalism” (KREBER, 2013. p.61). In particular, the integration of the “professional teaching history” alongside the “archive of teaching artefacts” aspect of an online teaching portfolio is helpful in starting the exploration of one’s agency in relation to professional practice. Highlighting the possibilities offered by the “personal thinking lab” notion appears as a meaningful developmental conception for working with doctoral students when they acquire some level of teaching experience. Nevertheless, further participation of subsequent generations of doctoral students and research of actual online teaching portfolios will be needed to add to this emerging understanding. The research that has been accomplished, however, highlights important distinctions between reflective work that is experienced as transformative rather than performative, and this is directly relevant to the work of scholars in other higher education professional development programmes.

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