

## What might the new Webfolio look like?

### Introduction

Thanet College started six months ago on a project that used e-portfolios as a tool to support reflective practice amongst the teaching staff. It involved providing each tutor with an e-portfolio to record and share critical incidents in their working day. Since then the Institute for Learning (IfL) has chosen an e-portfolio to help members store and present evidence of CPD. The primary purpose was to raise the level of professional practice amongst teachers in order to improve the learner experience.

This paper reviews how our project is progressing and what lessons we can share to help others make the most of having an e-portfolio.

### Characteristics of an e-portfolio

E-portfolios provide a private electronic web based space to create or upload assets to store, categorise, aggregate and marshal assets that become evidence in making a pitch or case or application in support of personal, educational or professional development.

There are distinct types of portfolio as well as hybrids and it is important to distinguish between them before choosing which kind meets the brief. In the case of the Institute for Learning (IfL) the reflective model has been selected.



### Characteristics of a reflective e-portfolio

Portfolios are by property a private space and it is only possible to share the content of an e-portfolio by publishing out of it rather than providing access into it. It is the essential private nature of the

portfolio that allows it to develop the level of honesty of the content because it tries to make no point beyond the conversation between the owner and him/herself.

This portfolio is:

- Owned by the author who controls content and development
- It is reliant for content in large part on the recording of incidents that happen to the author rather than instruction from others
- Content is nearly always improved when selectively shared with another who can add objective criticism
- The owner is responsible to themselves for the veracity of content in charting development

### How do reflective portfolios change tutor behaviour?

They encourage the author to be a **Reflective Practitioner** by recording incidents and episodes. Rather than comply with central systems of standard behaviour the tutor relies more on lessons considered from everyday events and incidents that happen to them, treating them as 'learning opportunities'.

They accommodate the reality of being a **Lifelong Learner** because they are owned by the author and therefore do not stay with the college when the author moves on. This also encourages the idea that even writing about incidents in college are personal. They create a record of a unique learning journey. This is **personalisation** of learning in its purest form so far achieved and easily better than a Virtual Learning Environment can achieve. They encourage reliance on fellow professional colleagues through the practice of **co-mentoring** and the development of **critical friendships**. Critical friends supplement primary reflection by offering an objective view of what is normally highly subjective writing. (i.e. the author writing about themselves). Virtually any reflection is improved by submitting it to third party scrutiny.

So rather than rely solely on a central college based checking system, reflective practitioners can ask for the critical friendship of any colleague in reviewing what has happened to them and each can learn by pooling experience and previous learning. This is because they achieve the following:

- For purposes of confession
- For an objective opinion
- To share burdens and successes
- To cement professional friendships
- To create a sense of collectivism or community of likeminded professionals

### **What might this mean for a College or training Provider?**

This is a new way of working that creates one virtual community of teachers who are to some degree reliant on each other to develop their effectiveness as teachers. It provides a method that draws on the one resource every college should possess in buckets – teaching experience and skill.

### **What was wrong with where we were: what was missing then?**

Central systems encourage compliant and somewhat passive behaviour from those required to follow the system. In CPS in particular there are as many ways to develop as there are individuals and one of the criticisms of central systems is that they are insufficiently subtle enough to allow genuine personal expression for development.

Tutors as a professional body have never had a strong unified presence in college but have tended to work in subject 'ghettos' out of physically separated staff rooms. Colleges have used central standards and competences to define the minimum standard for teachers and seek compliance through attendance at training events, completion of qualifications and having the whole summarised in targets that are checked in an annual appraisal with a line manager. The whole of this is then translatable into a collection of audited data.

### **What might tutors reflect upon?**

The traditional view has been that CPD can only be applied to formal training, provided for the tutor, often by and at the behest of the College. Whilst this training remains valuable in development it is only part of the story. Teachers are able to draw on events from the working day that is sensitive to reflective thinking. This includes observation of classes, both formal and informal, annual appraisal process, job applications and training. In fact anything that happens that can support purposeful reflection becomes CPD.

### **What have we learnt in the last six months?**

Having tested our hypothesis we have come to the following conclusions:

- There is a genuine acceptance of using portfolios because it increases teacher autonomy. It asks them to take control of their own development and to account for it as a unique yet rational passage of improvement over time. There is a sense of 'rising to the occasion' experienced.

- Because of the personal nature of portfolios, tutors use them in ways not necessarily thought of at start-up. This is a healthy sign of usage and should be encouraged.
- Managers slower to get started. We have noted that tutors have moved on at a faster pace than their immediate Section managers who are part time teachers. Section managers are critical to the process as they will need to assure the quality of the reflection and activity as part of the annual appraisal system.
- Apart from recording conventional CPD, tutors have found that reflection can be added to any critical incident recorded to create CPD. So much is now sensitive to CPD that was previously lost. Gathering 30 hours in 12 months will not prove difficult at all.
- Whilst we hoped tutors would share with professional colleagues across the College, sharing is mainly occurring between colleagues where there is a pre-existing friendship or a more formal agreed relationship such as mentorship. Work destined for assessment (trainee teachers completing CETLLS etc.) is shared with a respected colleague first.
- We have found that the opportunity and range of items on which to reflect is as wide as there are tutors in the community and the personalisation properties of e-portfolios really do support the unique approaches to portfolio building. Consequently, whilst the process is relatively simple the nature of the relationships and what is discussed is complex.
- We hoped to develop a sense of a single community to teachers around the e-portfolio. This is occurring but not due to the e-portfolio as such. We hear anecdotally that tutors feel identified and treated as professional people by the process of e-portfolio sharing and that has created a sense of community. Consequently e-portfolios have not created an on-line community but have made a major contribution to a sense of a physical community of teachers.
- E-portfolios represent a new way of capturing information, but it is gathered in individual an area that is private. There is an organisational culture of storing information centrally; consequently an accommodation needs to be found that meets the legitimate needs of the employing college.