

Reflective Practice with E-Portfolio

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ABSTRACT

Increasing workload has led teachers to ignore the significance of reflective practice in classrooms. This research aims to discover the influence of reflective teaching in enhancing teaching practices in English as a Second Language Teaching (ESL). It also reveals the role of an e-portfolio in supporting reflective practices. Primary data were collected among a group of B.Ed TESL student teachers through interviews, focus group sessions, and also through the analysis of the selected reflections of English lessons which were observed. Student teachers are expected to practise observational reflection that allows the teachers to gain insights on various ways of handling lessons, to be open minded when teaching different types of students, and to be critical instead of judgmental when encountering classroom issues. Nevertheless, their ability to execute these in their teaching is uncertain as they did not have the opportunity to reflect upon their own teaching practices. The e-portfolio system managed to support and assist the B.Ed TESL undergraduates' reflective practice. Personal documentation, personal space to reflect, and the development of peer reflection were conducted conveniently with the existence of this e-portfolio platform. Nonetheless, features, such as synchronous chat and receiving instant feedback from the teacher educator, which are unavailable in this e-portfolio are factors that could improve the ability of an e-portfolio to support reflective practice.

KEYWORDS: e-portfolio, reflective practice, reflective practitioner, ESL

Introduction

The responsibility of teachers has expanded from their tasks in the classrooms to the collective responsibility involving the school and higher management as a whole (Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan 2016). This has forced the teachers to be involved in decision making processes, and to be a leader in a collaborative environment (Miller, 1992, cited by Ellsworth, 2002; Melor Md. Yunus, 2007). Hence, establishing professionalism has become a requirement for teachers in order to gain experience while examining the learning process systematically (Muhamad Kamarul Kabilan, 2016; Reimers, 2003). Reflection is an essential element in enhancing their professional development (Bates, Swennan & Jones, 2011; Pollard, 2002). Teacher reflection has been acknowledged as a necessary tool for educators to enhance the teaching and learning environment. Dewey (1993) emphasizes integrating experience with reflective action which would enable the practitioner to criticize their own practice, and encourage them to improvise and upgrade their teaching performance (Etscheidt, Curran & Sawyer). On the other hand, the electronic portfolio (e-portfolio) has emerged as one of the Web2.0 technologies which provide an ongoing opportunity for student teachers to develop their reflective skills (Ellsworth, 2002). As Paulson, Paulson and Meyer (1991, p. 5) say, "E-portfolio is a laboratory where students construct meaning from their accumulated experience". Not only does it assist the student teachers to recognize their achievements against professional standards, it also develops their reflective skills which will be utilized in their future careers as a teacher (Morris, 2008). Two main questions have been developed upon the review of the literature involving the usage of e-portfolios and the development of reflective practices. The different practices and course design of the B.Ed TESL programme, and the varied features and facilities available in the e-portfolio used to support their reflective practice, helped to develop the two main aims of this research. The first aim is to ascertain the importance of developing student teachers into reflective practitioners, and the second aim is to investigate the effectiveness of the e-portfolio platform used by these student teachers in supporting their development as reflective practitioners.

Literature review

Reflection and professional development

Reflecting on various teaching practices as a student teacher would enable them to gain observational experience, criticise, understand and analyse their own teaching practices in the future (Bates, Swennan & Jones, 2011). Reflective practices engage student teachers in a process of continuous learning by encouraging them to pay critical attention to the practical values and theories which inform everyday actions (Goodfellow & Lea, 2007). This leads to the development of insights on effective ways to conduct lessons (Goodfellow & Lea, 2007). Practitioners will apply their existing knowledge on teaching while strategizing and testing their teaching skills (Etscheidt, Curran, & Sawyer, 2011). Reflection develops professional teachers who are always aware of their thinking, beliefs and values results in actions (Lynn, Castelli, Werner & Cone, 2007). It also allows constant evaluation of personal development that encourages student teachers to respond positively to changing classroom conditions.

Observations are said to allow student teachers to visualize the alternative ways of approaching the practice of the theoretical knowledge learned about teaching (Farrell, 2014). Nevertheless, limiting learning with experience alone will develop a judgmental mentality where they tend to handle issues according to their observational experience instead of finding the alternatives to handle the issues and improve a lesson (Farrell, 2014). It is essential for them to reflect on their own teaching practices as it will expose them to a broader range of ideas when encountering classroom issues (Farrell, 2014). Through this, they will be able to develop as teachers who will constantly analyse their own practices, and discover various ways to successfully manage a lesson, instead of blaming exterior factors, such as the learners' ability or the teaching facilities for a failure of a lesson (Ryan & Ryan, 2013).

It is also worth noting that limited knowledge and exposure to the development of teaching methods becomes an obstruction for the student teachers to start reflecting (Andreotti, 2006; Bryan, Clarke, & Drufy, 2009). Hence, it is normal for them to merely observe and experience their teaching abilities before being able to reflect at the initial stage of developing as reflective practitioners. In fact, studies have proven that reflective practices among student teachers often exist on a descriptive and general level and are not as effective as it is required to be (Farrell, 2014). Relating to this point of view, teacher educators should play a major role in providing scaffolding for the student teachers to ensure their understanding about reflection (Ryan & Ryan, 2013). Learners need time to observe, associate their thinking with the observations discuss and share ideas before reflecting on their own thought and beliefs (Walkington, 2005). However, professional reflective practice is often considered messy and complex (Goodfellow & Lea, 2007).

Reflection in e-portfolio

E-portfolio has the ability to document evidence of learning which could consist of texts, graphics, sounds and videos. It also allows teachers to link to other web-based content which cannot be achieved by normal paper-based portfolios (Ross, 2006). E-portfolio instils a sense of achievement among student teachers as it provides a discrete and overall practical indicator of the learning process in an organized way (Buzzeto-More, 2010). Videos or audio recordings of classroom teaching and the content of discussion boards can be uploaded in an e-portfolio which can later be referred to and reflected upon. It is a live document which would allow continuous documentation that can be easily edited and revised at any time provided there is an internet connection (Cameron, 2005). Emergent learning which is continuously developed through reflection has established through the usage of e-portfolio where student teachers understand better what they know and do (Farrell, 2014). An e-portfolio should never be a finished product as it should create a path for ongoing learning which is capable of keeping record of a lifetime progress that can develop or change over time. Here, they become active learners as they set goals for learning, engage in a self-reflective process (Cheng & Chau, 2013), review goals, and are responsible for their own learning (Buzzetto-More, 2010).

Peer-collaborative reflection is evident in e-portfolio as it enables student teachers to comment on written journals or learning logs through asynchronous and synchronous chatting (Oakley, Pegrum & Johnston, 2014). Student teachers get to brainstorm their opinions on an issue, and question while commenting on

each other’s point of view (Nooreiny Maarof, 2007). This creates an interactive learning environment where they get to develop positively by accepting feedback, critiques and comments from their peers on their uploaded reflections, and proof of teaching practice (Cheng & Chau, 2013). Interactive reflection can motivate and encourage them to develop reflectivity while becoming a reason for them to evade their existing stereotype and become more broad-minded (Hatton & Smith, 1995). They can extract meaning from their experience, and should be able to apply their knowledge in their future teaching practices (MacAntee & Garii, 2010). Nevertheless, Cheng and Chau, (2013) point out that learners will tend to be highly reflective and engaged in a deep learning process, which involves reflection, intrinsic motivation, interconnection and real meaning-making only if the e-portfolio process is well implemented (Buzzeto-More, 2010). Interaction among the teacher educators and student teachers can be developed through the usage of e-portfolio. Teacher educators will be able to provide instant feedback and comments on the student teachers’ progress in developing the content of the e-portfolio (MacAntee, Garii, 2010). This enables the latter to immediately correct their mistakes, which again assists in developing effective reflective practitioners. However, knowing that their lecturer is monitoring their activities in the e-portfolio may prevent them from providing and sharing genuine ideas, reducing the authenticity among the learners’ reflective writings while restricting the content of their discussion (Nooreiny, 2007).

An e-portfolio as a whole supports the process of developing student teachers into reflective practitioners (Ross, 2006). This can be visualized through Figure 1.

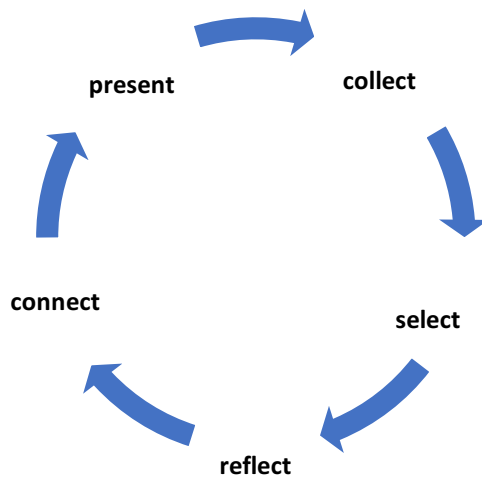


Figure 1. Circle of progression (Ross, 2006, p.1)

Methodology

Context

This research was conducted among a group of Malaysian B.Ed Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) undergraduate student teachers during their final year of study at a university abroad. The lecturer who initiated the usage of the e-portfolio consented to this study being conducted. They were required to reflect upon their observational experiences during their school visits to a primary, a secondary, and a college which was held for ten days. Lesson observations were conducted based on the theoretical knowledge learned which includes teaching methodologies and Quality Teacher Standards (QTS). The learners were exposed to these during lectures and seminars. The assigned reflective tasks required them to produce written reflections which were electronically uploaded into their respective e-portfolios. The e-portfolio used by the student teachers can be accessed through a virtual learning tool managed by the university. The writing task was later assessed by the unit lecturer.

Data collection tools

An interview was conducted with the lecturer who initiated the usage of e-portfolio and handled the course units with the B.Ed undergraduates. Constructive questions were directed through his interview to elicit qualitative data aimed at eliciting in-depth insights on the specific research questions. The interview was recorded, and later transcribed and analysed through themes related to the research questions.

Apart from that, discussions were conducted in a form of a focus group with twenty of the B.Ed TESL undergraduates. The focus group was used to extract personalized perceptions on the usage of the e-portfolio, the process of developing them into reflective practitioners, and the usage of e-portfolio in supporting their development as reflective practitioners. Apart from gaining a large amount of information at one go, the focus group was used to prompt discussions and idea sharing which led to the discovery of potential problems and possible ways of overcoming them (Stewart, 2007). The data gained were analysed according to three main themes: perceptions towards the e-portfolio, their understanding of being a reflective practitioner, and the support gained through the use of the e-portfolios in becoming a reflective practitioner.

The evidence of reflective practice in these student teachers' e-portfolio was analysed. Hatton and Smith's (1995) concept of reflection was used to analyse students' reflective writing documented in their e-portfolios. This concept claims that reflective practice appears in four different forms: descriptive writing, descriptive reflection, dialogic reflection and critical reflection. Hatton and Smith's (1995) concept was used as a guide to distinguish the different types of reflective writing used by the participants.

Results and discussion

Importance of developing initial student teachers into reflective practitioners

The majority of the respondents admitted that writing reflective journals are beneficial for developing themselves as future teachers. They managed to observe lessons, and reflect upon their observational experience by relating it with the theories learned in the classroom, and avoided being judgmental as taught in the lectures and seminars. From the reflection, they were indirectly encouraged to think of the improvements that could have been done by the teachers in a lesson within a particular context (Farrell, 2014). Even though they did not have the opportunity to teach and reflect upon their own teaching, reflecting upon other teachers handling lessons with varied types of students provided them with knowledge on classroom management and prepared them to become future teachers (Bates, Swennan & Jones, 2011). They said that they would analyse a classroom condition professionally, and would not fail to discover various ways of teaching and managing a classroom to ensure a positive learning environment (Freese, 2006). This can be seen in the following quote from the focus group:

“We will not end up blaming our students for a bad lesson like how our teachers did in the past. This reflective practice will make us a professional teacher where we will not be blaming anyone but we will put the blame on ourselves positively so that we will not take a failed lesson for granted but we will see where we can correct ourselves to make the children stay focused in a lesson”

One of the issues that arose was that the respondents could not reflect upon their own teaching experience as they were still student teachers who were not qualified to teach. These B.Ed undergraduates were required to reflect upon their understanding of teaching methodology and Quality Teacher Standards (QTS) applied by other teachers in the school. The lecturer clarified that this somehow prepares and equips them to become holistic teachers who are capable of knowing and executing various ways of handling problems in their future teaching careers (MacEntee & Garii, 2010). However, it has been proven that most teacher training programmes include performance-based learning that allows the learners to reflect upon their own teaching experience. This has led to improvement in their teaching practice compared to when they merely observe lessons (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2007). Reflecting upon their own experiences would definitely provide more opportunities for student teachers to effectively evaluate their own teaching practices (Ryan & Ryan, 2013).

Numerous clinical experiences, and a variety of reflective approaches which involves journal writing, portfolios and action research should be integrated in teacher education programmes (Ryan & Ryan, 2013). The ability to reflect on their own teaching experience should be nurtured during their training period to develop them into consistent and permanent reflective practitioners in their careers while allowing continuous professional development (Vygotsky, 1978, cited by MacAntee & Garii, 2010). Furthermore, their reflective journals on their own practical teaching experience should be assessed. Nevertheless, they should be expected to reflect on their own teaching only once they have qualified as teachers (Farrell, 2014).

In relation to this, some of the respondents did not see the rationale of reflecting on another person's teaching practice. They could not visualise the significance of being a reflective practitioner as they were not given an opportunity to teach and reflect upon their own teaching indicated in the following quote from the focus group:

“I don't see the point of reflecting upon another person's teaching. Even if I have managed to reflect and identify the advantages and how things can be improved, I am not sure that this can ensure me being a good teacher in the future. Will I be able to be a good teacher after learning from what had happened in the other lessons? Will I be ready not to repeat the mistakes other teachers tend to do in their lessons? I don't think so. My teaching context is going to be totally different. I have to start teaching, I have to reflect upon my own teaching, learn about myself and my own style, and then this whole reflective practice will be useful for me”.

Reflecting on their own performance and practice would have provided insights into the practical realities of teaching. It makes the reflective process more effective as they can monitor and evaluate their own teaching process, detect the advantages and disadvantages in a lesson, and discover the ways to overcome their problems and improve their future lessons (Sung, Chang, Yu & Chang, 2009, cited by MacAntee, & Garii, 2010). The process of reflecting expands positively only when student teachers encounter a similar teaching situation several times as it allows them to understand it in a wider perspective. Teacher training programmes which have successfully developed their learners as reflective practitioners claim that it has been achieved through a continuous reflective activity on their personal teaching experience (Cheng & Chau, 2013). Hence, it is essential to integrate teaching practical opportunities if the initial student teachers are expected to develop as a reflective practitioner

Effectiveness of the e-portfolio platform in supporting B.Ed TESL undergraduates to develop as a reflective practitioner

The respondents felt that e-portfolio platform played a major role as a tool to support evidence-based practice where learners do not merely chat and share insights on a teaching practice but are able to document their discussion in a professional learning tool (Ross, 2006; Cameron, 2005). The teacher candidates will have the evidence of their learning which can be used for future reference. The evidence favours the student teachers visualising the areas that need to be strengthened (Ellsworth, 2002). Learners will be able to edit, and revisit their writings at a time convenient to them with available internet connection while being able to recall and visualize their experiences whenever they reread their reflections which were saved in their e-portfolios (Cameron, 2005).

E-portfolios have been claimed to create a sense of ownership and personalization as it allows them to document their reflections, assignments, reading materials and electronic teaching aids in their own desired way. They own the authority to decide the ways of organizing the files, choosing the background colour and also the layout. The self-authority towards their own e-portfolios, which allows autonomous learning, reduced their anxiety when completing their reflection writing, as well as encouraged them to prepare and review their reflections before sharing them with their colleagues (Ryan & Ryan, 2013).

The e-portfolio becomes even more effective when it supports peer-to-peer interaction through discussion boards where learners can comment, criticize and develop their colleagues' reflective comments on a topic assigned by the lecturer. Here, learners acquire positive learning skills by being able to share and accept their friends' idea and critiques (Cheng & Chau, 2013). They also become more open-minded, and obtain the opportunity to widen their horizons as they can begin to think and reflect from various angles. However, some of the respondents were rather upset as they could only communicate with their own course mates, and this limited them from communicating with a broader range of audience, thus, limiting the sharing of ideas and insights.

One of the respondents said that, "The best part is when the lecturers can comment on our work and we get a chance to correct ourselves without meeting them". However, the respondents also mentioned that the e-portfolio platform could have been better through the features of synchronous communication which would enable the lecturers to join a discussion board, and provide instant feedback. Through this, dialogic reflection becomes more efficient and effective (Hatton & Smith, 1995). The following excerpts from the e-portfolio show that the this platform supports the B.Ed TESL undergraduate's development as reflective practitioners.

This is interesting however, I do not know how to make my argument becomes convincing as I have different experience for both activities (independent reading and read aloud session). In my opinion, it depends on the teacher in terms of measuring the effectiveness of the activity. I would say that I do not get any benefit from the read aloud session as it is just a 'wasting activity'. I really experienced this when I was in the secondary school and it was very hard to understand the chapter. I would say the approach taken by the teacher in your school is relevant as it is compatible with the teaching style in England. Furthermore, the text is written and being read in their mother tongue so that it should be no problem. In addition, the approach taken by the teacher is absolutely great because she utilises the time efficiently. Another positive aspect which I can comment is about the teaching methodology. From what has been written, I understand that the method is used to develop students' listening, speaking (preferably on pronunciation) as well as to make some aspects of the novel clear to the students, for instance, the embedded meaning which the students do not realise when they were reading on their own.

23 May 2010 15:19

Subject: Mature students **Topic:** BLOG: Experiences of Teaching and Learning
Author: **Date:** 23 May 2010 14:33

I went to Fareham college. It's was a good experience to be in college not as a student nor a teacher but as an observer. i can put myself in a student's position or a teacher.

From what i had observed, i learnt that, no matter what age are you, one has to be respectful to your teacher. during my visit in Fareham college, I went into horticulture class, which the students are comprised of from different ages ranging from 17- 40. i could see that, the students, especially the adult, listen to the teacher's instructions, they respect their friends even though they are younger than them. They helped each other, and responsible together when there were mistakes or problem occurs.

the younger students, respect the elders and listen to what their mature friends said, and the adult students accept the younger opinions without questioning their point of views.

This had contributed to professional environment, where one can work together and everything run smoothly..from this, as a future teacher, if there were to be a younger and new teacher, come to our school, we have to respect and treat them equally, and there should be no senior-junior sentiment among the colleague.

Comment

1 Author: **Date:** 23 May 2010 15:14

That is really a point. From my point of view, there should be such sentiment in a school as we are professional. It is better for us to treat them as new colleague instead of labelling them as 'junior'. Furthermore, it leads to the negative connotation as people do not want to be labelled in such a way. It is true that we are the 'juniors' in service and experience, however, we should not be penalised of being new because that is how life goes on. New generation will replace the old ones. In my opinion, this issue should not exist anymore as we need to help each other in order to improve our quality. Team work is very essential when it comes to a large organisation as we need to work collectively and make the decision based on the majority. It is better to put aside the feeling of being inferior to somebody's else ability as we need to believe in our capability in doing the work. My suggestion is to give the best service to your students no matter how long you have been working in a school. If you were new, you can ask your colleagues on how to improve the teaching method so that it will become more effective. Basically, those are my thoughts from teachers' point of view. In terms of students' point of view, it is recommended for them to work with the mature students as there will be a mutual help and cross information between each other. It is not good to assume that mature sbtudents know everything as they might be new as same as us in that particular course. However, it is wise to take into consideration in terms of their experience which they have obtained so that we can share and develop ourselves towards being a positive person in future.

23 May 2010 14:39

Figure 2. Evidence of reflective practice and peer reflection

Conclusion

The B.Ed TESL undergraduates managed to develop as reflective practitioners, and see the benefits of this practice as future teachers. Reflective practice towards observational experience has allowed them to think about how a lesson could be enhanced, and how it can be applied in different teaching contexts. They have become more broad-minded by avoiding judgmental attitudes, and are able to think of different ways to handle or overcome issues that may arise in a teaching and learning environment. However, without the appropriate opportunities to reflect upon their own actions, the ability to apply the knowledge gained through their observational experience into their own teaching practice is questionable. This is because observational experience itself is insufficient to build a complete reflective practitioner (Bolton, 2010).

The e-portfolio platform used managed to support reflective practice among the student teachers. It has been effectively used to document their reflective writings, create their own discussion board to express their personal reflective ideas, and to develop peer reflection through online discussions. Nevertheless, one drawback was that synchronous chatting was disabled, hence, not allowing the instant feedback from colleagues and lecturers. Apart from that, the controlled audience system limits their collaboration with their coursemates, thus, reducing the opportunity for them to share and receive constructive insights with a wider range of audience. Another drawback is that the e-portfolio system is not an effective tool that supports continuous professional development as users will not be able to access their e-portfolios, and revisit their documented reflections upon leaving from the university. It is worth emphasizing that an e-portfolio would be more efficient if it functions like a social network where it provides lifelong accessibility while allowing documentation and synchronous discussion with anyone related to their teaching careers.

The findings and discussion have brought to light a few principles that impact upon reflective practices. These include the importance of one's own teaching experience, the scaffolding from the teacher educator, the attitude of the student teachers themselves, and the need of sufficient understanding of the technical aspects of an e-portfolio. Further research on ways to facilitate and develop reflectivity among student teachers can be conducted to develop more principles that would assist in developing reflective practitioners (Bolton, 2010). Furthermore, the values of reflective thinking and reflective practice can be analysed by considering their attitudes towards their own teaching experience (Nooreiny, 2007). The capability of other Web2.0 tools, such as social networking, blogs, Google document and Wiki space, in supporting reflective practice among student teachers should be studied and examined to rationalize the usage of alternative tools in supporting reflective practice.

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