Drivers and barriers to using eportfolios as a newly qualified teacher

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Theme(s)
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The background context

This study considers some of the drivers and barriers to taking eportfolio practices developed by trainee teachers during a University based Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme into a professional environment as they begin work as Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) in schools. The study is based in the Department of Education at the University of Bath and PGCE partner secondary schools.

The purpose

There is little empirical research regarding how individuals experience moving their eportfolio activities from one context/role to another. This case study seeks to illuminate this issue by investigating whether and how eportfolios can support trainee teachers' transition to NQTs.

The approach

The research employed a participatory methodology involving trainee teachers, NQTs, university tutors, school based mentors and professional tutors, and the researchers in discussing the potential for eportfolios in the induction year alongside discussing foci for the research. The study spanned nine months from the end of the PGCE year through to midway into the NQT year and followed six trainees who had volunteered to take their eportfolio practices into their first teaching post.

There were several data collection points over this period.

- Focus groups following a participatory workshop with key stakeholders (May 2010)
- Focus group with trainee participants (June 2010)
- Individual interviews with trainee participants (October 2010)
- Individual interviews with trainee participants (January 2011)

All trainee teachers who had been using eportfolios during their training were invited to continue working with the research team in their NQT year. Six trainees indicated that they wished to be involved in the study. They had used a mix of eportfolio platforms including blogs and personal websites, however PebblePad was the 'default' platform offered. All trainees had made good use of their eportfolios in their PGCE year and at the end of their training all trainees were positive about their experience of using an eportfolio to both reflect on and present their evidence about their professional development against the Standards. They were also enthusiastic in respect of continuing in a similar vein in their NQT year to meet the corresponding Induction requirements. They predicted that the benefits of the eportfolio in the PGCE year could be translated into the NQT year, although they foresaw the need for support in respect of fit with the new Standards and proformas. In response to this we set up templates for the participants using PebblePad, similar to those they had used during their PGCE. Thus, all the NQTs started their posts with an interest in using their eportfolio further.

The result /findings

An initial participatory workshop was attended by seven professional tutors/mentors (representing 6 local schools), 4 trainees, 3 University tutors, 1 early career teacher and 4 members of the research team. Trainees gave presentations on how they used their eportfolios to support their development. Focus groups were held to gather participants', i.e. users', views on how eportfolios could be used to support trainees in their transition to becoming NQTs and their continued professional development (CPD). Some specific perspectives on the potential benefits of using eportfolios with NQTs which were identified were:

- they enable strengths and weaknesses to be seen at a glance;
- they provide continuity with the trainee year;
- they raise expectations that NQTs will engage with practice and reflection.

There were also observations about the potential challenges to NQTs taking their eportfolio practices into school settings including:

- lack of buy-in from the school;
- efficiency (or not) of school mentors managing different approaches to CPD;
- staff support in using the eportfolios as part of the mentoring process.

NQTs' experience of eportfolios at the start of their professional career

All trainees were contacted and most visited early in their NQT year (September/ October) with a further follow-up visit to take place in December/January that included meeting each NQTs' Induction Manager and subject mentor. It was not possible to carry out follow-up face-to-face interviews for each NQT due to time constraints on the part of the sample. Where appropriate, telephone interviews and email correspondence replaced face-to-face interviews.

Two NQTs never started to use their eportfolio, citing lack of time, lack of support and no requirement to use them as the reasons for this.

> ❝ *When I reached the end of my PGCE year I was quite adamant to use my eportfolio not only through my NQT year but also throughout my teaching career. However … I have been unable to continue with my eportfolio* ❞
>
> *(NQT)*

Four NQTs were interested in using the eportfolio and discussed its use, its advantages and disadvantages. There was some but not much understanding of the eportfolio process by their Induction Managers and, in one case, by the mentor.

Not surprisingly, the demands of being an NQT have a significant impact on time for any tasks not directly concerned with teaching or pastoral responsibilities.

> *"I set up a blog online before the start of term but I have not used it since. I don't use it because I don't have time and also I don't have a requirement to do so." (NQT)*

However, while ill-health (self, mentor, head of department) are unexpected occurrences and therefore difficult to anticipate, there would seem to be no reason for an NQT not to know what the school's expectations were of them in terms of requirements for Induction.

Only two of the NQTs continued to actively use their eportfolios. Both these active eportfolio users had some support in their workplace. One had full support from their mentor and induction manager. The other had no support from the mentor but there was praise for the eportfolio from the Induction Manager. In both cases, however, the NQTs were working on their own; there was reflection and the eportfolio was being used to record good practice and teaching and learning issues.

> *"I tend to be a 'Blitz' type of person and I blitz the eportfolio work about every 3 weeks. It helps me to reflect. I am of the generation using computers." (NQT)*

However there was no sharing or feedback for the NQTs which they found disappointing. Both said how different this was from the active use of the eportfolio in their year as a trainee.

> ❝ *My portfolio is significantly different compared to my PGCE in that during my PGCE year I constantly referred to it, reflecting on it and was striving to keep it up to date. Currently I am not able to invest as much time into it and it is not playing a significant role in my development, whereas during my PGCE it helped me develop* ❞
>
> *(NQT)*

One of the significant influences on this was the fact that there was no similar requirement from the school to complete a portfolio of evidence.

The impact - implications and conclusions

One element of trainee engagement and support for using eportfolios during the PGCE was the requirement to engage with and produce a portfolio as evidence of progression against the Standards. The PGCE tutors encouraged and supported trainees in the process by, for example, reading their eportfolios and commenting on them. In one Local Authority the NQT, mentor and Induction Manager were all interested and keen on the use of eportfolios. The Induction Manager and mentor were also interested in extending such to use for Performance Management. Clearly support from the school was an enabling factor for the continuation of NQTs' eportfolio activity. Additional factors were strong personal ownership of the eportfolio and intrinsic motivation to make it work.

There was a significant observable change in that using an eportfolio was an identifiable supportive factor in trainees' development but as an NQT, for most, completing it became, at best, curtailed. What was realistic to accomplish as a trainee rapidly became unrealistic as an NQT, particularly where interest and support from relevant agencies was lacking or absent. The eportfolios developed for the PGCE year could be characterised in Cambridge's terms as 'standardised' portfolios where the purpose and structure to a large extent are set by the institution in order to support assessment

against the Standards. However the six trainee participants in this study had developed strong ownership over their PGCE portfolios and as such used them reflectively and effectively. This arguably enabled them to see potential beyond the PGCE year. In the PGCE context the eportfolio purpose and to some extent ownership may be thought of as shared between the trainees and the University based tutors.

There are requirements in the form of Induction Standards for which NQTs have to successfully demonstrate evidence. Schools and LAs support and take responsibility for this process, in conjunction with staff in schools who have designated responsibility for the induction of NQTs. Variations at both school and LA level were apparent in the sample. Inevitable variations existed in terms of the form that NQTs were expected to use to demonstrate satisfying these Standards. One LA, for example, requiring a paper version, with other LAs not stipulating a particular mode.

> Strong personal ownership, a potential driver for the use of eportfolios for lifelong learning, was evident at the start of the NQT year and while two NQTs were using their eportfolio mid-way through their NQT year this was not a sufficient driver for continued use by all six NQTs. Other factors got in the way such as lack of internal (school) support or external priorities or agencies (LA).

Lessons learnt

In September (beginning of the NQT year) all participant trainees could still see the advantages to using eportfolios. Quickly this enthusiasm was eroded as the demands of being an NQT were realised and dominated NQTs' time and thinking. Time, or lack of it, was a key constraining factor. Both the NQTs who continued with their eportfolios had scaled back their activity compared to their PGCE eportfolio work. Those who were unable to continue put forward reasons including being snowed under and not having the time, being off sick, not having access to a mentor as they were too busy, off sick or not interested, and being expected to work with a system that was paper-based.

For schools generally it seems (e)portfolios are not a priority. Whatever the reasonableness that might be accorded as a result of some of the pressures and demands made on schools, this is disappointing and contrasts vividly with other professions where eportfolios are much more integrated into working practice. For example, the NHS requires Foundation Doctors to complete an eportfolio. This is an integral part of their training and they are supported in this process, for example, by practice managers. If schools were to adopt a 'standardised' approach to eportfolios for CPD this could go some way to supporting NQTs more effectively in the eportfolio activity. However only where new initiatives complement or resonate with extant priorities are they likely to be supported. Nevertheless, on a positive note, there is the possibility of tapping into the potential of using eportfolios as evidence of meeting Standards and for contributing to NQTs' professional development at individual, school and LA level.

While it has been argued that highly 'personalised' eportfolios with strong personal ownership make them more robust to use across work/life contexts, it can also make their assimilation into institutional objectives more challenging. This research indicates that support and reciprocal engagement in eportfolio activity between individual teachers and their workplace mentors is a key factor in sustaining the use of eportfolios for teacher professional development.

In brief – making the case for PebblePad

An eportfolio system is an enabler for a standardised approach across a profession i.e. it is **necessary**, but – it is not **sufficient**

- in overcoming local priorities in respect to CPD
- in driving large scale change.

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