

The Use of Portfolio in the Field of School-Based Professional Experience

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ABSTRACT

Portfolio use as a way of assessing classroom performance of pre-service teachers is a new trend in the field of school-based professional experience. It is of value then to investigate how stakeholders, namely pre-service teachers, cooperating teachers and university supervisors who are involved in this field experience the phenomenon of portfolio use.

INTRODUCTION

A portfolio and its recent application e-portfolio is an authentic tool to improve pre-service teachers' classroom performance during their school-based professional experience. A plethora of research has emphasized on the use of portfolio as a developmental and formative (authentic) assessment tool, with the aim of enhancing reflective skills of pre-service teachers in the field of school-based professional experience (e.g., Eames, 2006; Kim and Yazdian, 2014 & Shulman and Wilson, 2004).

This study focuses on the understanding of portfolio use from stakeholders, namely university supervisors, cooperating teachers and pre-service English teachers in the field of school-based professional experience. Those stakeholders are from three higher education institutions, namely Sultan Qaboos University (hereafter SQU), Rustaq-College of Applied Sciences (hereafter Rustaq-CAS) and Nizwa University in Oman. To this end, the study implements hermeneutic phenomenology because it allows the study to understand how human experience is constructed discursively. In other words, the language people choose to describe their experience of any phenomenon has to be the focus of hermeneutic phenomenological research.

SCHOOL-BASED PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

School-Based professional experience is considered a key contributing factor to the quality of pre-service teacher education programs because it provides pre-service teachers with experiential knowledge of the teaching profession inside and outside the classrooms (Chiang, 2008; Farrell, 2008; Kaldi, 2009). Also, it provides pre-service teachers with ongoing professional development (Howitt, 2007; Loughran, Mulhall & Berry, 2008). The school classroom context provides the opportunity for pre-service teachers to demonstrate their ability to teach and to have their classroom performance assessed.

In Oman, the three higher education institutions, namely SQU, Rustaq-CAS) and Nizwa University, implement the school-based professional experience practicum course differently. SQU has a completely different arrangement and structure compared to those at Rustaq-CAS and Nizwa University. The pre-service teachers at SQU must successfully finish all the obligatory pre-requisite courses before enrolling in their school-based professional experience practicum course.

This practicum course is the final course of the education program and must be undertaken by all SQU students in their final semester, where they practise and develop their teaching skills in one school. During this final semester, they visit SQU for one day each month for follow-up discussions with their supervisors. In contrast, the school-based professional practicum course has, more or less, a similar structure at Rustaq-CAS and Nizwa University. Like SQU, it is arranged in the final year of the program; however, it is run over two semesters and is integrated with the other required courses. Thus, it is not obligatory to finish all the required courses prior to practicum. In other words, the pre-service teachers at the two latter institutions have to spend two days each week at various schools, as well as three days at their institutions to undertake the theoretical courses.

USE OF PORTFOLIO IN SCHOOL-BASED PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

In the field of school-based professional experience, research shows that a portfolio is used as a developmental and formative (authentic) assessment tool, with the aim of enhancing reflective skills of pre-service teachers (Eames, 2006). When the portfolio is used as a learning journey with a formative assessment function, pre-service teachers compile their resources, assignments, and reflections over time. They become involved in monitoring and regulating their own learning, in which their cognitive thinking and their accountability in making judgments regarding their quality of work become highly developed. According to Eames (2006) and Kim and Yazdian (2014), a portfolio offers the opportunity for pre-service teachers and teachers to reflect upon their learning and teaching, both technical and social.

In addition to enhancing their reflective skill, research shows that portfolios can be used for summative assessment purposes. They provide a summative assessment function when artefacts, performances, and achievements are assessed as part of a specific set of professional standards to provide evidence of teaching accomplishment. Shulman and Wilson (2004) have asserted that “assessment using portfolios can thus become more than a new technology for quality

assurance; it can become a significant opportunity for the reform of teaching” (p. 346). Furthermore, a portfolio can accompany an application for a teaching position for pre-service teachers to showcase their best teaching performances, achievements, and talents.

Regarding the quality of teaching portfolios being assessed in a summative assessment, Smith and Tillema (2007) used questionnaires, collected conceptions of portfolio standards and criteria and conducted interviews to examine portfolios within the contexts of Israel and the Netherlands. The study found that portfolios were being viewed as a product based on predetermined, more or less explicit criteria. As an alternative, the researchers suggested that portfolios assessed in a summative assessment should take place in dialogue with the stakeholders including pre-service teachers as this becomes “a scrutiny of accomplishments, accounting for process as well as product, and the portfolio collector is invited to explain and defend his/her work” (p. 115).

As the use of a portfolio for summative assessment dominates the literature, Klenowski, Askew, and Carnell (2006) argued that the portfolio for learning could be used to develop an understanding of one’s own learning, assessment and professional practice. Through their research, they identified important elements for the use of portfolios for learning purposes. These include the importance of clarity of purpose, the impact of portfolio use on the approach of learning through questioning, and discussion, approach to teaching, approach to professional development and learning leading to changes in practices, and finally, reconsidering issues related to ethics and confidentiality. In a similar vein, Klenowski et al. (2006) suggested a need for an explicit and ongoing discussion with the stakeholders involved in portfolio assessment.

E-portfolios are a recent application of portfolios through the use of technology. They can enhance pre-service teacher’s reflective ability and their knowledge of information and communication technology. According to Kabilan and Khan (2012), an e-portfolio is described as “a platform for effective and meaningful assessment for pre-service teacher” (p. 1008). In addition, e-portfolios are found to be a move to a new direction and approach for the assessment of pre-service teachers. The same study found that e-portfolios can help pre-service teachers develop six teacher competencies, which are “developing understanding of an effective teacher’s role; developing teaching approaches/activities; improving linguistic abilities; comprehending content

knowledge; gaining ICT skills and; the realization of the need to change mindsets” (Kablin & Khan, 2012, p. 1007).

Moreover, Lim et al. (2016) and Forawi et al. (2012) revealed that e-portfolios have several potentials: they enhance a pre-service teacher’s learning interests and initial reflective thinking, improve pre-service teacher’s higher-level reflective thinking capacities and show evidence of teaching competency to future employers. However, Lim et al. (2016) indicated that there are challenges to the use of e-portfolios in pre-service teacher education.

One of the pitfalls of portfolios is that it can lead to a lack of reflection in a constructive way as shown by pre-service English teachers from Taiwan who tended to upload pictures and classroom presentations with little or no critical reflection upon the learning process and outcomes. Another challenge of using e-portfolios relates to the lack of clarity of roles between mentor teacher- university supervisors in how they should supervise and support pre-service teachers. Research findings were that university supervisors have to serve as a role model for the mentor teacher by providing feedback to engage the pre-service teachers in critical reflection mediated by the e-portfolio (Lim et al., 2016). They and the mentor teachers have to keep themselves updated on the pre-service teacher’s e-portfolio and provide them with timely feedback to encourage them to improve their teaching and learning. Finally, Lim et al. (2016) found a lack of motivation by pre-service teachers to engage in the development of e-portfolios attributed to the lack of communication between mentor/university supervisors and pre-service teachers about embedded practices in the field experience.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the use of portfolios in the field of school-based professional experience in Oman, I have adopted a qualitative approach because it allows for an understanding of the complexity of the social phenomenon within social contexts, participants’ behaviors and experiences. This concurs with Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011), who indicated that the subjective world of the human experience is the concern of qualitative research. It also agrees with Richards (2003), who states that the aim of qualitative research as being to “understand better some aspect(s) of the lived world” (p. 10). Thus, Hermeneutic phenomenology is chosen as a suitable approach for this research because it allows the study to understand human experience by using discursive language underpinning both hermeneutics and phenomenology. The core of phenomenology focuses on

questions of the meaning of experience (Cohen, Kahn & Steeves, 2000; Langdrige, 2007). Creswell (2012) emphasizes that the phenomenological researcher “tends to rely upon the participants’ views of the situation being studied” (p.8).

For this study, I conducted interviews with stakeholders, namely pre-service teachers, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors. This method is one of the most commonly recognized forms of qualitative research methods (Mason, 2002) because participants can comfortably share their experiences without restrictions. Interviews were analysed using the guidelines of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provided by Smith et al. (2009). The guidelines provided by Smith et al. (2009) were adopted with some flexibility as he suggested. There are five suggested steps used to analyse the interviews: 1) reading and re-reading; 2) initial noting; 3) developing emergent themes; 4) searching for connections/patterns across participant cases, and 5) moving to the next different case. Each one of them is depicted in the following diagram and explained in the following paragraphs.

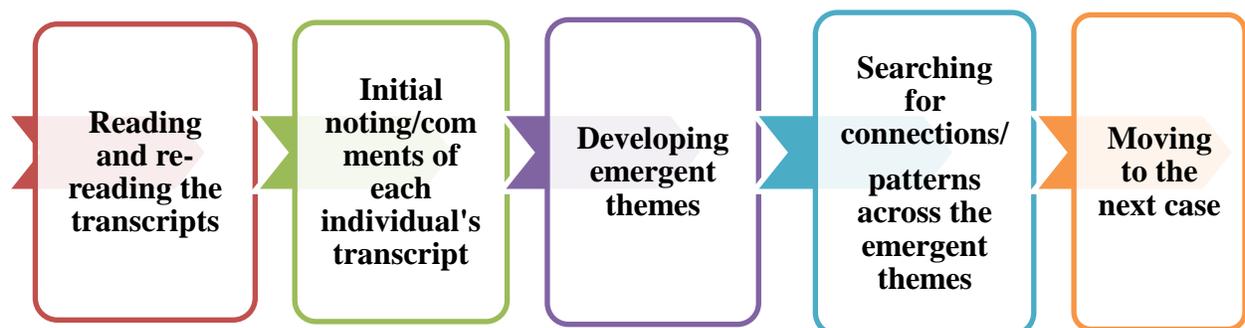


Figure 1.1: The process of analysing the interviews using Smith et al. (2009) guideline

Also, I observed how the portfolio is used within the school context. Patton (2002) supports this practice when claiming that observations enable researchers to directly observe the actions and behaviour of people rather than asking participants about their views, feelings, or attitudes. Also, Starks and Trinidad (2007) recommend that observations be incorporated into phenomenological and discourse analysis studies as they can provide clues about how participants might embody meanings regarding the investigated phenomenon and offer insight into the way different discourses and use of language, shape participants’ identities, relationships, and meanings. The following section will present firstly the experiences of cooperating teachers and

university supervisors, followed by pre-service teachers' experiences. Then, the findings of my observations are demonstrated.

STAKEHOLDERS' EXPERIENCES: FINDINGS

The understanding of the purpose of portfolio varied from creating a reflective practitioner to evidence of each lesson and as a final show for assessing pre-service teacher's performance at the end of the school-based professional experience course. Further explanations of the different understandings of the portfolio by the university supervisors and the cooperating teachers follow.

In the case of SQU, the university supervisor believed that the purpose of the portfolio reflects the SQU pre-service teacher's full experience of being a reflective practitioner. She revealed the impact of the portfolio on the SQU pre-service teachers saying,

The portfolio is their full experience for the whole semester, including their philosophy of teaching, their unit plan and lesson plan and any work been done in the class will be put in that portfolio, and we ask them also for a weekly encounter of what happened in schools. I insist on writing weekly encounters actually because I want the teacher not to miss any experience, either it was positive or negative, write it down and it is amazing as they go throughout the semester and as they read it, they say did they really do this? or was I really feeling insecure, for example? Was I feeling unsure? and towards the end, they see how confident they are about themselves. They can go well and teach and if they faced a certain problem with students, they become in control now and through doing the portfolio, they build confidence and look at themselves, how they have developed, and this is what makes them critically reflect on themselves. (# The university supervisor of SQU)

The above quotation indicates that the emphasis of the portfolio at SQU is on writing *weekly encounter/reflection* of what happened in the classroom.

Similarly, the cooperating teacher at SQU confirmed that she regularly checked the portfolio with the pre-service teacher, mentioning that:

I checked her portfolio regularly, particularly her action research, because she has to observe a situation in class and write a report on it. So we had kind of weekly discussion about it. (# The cooperating teacher of SQU)

In the case of Rustaq-CAS, the cooperating teacher did not articulate any significant value to the portfolio and seemed to be not involved in the portfolio. At the same time, the second university supervisor at Rustaq-CAS believed that the portfolio helped pre-service teachers to be organized teachers who should have all the evidence needed for their lessons. She elaborated on this understanding by saying,

All the materials, documents for each lesson should not be in a separate file or folders; they should be kept in the portfolio for each lesson. So that we prepare organized school teachers who have all the materials as evidence for each lesson so for each lesson, they should have the lesson plan, self-reflection sheet peer observation form and the written feedback from the supervisors. Previously it was left for supervisors whether to give them the feedback orally or in written form; now also they were asked to give them both ways of feedback. So, they should give them first oral feedback and then they should handle them written feedback, which they should attach with the portfolio. (# The second university supervisor at Rustaq-CAS)

This understanding is different to the university supervisor at Nizwa, who indicated that the portfolio is summatively assessed and graded at the end of the school-based professional experience. Accordingly, he understood the purpose of the portfolio as a final show of the pre-service teachers' performances in terms of the activities in the classroom and in the school to be collected at the end of the school-based professional experience. He stated that the portfolio,

...is collected at the end of the course which should show the class preparation, and what the pre-service teachers have done to school, did they add anything to school or not? (# The university supervisor of Nizwa University)

The cooperating teacher at Nizwa University complained about the ambiguity of the portfolio artefacts. She indicated that there is nothing clear about the portfolio and what should be included. It seemed that the cooperating teacher at Nizwa did not know her role with regard to the pre-service teacher's portfolio.

In addition, the pre-service teachers' experiences of portfolio showed different understandings of the portfolio. For example, the pre-service teacher at Rustaq-CAS understood that the portfolio helped her to organize lesson steps and tasks. She added that the portfolio helped her to determine objectives and to anticipate problems that students might face and hence included in the lesson plan. She further indicated that she made sure that she had a '*lesson plan*,' a '*peer-observation*' form and '*self-reflection*' ready for every class in her portfolio since her university supervisors regularly checked them.

However, the pre-service teacher at Nizwa University did not seem to share the same understanding of the portfolio. She understood the portfolio as a compilation of 'everything' that she did in the school, and in class. She described her understanding of portfolio in the following excerpt,

I have to put all the materials in the file and give it to the supervisors at the end of the semester. so I tried to make and collect everything to please my supervisors to feel that I

did a lot in the class. I mean the materials, the activities I have to do a lot of things to make my portfolio large for him so fair enough. (# The pre-service teachers of Nizwa University)

Meanwhile, the pre-service teacher at SQU believed that her e-portfolio was beneficial to her professional development, Firstly as an attachment and a proof of her work at the school, and teaching tasks in the classroom. Second, it services as future curriculum vitae (CV) of her research skills as an ‘action research’ is one of the portfolio requirements. Third, it is an indicator of her learning progression and weekly reflection on her classes. Fourth, she clarified that the portfolio practice provides feedback about the quality of the joined schools, the quality of the cooperating teachers and the school-based teaching practicum. She indicated that there is a component in the portfolio requiring the pre-service teacher to evaluate cooperating teachers and to address any tensions in schools or the school-based practicum course.

OBSERVATION: FINDINGS

A portfolio is a tool, in addition to classroom observation, which occurred as part of the assessment event. It is part of the final evaluation process as each institution allocates a mark: Rustaq and Nizwa assign 5%, and SQU assigns 30% to this task. I observed that the pre-service teachers across the three institutions had to produce the portfolio. However, from my observation, each university institution had a different approach in evaluating the portfolio. For example, I observed that the pre-service teacher at Rustaq-CAS handed the portfolio to her university supervisor during each visit. The artefacts that she provided were a ‘lesson plan,’ ‘a peer-observation form’ and ‘a self-reflection form.’ The pre-service teacher at Nizwa University submitted the portfolio to her university supervisor only at the end of the school-based professional experience. I did not observe a follow-up with her university supervisor or her cooperating teacher about the artefacts that she should include. In fact, I could not observe any artefacts that she compiled and used as evidence to be presented to her cooperating teacher and her university supervisors during her school-based professional experience.

The scenario with the pre-service teacher at SQU was different again. I observed the pre-service teacher having constant discussions with the cooperating teacher about her portfolio. The discussion was more about an ‘action research’ that the pre-service teacher had to conduct as part of her portfolio. Also, I observed her submitting her portfolio online twice during the semester, once in the middle of the semester and once at the end of the semester. The artefacts that she uploaded, in addition to ‘lesson plans,’ ‘weekly reflection,’ ‘peer-observation reflection,’ were

'her Curriculum Vitae (CV),' 'teaching philosophy,' 'a statement of teaching responsibility,' 'a statement of professional goals,' 'a unit plan,' 'her supervisor and cooperating teacher's written feedback,' 'self-assessment reports,' 'student sample work,' 'workshops and professional activities conducted in school,' 'assessment tools used' and 'action research.' This implies that there is a continuous load of artefacts that the pre-service teachers at SQU have to supply online to be followed up by the university supervisors compared with the pre-service teachers at Rustaq-CAS and Nizwa University.

DISCUSSION

The effect of the portfolio is prominent at SQU and Rustaq-CAS, compared to Nizwa University. Some countries are implementing portfolio and specifically the recent trend towards e-portfolio as an authentic assessment tool to assess a pre-service teacher's classroom performance. The results of this study show that stakeholders at SQU and Rustaq-CAS construed it as a compilation of artefacts that mediate learning. For example, the pre-service teachers at Rustaq-CAS have to provide a lesson plan, a peer-observation form and a self-reflection form after each lesson whereas the pre-service teachers at SQU have to compile a number of artefacts such as lesson plans progressively; weekly reflections; peer-observation reflections; Curriculum Vitae (CV); teaching philosophy; a statement of teaching responsibility; a statement of professional goals; a unit plan; supervisor and cooperating teacher's written feedback; self-assessment reports; student sample work; workshops and professional activities conducted in school; assessment tools used; and action research. This finding resonates with a study (e.g., Eames, 2006), which indicated that the portfolio serves as a learning and formative assessment function, and as a learning journey in which pre-service teachers compile their resources, assignments, and reflections over time.

Consequently, the pre-service teacher at SQU and Rustaq-CAS experienced the effective use of a portfolio. The pre-service teacher at Rustaq-CAS experienced being organized in writing her objectives of lessons and in anticipating students' problems. Similarly, the pre-service teacher at SQU had benefited from the e-portfolio in her learning progression as she has to reflect weekly on her classes. The university supervisor at SQU mentioned that she insisted that her pre-service teachers write 'weekly encounters' about classroom events so that they can reflect on and improve their teaching. This finding resonates with a number of researchers (Forawi et al., 2012 & Lim et al., 2016) who found that among the benefits of the portfolio is the enhancing of reflective abilities of pre-service teachers.

On the other hand, the results show the stakeholders at Nizwa University construed the portfolio as a summative assessment tool only. It showed that the university supervisor at Nizwa University perceived the portfolio as a product that should be submitted at the end of the school-based professional experience. In a similar vein, the pre-service teacher at Nizwa University expressed concern about compiling a portfolio with a large number of documents/artefacts to please her supervisor at the end of the course. Also, the Nizwa cooperating teacher's ambiguity about the components of portfolio artefacts did not help the pre-service teacher to make it part of the learning process. This finding resonates with the challenges encountered in the study of Lim et al. (2016), where they identify that clarity of roles among cooperating teachers and university supervisors on how they should supervise and support pre-service teachers in relation to the portfolio is a challenge to the effectiveness of portfolio. Here, I would like to add my voice to Smith and Tillema (2007), who suggest that a portfolio should be placed in a dialogue with the stakeholders if it is to be assessed for a summative purpose.

The understanding of portfolio as only an assessment tool by the Nizwa assessors and the pre-service teacher is different from the international perspective of the portfolio. For example, in the United States, Okhremtchouk et al. (2013) have emphasized that the portfolio aims to prepare competent teachers who can professionally “demonstrate a well-developed set of skills and knowledge of teaching and learning” (p. 22). Also, in Australia, Allard et al. (2014) show that through the use of the portfolio, the pre-service teachers can demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and readiness to teach. Moreover, understanding portfolio as a summative assessment tool loses the cultural value behind learning. Indeed, some researchers (Klenowski, 2002; Klenowski et al. 2006) indicate that portfolios can provide a summative assessment function when artefacts are assessed to reflect the accomplishments of teaching; yet they also indicate that the portfolio is part of the learning process. As shown in Chapter Three, Klenowski et al. (2006) proposed a framework for using portfolios for learning and assessment. They highlight the importance of dialogic learning, as I previously indicated, underpinning the portfolio development and its link with the formative and summative purposes of assessment.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that SQU and Rustaq-CAS are implementing the portfolio as part of the learning process. The stakeholders, including pre-service teachers, are fully aware of their role in the portfolio, which has enabled them to become reflective practitioners. However, Nizwa

University does not seem to integrate the portfolio in the learning process. Thus, its stakeholders do not value the portfolio. For them, it is a compilation of artefacts that should be compiled at the end of the school-based professional experience. Therefore, it is suggested that Nizwa stakeholders are clearly aware of their role when performing the portfolio and make the role of the portfolio more explicit in terms of monitoring and enhancing pre-service teacher development and learning.

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