

Professional Learning Portfolios:

A Tool for the Reflective Practitioner

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ABSTRACT

This paper will focus on the Professional Learning Portfolio program at a large 7-12 Independent Girls School, where teachers are using learning portfolios as a tool for organising and documenting reflective practice. It will detail the purposes, processes and impacts of the program in the context of teacher professional development and whole school improvement.

Introduction

This paper is representative of what John Elliott would call 'second order' practitioner research. As one charged with the oversight and provision of professional development for teachers in a relatively large secondary girls school, I report here my observations during the first year of a professional development program which involves teachers in developing independent professional learning portfolios. My role in the process has been two-fold. In the first place, as a member of the school leadership team, I have had administrative oversight of the program, including accountability to the principal and school council for its effectiveness with regard to teacher professional development. In the second place, I have had the privilege of mentoring each of the ten teachers through the process. Of these dual roles and the potential for collision between the two I shall have more to say later.

The school itself is an independent girls' secondary school in a relatively affluent area in Sydney. It was established in 1897, and has thus entered the 21st century with a fairly long and successful history behind it, which undoubtedly has both positive and negative implications – independent schools are not always renowned for their willingness to innovate. The school has an enrolment of approximately 900 students 7-12, including 150 boarders from country NSW and approximately 80 teaching staff. I wish to state at the outset that I am very sensitive to the issue of privilege, and recognise that much of this work would not be possible but for the generous resourcing which is lacking in so many schools and also by virtue of the school's relative autonomy in issues of policy and practice.

The idea for this program grew out of my personal experience of practitioner research and reflective practice as professionally renewing and energising forms of professional development, a commitment to development of "activist professionals" in the face of external pressures of effectiveness, standards and efficiency, and the growing realisation that "drive-by staff development" is not necessarily the most effective form of teacher education for improved student learning. The Independent Professional Learning Portfolio (IPLP) program is situated within a broader professional learning program which aims to incorporate and

reflect each of the ten characteristics of teacher development identified by Susan Loucks-Horsley et al , namely:

- Collegiality and collaboration;
- Experimentation and risk-taking;
- Incorporation of available knowledge bases;
- Appropriate participant involvement in goal setting, implementation, evaluation and decision making;
- Time to work on staff development and assimilate new learnings;
- Leadership and sustained administrative support;
- Appropriate incentives and rewards;
- Designs built on principles of adult learning and the change process;
- Integration of individual goals with school goals;
- Formal placement of the program within the philosophy and organisational structure of the school.

The IPLP Program

The IPLP itself is an initiative of the University of Sydney Faculty of Education Professional Development Unit. The Faculty of Education describes it in this way:

"The Individual Professional Learning Portfolio (IPLP) is a stand-alone professional development course for which the Faculty of Education provides a certificate of participation. However, if you subsequently or simultaneously, choose to pursue your professional studies and enrol in a Graduate Diploma or Master of Education program, your IPLP result will be credited as one completed Diploma or Masters unit."

The school has embraced the notion of the IPLP as a professional learning tool in developing a pathway for teachers undertaking an IPLP where the school funds their entry into the program itself, provides limited release time for the development and investigation of their focus areas, provides a mentor (where appropriate) and acknowledges and applauds their professional learning through the IPLP in a range of ways.

Within the school, the program is seen as a collaborative venture. While individual teachers work on their chosen focus areas, which are generally unique to the particular context of their work, opportunities for collaboration and sharing are built into the process. Teachers come together regularly to discuss their progress and critique each others' work. A number of teachers are completing their IPLP on common areas, either as the result of funded projects which have run within the school or areas of mutual interest between colleagues which they have resolved to investigate together. The range of areas currently under investigation include:

- The Year 12 Visual Arts major work and its contribution to the development of emotional intelligence;
- Metacognition in the Mathematics classroom;
- Authentic Assessment in PDHPE, Science and Geography;
- Multiple Intelligences in the English classroom;
- Student Engagement in the Geography classroom; and
- Students' understanding of teachers' expectations in the Religious Education classroom

The mentor acts as a 'critical friend' to the teacher in the IPLP process. As mentor to all ten of these teachers, I see my role as multi-faceted. In the formation of their focus areas and

establishment of their own research questions the mentor meets regularly with the teacher, asking 'hard' questions and making suggestions which hopefully challenge and, in some cases, confront the teacher, helping to guide their reflection and interpretation. I also work to break down some of the barriers that teachers might feel keenly between themselves and postgraduate work – working with them to put together collections of readings and source the materials they need. The mentor is also the final sounding board for the portfolio before it is submitted for assessment, and working through the various drafts of some items in the portfolio with teachers is an important part of supporting them in this type of work.

There is a significant level of trust which needs to be built up between the teacher and the mentor in order for this relationship to work. I feel very privileged to have been involved in mentoring these ten teachers but am also aware that my role within the school creates some difficulties from time to time, when, for example, teachers feel that their work is 'under the microscope' and perhaps being judged by someone in a position of power, or when things in their classrooms don't quite play out as planned and I'm on hand to see it happen. I work in a variety of ways to build trust with the teachers I mentor, but it does take time and a leap of faith for both partners. I think that one of the most significant things about building that relationship is to allow people to see that you are also still on the journey of self-reflection and learning, and that you intend to learn as much from them as they will from you and the process in the course of the IPLP. That said, I am still acutely aware that there are probably some people within the school who would really like to do an IPLP at this stage but could not possibly be mentored by me, and I am very keen to build up a bank of willing mentors whom people can call upon without feeling that they are shunning me. The bank of mentors is slowly but surely being developed and I think that in 2002 I will probably not take on any more teachers so as to break down the notion that I am the resident mentor in the school and encourage more people into the program.

The format of the portfolio which teachers develop in the IPLP program follows that outlined by Retallick and Groundwater-Smith in *The Advancement of Teacher Workplace Learning*. Briefly, the portfolio comprises the following parts:

- Statement of Purpose
- Career Map
- Description of focus area or project
- Evidence of Professional Learning

Through the construction of their portfolios, teachers reflect on their life story and the significant influences which have impacted upon it, particularly in relation to the part of their lives they have devoted to teaching. Some choose to do this using a narrative form, while others choose to represent their personal and professional journey in diagrammatic or more symbolic ways. The type of text they use to represent their journey is really a secondary concern to the process of carrying out that reflection and seeing the ways that their personal and professional lives have intersected over the course of their careers. A good example of this is the way that a significant number of the women involved in the program were struck by the significance of becoming a mother in the development of their understanding of learning and their appreciation of the role of the parent in the schooling of the child. This conversation was one we had as a group very early on in the process and which I returned to individually with many of the teachers in the program throughout the construction of their portfolios.

The focus area or project is identified by the teacher in relation to the reflection they have engaged in on their career thus far and the direction or destination they have set themselves in their reflection on the future. Several teachers have chosen to document their experience as part of a team working on a funded project which has had an impact on their practice,

such as those developed under the *Quality Teacher Program*, while others have developed focus areas out of their particular professional interests or in response to a challenge or problem they have identified in their practice. For many teachers, the establishment of the 'project' and the writing up of the evidence of their learning through that project or focus area is the most daunting and angst-inducing part of the portfolio process, but also the area where the greatest amount of professional learning takes place.

The process culminates with the presentation of the portfolio to a round table comprised of university-based and school-based teachers, where the teacher presents their evidence of learning and opens their work up to critical discussion. The roundtable is not set up to be adversarial in nature, but rather represents a type of professional sharing, fostering critical discussion and debate amongst colleagues. It also represents a type of accountability to the community within which the work has taken place, a type of "publication" of the professional learning throughout the community, and in doing so contributes to the knowledge base of the school and to the school itself as a knowledge-building community (Hargreaves 1999).

[Preliminary] Outcomes of the Program

The IPLP program has provided a useful pathway for several teachers into postgraduate study. The accreditation of the portfolio by Sydney University as part of a Master of Education degree has legitimised the IPLP in the eyes of the teaching staff, and largely been responsible for the popularity of the program. Teachers who have not undertaken tertiary study for a significant number of years and may be feeling some apprehension about their ability to do so are seeing the IPLP as a way of bridging their workplace experience and their further study, while early career teachers have seen the IPLP as a way to engage in professional study without the pressure of formal enrolment in a degree course.

The program has also served to raise the profile of the teachers involved in it, providing opportunities to publicly celebrate and recognise their achievements. This has been significant for several of them who are now seen by their colleagues to be 'expert' in a particular area or in the process of reflective practice and documentation of professional learning. In this way the IPLP program has served as a tool for teacher professional renewal, enhancing teachers' understandings of what it is to be a professional and providing a vehicle for the collection and presentation of the artefacts of professional learning. A number of the teachers working within the portfolio program have also, concurrently or subsequently, engaged in other 'knowledge building' professional development activities, such as practitioner research projects, as both leaders and team members. In this way, the IPLP program has provided a link between the various in-house professional learning programs within the school and lent a type of external legitimacy to all of them.

Enabling Factors

This program has been enabled primarily by the understanding of the principal and leadership within the school of the significant nature of this type of professional development and their subsequent willingness to resource it. The school pays each teacher's enrolment fee in the IPLP program at the University and provides a small amount of release time (1-2 days) for teachers to use working on their portfolio, either with their mentor, in a small group or by attending relevant in-house or external workshops. Often this type of professional development is encouraged in schools without a significant amount of resourcing, which is reserved for 'courses' which teachers undertake outside of the school community. The generous resourcing of this program has contributed enormously to its success at this stage.

It would also be true to say that a very significant number of teachers at the school are at the stage where they are very open to this type of experience. Over the past two years, a lot of

work has been done within the school in relation to teacher learning and as a community, the teaching staff have begun to make the swing from teacher learning being about admitting that "there are deficiencies in what I am already doing" to understanding that teacher learning is about reflection on practice and continuous improvement. My belief is that this has caused several of the teachers in the program to 'take the plunge'.

Inhibiting Factors

It is almost a cliché to list lack of time as an inhibiting factor to this kind of work, but it is by far the most significant inhibiting factor, along with the attendant 'busyness' of the workplace. I often hear teachers talk about what a busy school ours is, and while I have to agree with them, I also recognise that I have never worked in one that is not, and that the intensification of teachers work is a phenomenon much broader than the context of our school or even our country. Andy Hargreaves writes of the "intensification of the labor process in teaching, as time and space are more compressed in the postmodern world" (p.149), and the interconnected accountability and guilt which impinge on teachers' professional identities at the same time. Despite this highly significant inhibiting factor, it would be true to say of my own context that the more rewarding teachers experience of a program such as this is, especially in terms of building confidence and making professional learning 'tangible', the less it matters that it is one 'extra' thing to be doing. Trust, it would seem, is the key to getting them started at the beginning and the experience itself takes over at some point along the journey.

The provision of so much external professional development, especially in NSW over the past two years with the implementation of our 'New HSC', can be seen as another inhibiting factor to a program such as this. With only so much time and energy to devote to their own professional development in the course of a school year, teachers often feel that they and their students will be disadvantaged if they don't attend any number of 'in-service' courses, even though at a deeper level they know that such courses very rarely (if ever) make a real difference to teaching practice. This is a difficult paradigm to break down, and while I and others who have been involved in the IPLP program and other types of school-based professional development aimed at building the knowledge-creating capabilities of teachers and renewing professionalism are committed to working in this way and believe that it is a far more effective way of developing professionally, at the same time I am loathe to take away from teachers what I know is a good networking experience and at the same time leave them feeling insecure about what it is that their colleagues in other schools know that they don't. I am hoping that an integrated whole school professional development plan with associated individual plans negotiated by all teachers in 2002 will help to create a balance between the two types of professional development and in doing so alleviate this inhibiting factor.

Lessons So Far

I have already alluded to some of the lessons of the program thus far. The first is that moments for collaboration and professional sharing need to be built into the program from the beginning or else they become the first thing that is sacrificed under the pressure of time. Our gatherings, at first frequent, have become more and more ad hoc over the course of the year, to the point where I have begun to fear that the process may become another example of individualisation within the repertoire of secondary education. In 2002 I intend to reclaim the collaborative time by formalising it in the school calendar so that the time is preserved. This is something which I hoped would be able to remain flexible for the teachers involved but I have come to realise that less flexibility is better than no sharing at all.

As mentioned in then last section, the integration of the IPLP program into the whole school and individual personal professional development program will hopefully continue to legitimise the IPLP within the school community and help it to be seen as a good alternative and complement to 'being inserviced'. This is not so much a lesson from the process directly as something which has become more clear to me throughout the course of the year in thinking about how to change the primary focus of professional development within the school.

Finally, the establishment of a pool of mentors will hopefully act to involve a greater number and variety of teachers from across the school, understanding that a diversity of mentors with a diversity of skills and interests will be an excellent thing for the program. If the program is to endure beyond the immediate timeframe, it is essential that it becomes embedded within the broader workings of the school rather than associated with one individual, and in this sense this will also be a healthy development for the program.

Conclusion

The benefits of the IPLP program are palpable, even at this relatively early stage in our development of the program. Teachers who have never before in a lengthy career systematically reflected on their practice are taking delight in doing so. The impact of a teacher looking back over their career, legitimising their own life experience in relation to their development within the profession can already be seen to be very powerful. The visibility within the school, even on a small scale, of teachers sharing their ideas and questioning their own practice aloud to their colleagues, video taping their lessons, watching each others lessons, thinking deeply about learning outcomes for students and meeting the needs of their students with learning difficulties is already having a positive impact on the school. One of the teachers currently engaged in an IPLP has had such a positive experience that she has managed to talk her faculty into embarking on a major evidence-based practice project, and I could continue on with many other stories of the positive by-products of the program. I need, however, to conclude at this point. The benefits of this program for our school are already highly visible. As the program grows, it is foreseeable that the impact will be profound across a range of contexts, including teacher professionalism, understanding of pedagogy and classroom practice.

References