

Critical Reflection on the use of Learning and Teaching E-portfolios in Higher Education in Ireland

Having completed my Learning and Teaching E-portfolio, it has given me a great opportunity to review my personal growth and development in my chosen professions. It has allowed me to put stages of progression on my professional development as an Architectural Technologist, Chartered Engineer, Higher Education Lecturer and Researcher at GMIT.

On reflection having finished the exercise, I recognised that my homely e-portfolio, once completed and made 'live', would be representative not only of myself, but of my students and graduates and GMIT as a whole. It would reflect what graduates have been trained to do, and the professionalism and management of the programme.

I took over as programme chair on the Architectural Technology programme three years ago. Since then, my name and email address have been added to the GMIT website and I have had numerous 'hits' on my LinkedIn page and google searches from prospective employers seeking graduates or alumni all year round.

As I have put its link on to my LinkedIn page, it is inadvertently advertising to prospective employers and students the skills mix of at least one staff member involved in the Architectural Technology programme. It is demonstrating learning and teaching exercises and types of assessment strategies which are being implemented.

When at the standards committee to get approval for this module on behalf of the module leader who was otherwise disposed on the day, I was posed the question: why did you take this module? You have a job, you don't need it to seek employment? My answer to that was that it gave me a great opportunity to reflect on what learning and teaching skills I actually have and what assessments I have been doing. I am aware of how my teaching has developed over the years, but I have never availed of an opportunity to write it down. I have not taken account of it, nor benchmarked how far I have come and what I would like to plan to do in the future. Completing this module gave me the opportunity to do so.

There is hope that all GMIT academic staff will develop a Learning and Teaching E-portfolio. This will allow us to look at examples of best practice from different Schools and take inspiration from others who teach similar sized classes, disciplines or laboratories. This can be done in an informal and relaxed way because e-portfolios can be reviewed online.

It sets up greater opportunities for networking, liaison, interdisciplinary projects, mentoring and leadership. It can be used to identify areas for further research and development in learning and teaching. Champions of excellence can be identified in areas of learning and teaching, assessments, technologies and so on and be used to spearhead initiatives towards recognition of GMIT as a centre of excellence in learning and teaching.

I would anticipate that this initiative will initially fall into the ideological '*enterprise academic*' typecast as alluded to by Trowler (1998), where '*the enterprise academic favours vocationalism over the Newmanite ideal, skills over content and teaching above research*'. However, similar to Kolb's learning cycle (1984), once the first phase or iteration of the cycle is complete, it leads on to the next phase, where change and innovation can be considered. Following an action research cycle, this can be strategically developed and deliberately nurtured towards maturation.

The delivery of vocational programmes has required the appointment of lecturers with particular strengths in their chosen professions, and this may be at loggerheads with their lecturing and academic roles at times, typical of *'blended professionals'*, whose *'identities (are) drawn from both professional and academic domains'* (Whitchurch 2009).

However, by creating a Learning and Teaching E-portfolio, this would give an opportunity to identify, acknowledge and strategically develop multi-faceted skill-sets and give each skill the credence it deserves. These skills could be soft skills or management ones, industrial skills or academic ones, research or community based ones, for example.

If one were to look at this from another perspective, management and/or administration staff at GMIT might have an interest in doing research or a desire to get teaching experience and by identifying this when developing an e-portfolio, they will then be able to use this to inform supervisors of their training requirements and hopes and aspirations for the future. This process, in my opinion, should be flexible, fluid and organic to meet the needs of all staff at GMIT, regardless of their current position.

Vocational programmes will tend to mirror vocational practices in the work place and be quite pragmatic in their ideologies and teaching and learning practices (Fanghanel 2009). However, it should be noted that this is *'where meaningful pedagogical innovation and change happens'* (Anon 2015).

With inherent emphasis on the teaching element of academia (Fanghanel & Trowler 2008) already a pivotal role in the Institute of Technology sector, teaching and learning forms the first pillar of excellence at GMIT and features in our mission statement, where *'we develop life-long learning opportunities through our teaching and research'* (GMIT 2015, p 6).

Learning and teaching should be at the forefront of the push to have GMIT recognised world-wide as a centre of excellence. Getting everyone on board to create and maintain their individual Learning and Teaching E-portfolio is the first step. If staff are made aware that what they are doing is incredibly valuable, and if students, graduates and alumni know this too, it will help inform the larger community and beyond.

I will finish with two further quotes from which to take inspiration and guidance.

According to Paulo Freire, a critical theorist, *'the school is a scenic community attitude'* where *'the curriculum itself must be seen as a part of the larger culture'* (Freire 1973; cited salehi 2013, p51).

'How a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control' (Bernstein 1971, p47; Cohen et al. 2011, p36).

One could argue that it is time to take account and re-define a new cultural norm and way forward in Higher Education.

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