

21 The Value of Teacher Portfolios for Professional Development in TESOL

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Introduction

Teacher portfolios can play a significant role in professional development. This is because besides being “an organized collection of evidence about a teacher’s best work that is selective, reflective, and collaborative” (Xu, 2004, p. 199), the portfolio is an intrinsic part of their professional identity. In fact, Haniford (2010) affirms that the discourse employed in a portfolio may be indicative of how practitioners construct their identity.

Perhaps the most important means by which a portfolio allows teachers to negotiate their identity is by enabling them to examine their beliefs and practices as professionals. This is because “When presenting a (personal) professional portfolio, the professional presents material that characterizes themselves and distinguishes their practices, values and beliefs from those of another professional in the same field” (Goodfellow, 2004, p. 72). Berrill and Whalen (2007) found that the portfolio acted as a way for teachers “to make their beliefs visible, to demonstrate how their practice reflected those beliefs, and to demonstrate how they could teach in ways that had integrity for them and still satisfy external expectations” (p. 882). Speaking about pre-service education, Berrill and Addison (2010) maintain that through the portfolio “teacher candidates might more deeply understand and articulate their beliefs and competencies regarding the expected repertoires of practice in the teaching profession and therefore, their teaching identities” (p. 1184). The portfolio’s contribution to teachers’ professional identity makes it a significant artifact of practice.

In compiling a portfolio teachers usually rely on self-reflection as a tool for evaluating beliefs and practices. Self-reflection is included in the portfolio because teachers see “it as a way to articulate their tacit knowledge of teaching... Teaching contains a great deal of knowledge that is not theoretical in nature and is, therefore, difficult to describe. Reflection

requires articulation of this type of knowledge” (van der Westhuizen & Smith, 2000, p. 347). Montgomery (2003) claims that “the insights of self-reflection enable practitioners to examine ways that their own beliefs and actions impact students” (p. 181). Through self-reflection, “practitioners can scaffold their own ethical and professional development” (Montgomery, 2003, p. 181). This is related to the fact that “teachers have to think about their goals and priorities for future development or improvement when compiling their portfolio” (Darasawang, 2006, p. 308). According to Jones (2010a), “Selection and annotation of evidence and the writing of reflective statements in relation to the three foci (technical, contextual and critical) encourage meta-cognition and reflection” (p. 309). Nonetheless, besides reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, portfolios can also promote a form of reflection which “is not bound to and by specific events but rather becomes a means of looking programmatically at one’s practice over time” (Berrill & Whalen, 2007, p. 882). The potential to foster self-reflection seems to be one of the most significant benefits of compiling a portfolio.

In addition to self-reflection, a teacher portfolio leads to a number of related outcomes. Antonek, McCormick and Donato (1997) indicate that using a portfolio leads to the consolidation of teachers’ confidence through self-reflection. Gelfer and Filler (1997) claim that “A portfolio can serve as a potentially effective method to encourage teachers to evaluate their own abilities and to enhance their skills” (p. 117). As teachers “reflect, refine and clarify personal professional growth and performance they impose organization upon what can appear, at first, to be little more than a mass of unrelated events” (Gelfer & Filler, 1997, p. 117). Partly for this reason, a portfolio is “a highly useful means of demonstrating a teacher’s level of professionalism” (Murdoch, 2000, p. 58). Smith and Tillema (2001) maintain that a portfolio’s “Sustained use results in a gradual increase in benefits, starting with documentation of accomplishments and moving to a learning-oriented use or acceptance of mistake through the stages of collegial discussion and systematic reflection” (p. 201). This is why a portfolio can act as a “mirror of competence” (Smith & Tillema, 2001, p. 201) for teachers. Linked to this is “the opportunity to describe the teaching process from their own perspectives” (Xu, 2004, p. 201). According to Goodfellow (2004), “Documentation of professional practice not only enables a developing professional to reflect on their practices but also provides a testament to those practices in ways that are enriching and empowering” (p. 72). The process of compiling a portfolio leads to evidence of professional growth as well as the organization and articulation of teachers’ thoughts (McIntyre & Dangel, 2009). Moreover, it “encourages the integration of theory and practice and

the articulation of a theory of practice” (Jones, 2010a, p. 309). The above outcomes make the portfolio an invaluable tool for cultivating teachers’ professional development.

The Study

This article explores teachers’ perspectives in relation to the value of portfolios for professional development in the TESOL sector in Malta. It reports part of the results of a study conducted at a private language school.

Context

There are currently more than 45 private language schools in Malta. In 2013 alone, these schools catered for the English language needs of nearly 75,000 students coming from more than 40 countries. The teaching population in Malta’s TESOL industry amounts to more than 1,400 professionals, the majority of whom are employed on a part-time basis. Every teacher is required to have a permit issued by the EFL Monitoring Board, a regulatory body within the Ministry for Education. This permit is granted on the basis of a set of qualifications in methodology and language awareness at a minimum level 5 on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

The EFL Monitoring Board devises policies that serve to promote high standards in the industry, and it conducts regular quality assurance visits to schools. By means of such visits the EFL Monitoring Board ensures that there exists an effective mechanism to maintain teaching standards, advises schools on how to support teachers in their CPD, and assists schools in developing a strong CPD culture. As shown above, research has established “just how powerful a professional development and personal affirmation process the portfolio can be” (Dingham & Scott, 2003, p. 243). Jones (2010b) asserts that “a mandatory portfolio may...be the prompt needed for the reflection required to promote professional development” (p. 603). For these reasons, the EFL Monitoring Board introduced teacher portfolios as part of a quality assurance policy governing academic school visits. This policy was developed in collaboration with the leading stakeholders in the industry, including teachers, trainers, Directors of Studies, and school owners.

Study Participants

The teachers that took part in this study were all employed at Easy School of Languages in Valletta, Malta’s capital city. In 2014, the school employed 36 teachers, 12 of them all year round. It had a population of circa 1,200 learners

originating from a variety of countries and speaking a wide array of first languages. Table 1 shows that the majority of the study participants were experienced teachers that had been at Easy School of Languages for more than a year. Most of them had an EQF level 5 qualification in TESOL, which is equivalent to a Cambridge ESOL CELTA or Trinity Cert. TESOL. The other two teachers held a TEFL Cert., which is an EQF level 4 qualification in TESOL methodology devised by the EFL Monitoring Board and delivered and assessed by those language schools accredited to run the course.

Teacher	Gender	Teaching experience in years/months	Years/months at Easy School of Languages	TESOL qualification EQF level
T1	F	13	3	5
T2	M	7	7	5
T3	F	10 months	10 months	4
T4	F	4	6 months	5
T5	F	7	2	5
T6	F	14	1	5
T7	F	7	7	5
T8	F	12	10	5
T9	F	7	7	4

Table 1: Study participant information

Methodology

The study used a mixed methods approach and it acted as a case study by focusing on a sample of teachers at one particular school. This sample consisted of teachers who taught at the school all year round. A self-completed questionnaire comprised of a series of open-ended questions was first distributed amongst the participants. This was followed by a face-to-face semi-structured interview with every participant. Each interview was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. One of the purposes of the questionnaire and interviews was to examine the participants' perspectives in relation to the value of teacher portfolios for professional development. The questionnaire and interview responses were coded and subsequently analysed.

Contribution to Development and Change

With one exception, all the teachers agreed that the portfolio contributed to their professional development by providing them with a record of professional growth and a log of attendance at CPD events. One teacher

maintained that “The importance of having a portfolio is that you can use it to look back at the way you were in the past, to reflect on where you are now, and to think about where you would like to be in the future” (T5). A questionnaire respondent stated that the portfolio “imposes a certain discipline and commitment to take part in educational seminars.” T1 disagreed with this idea because she felt she had always possessed a positive orientation towards professional development and because “sharing with other teachers and exchanging ideas is more beneficial and useful”. Unlike her colleagues, she seemed unable to see the portfolio as an extension of the CPD activities the teachers already practised and as a complement to their staffroom sharing of ideas.

For these teachers, professional change ensued as a result of using the portfolio. They indicated that with the implementation of the portfolios they started giving more importance to self-reflection, classroom observation, and attendance at CPD events. One interviewee affirmed, “It helps you to respect yourself as a teacher...because when I look at it I think of it as a journey I’m doing and these are my milestones” (T7). Another teacher explained,

Doing something like a portfolio hasn’t been a big change to the way I teach because it’s always been part of my personality to be like that. What it has done though is that it’s given me a record...which is quite important because it’s good to have something concrete that you can go through again. (T5)

Seven teachers indicated that the introduction of the portfolios had led to a change in their attitudes to teaching and CPD. A questionnaire respondent asserted, “I feel I’m valued more as a teacher and my efforts are appreciated.” A colleague pointed out, “Being able to see remarks on your teaching...helps you to reflect and examine the possibilities for improvement.” Confirming the idea that “Portfolios tend to be reflective” (Thaine, 2004, p. 336), the teachers seemed convinced that one of the portfolio’s main benefits was the opportunity it provided them for self-reflection. One interviewee explained,

I really believe that as teachers we are constantly learning and we learn mainly from experience not books. You have to be humble enough sometimes to admit your mistakes. So a portfolio helps you in your development by making you reflect on experience. (T7)

T1 underscored the portfolio’s role in enhancing the value given to self-reflection amongst her colleagues. However, she dismissed its contribution to professional change by saying, “I don’t want to overemphasize its importance and say that this is some guiding light for me because it isn’t. I’d

be lying” (T1). It seems clear that the implementation of the portfolios seemed to have consolidated these teachers’ beliefs in relation to the merits of professional growth via self-reflection, observation, and participation in CPD events.

Furthermore, the teachers pointed out that the portfolios had brought about change in the school’s CPD culture. They felt that there was now a collective sense of accountability, with one teacher maintaining that “It’s a great way to force people to organize their training... When you’re putting things in here physically...visually seeing it...it’s a kind of accountability” (T1). For some teachers this was linked to a sense of pride in professional development: “We are proud of our development and it’s nice to have everything in one portfolio” (T3). Despite the fact that these teachers had always been active in CPD, the portfolio spurred them to become more self-reflective. An interviewee asserted, “In this school the attitude of going to seminars and different events has always existed so I think the difference it may have made here is in the way people reflect on their teaching particularly because of the observations” (T5). Some of the teachers felt that the portfolios were a testament to their professionalism. As one interviewee declared,

The direction is more professional now. It no longer feels as if you’re just a housewife who comes in to teach for a couple of hours to fill in your time... Your development as a teacher is acknowledged. It’s more concrete. (T7)

These teachers confirmed that the implementation of the portfolios had succeeded in fostering the school’s CPD culture by underscoring their role as professionals following a path of constant development.

Conclusion

The perspectives of the participants in this study seem to corroborate the idea that teacher portfolios can act as an ideal means of cultivating professional development. In order for this tool’s potential to be maximized it is important that teachers are consulted during the implementation process, given training in its use, provided with the time and support needed for them to use it effectively, and guaranteed ownership. If these conditions are met teachers will see the portfolio as a validation of their professionalism, an incentive to engage in reflective practices, and a manifestation of their professional identity. Teacher portfolios do not only lead to positive outcomes with respect to the practitioners themselves but also instigate change in a school’s

CPD culture by helping to promote a shared sense of appreciation for professional development.

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