

Developing portfolio assessment in English and Mathematics: Contrasting perspectives on the implementation of professional teaching standards

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ABSTRACT: Professional standards are typically the product of the deliberations of small groups of teachers who are recognized experts in their field (Petrosky, 1998). This has been the procedure followed by the Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers (AAMT) and the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) in collaboration with the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) in developing subject specific professional standards on behalf of their members. However, as products of specific discursive communities, these standards remain open to critique. Are such standards genuinely inclusive, or do they exclude significant numbers of the teaching profession? Can these standards be applied in a diverse range of school settings? Do they promote reflection and professional renewal? In significant respects, the validity of these standards still needs to be tested, especially with respect to the way teachers who have not been involved in formulating the standards interpret and apply them to their own teaching.

This paper draws on research over the past two years, when a small number of Mathematics and English Literacy teachers showed how they interpreted and applied the standards by preparing portfolios. Those portfolios were then assessed by teachers who originally participated in formulating the standards. We report on the experiences of those teachers who prepared portfolios, as well as the viewpoints of those teachers who assessed them.

1. Background

Recently in Australia increasing attention has been given to improving pedagogy as a lever for large scale educational reform (see e.g. Luke, 2000). Education systems at a state and federal level have taken a range of initiatives designed to enhance the quality of teaching in order to improve students' learning outcomes. Attempts by professional associations to develop subject specific professional standards that describe 'excellent' or 'accomplished' teaching have likewise focused on the performance of teachers, constructing accounts of best practice to which individual teachers might aspire. Of special significance to this paper are the Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA) which have been developed jointly by the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) and the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA), two peak professional bodies which represent secondary English teachers and primary school literacy teachers respectively, and the Standards for Excellence in Teaching Mathematics in Australian Schools, developed by the Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers (AAMT).

By formulating standards, AATE, ALEA and AAMT have run the risk of promoting managerialist constructions of professional practice. It is only necessary to think of performance management schemes to recognize how professional standards easily lend themselves to regulatory purposes. Advocates of professional standards maintain that recent research 'confirms common sense perceptions that the quality of teachers' knowledge and skill is the most important controllable factor in successful student learning' (Kleinhenz and Ingvarson, 2004, p.31). Common sense also dictates that 'the strong link between teacher quality and student learning outcomes calls for effective systems of teacher accountability' (Kleinhenz and Ingvarson, 2004, p.31). When teacher quality is a key factor affecting students' learning outcomes, it seems necessary to devote time and resources to developing standards to maintain that quality. Indeed, this kind of common sense has led ACER researcher Ken Rowe to caricature a 'traditional' emphasis on 'socio-cultural and socio-economic factors' for understanding student success at school as 'little more than "religious" adherence to the moribund ideologies of biological and social determinism' (Rowe, 2003, p.15). Such ideologies have no place in a brave new world of school effectiveness that is evidence-based and focused on 'what matters most', namely 'quality teachers and teaching, supported by strategic teacher professional development' (Rowe, 2003, p.15).

Yet it would be a mistake to think that the standards developed by AATE, ALEA and AAMT simply reflect this kind of logic. The research that forms the subject of this paper, in which AATE, ALEA and AAMT, along with the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT), have been industry partners,¹ has been designed to scrutinize key assumptions behind professional standards and the forms of accountability that usually accompany them. The professional associations initially developed their standards as a way of positioning themselves strategically within a policy environment characterized by an increasing focus on individual performance. Rather than allowing systems to impose standards with minimum consultation, the associations argued that teachers would be more likely to identify with standards that they had formulated themselves (cf. Gill, 1999). The standards they subsequently developed were the product of the deliberations of small groups of teachers who were acknowledged by their peers as experts in their field. Because of their expertise, these teachers were entrusted with the task of formulating subject specific standards on behalf of the wider profession (Petrosky, 1998).

However, by following this procedure, the professional associations have been confronted by a number of paradoxes (cf. Doecke and Gill, 2000). How can such standards be genuinely inclusive when they are the product of specific discursive communities? Can these standards be applied in a diverse range of school settings? Do they promote reflection and professional renewal? How do they speak to teachers who do not belong to a subject association? The challenge faced by the professional associations is perhaps best summed up by Anthony Petrosky, when he characterizes professional standards as the product of 'insiders' who meet together to discuss their professional knowledge and practice. While they might be able to distil their discussions into a set of general principles or standards that capture the complexities of their own professional practice, those standards will inevitably be received by other teachers as 'the products of others' work' (Petrosky, 1998, p.48). There always remains, in short, a challenge when it comes to disseminating those standards amongst 'outsiders' who have not been party to the discussions that produced them. Indeed, the assumption that the standards represent 'the best thinking of the profession with the implicit assumption that most members of the profession are in agreement with them' (Petrosky and Delandshere, 2000, p.32; see also Doecke, 2001) is tested every time they are used as a framework for professional learning or judging professional practice.

The research reported in this paper arises out of a recognition by AAMT, AATE and ALEA that in significant respects the validity of their standards remains open to scrutiny, especially with respect to the way teachers who have not been involved in formulating the standards interpret and apply them to their own teaching. By supporting further research into professional standards, they have attempted to probe the epistemological assumptions behind statements about 'accomplished' teaching, thereby developing a critical perspective on the very policy environment they have helped to create by formulating standards.

2. Researching professional standards

Standards are usually accompanied by a flurry of activity devoted to finding ways to measure teaching practice. It is as though standards can only have validity if they provide benchmarks against which the professional practice of individual teachers can be judged. Such research typically fails to question many of the assumptions behind standards, including their ontological status. The standards are lifted outside the context of the discussions that produced them, and located in a neutral realm beyond the debates in which teachers engage when they discuss their professional practice. Although conversation is increasingly recognized as a vital means by which teachers construct professional knowledge (Clark, 2001, Doecke et al., 2000), it is not easy to say precisely how standards constitute a 'knowledge' about teaching, especially when that 'knowledge' is situated in a sphere outside the professional activities in which teachers collectively engage on a daily basis. To then suppose that these activities can be judged against those standards is arguably less a matter of exercising the 'common sense' invoked by Kleinhenz and Ingvarson (2004) than repressing any recognition of the contradictions and complexities of professional practice.

Some months into our research project, we decided to name it PRIME (Portfolio Research in Mathematics and English). PRIME's aim was to investigate and document the ways small groups of Mathematics and English teachers demonstrated their professional accomplishments by preparing portfolios with reference to

¹ The project was funded through a Linkage grant, a type of research grant provided by the Australian Research Council which involves partnerships between universities and industry partners.

their respective subject standards. This was not, however, to be a pilot study which trialed a set of protocols for preparing and assessing portfolios, but an attempt to test the validity of the 'knowledge' and assumptions embedded in those standards, most notably with regard to the ways teachers who had not been involved in formulating the standards (i.e. who had been 'outside' this process) interpreted and applied them to their own teaching practice. To do this, we deliberately positioned the teachers who prepared portfolios as 'outsiders', selecting teachers who had previously no involvement in formulating the standards (they were recruited through the VIT's network, and were not active members of their subject associations). We then invited them to choose a domain of the standards and over a period of months to produce portfolio items that demonstrated their understanding of that domain. They were to do this without any consultation with the assessors (i.e. 'insiders' who originally developed the standards), although they were encouraged to nominate teachers at their schools who might perform the role of critical friends, helping them to make a judicious selection of materials to demonstrate their professional knowledge and practice.

The professional accomplishment of the participating teachers was not in question. The challenge they faced was to construct their own interpretations of the standards and to produce a range of artefacts that others might in turn read as signs of accomplished practice. They were engaged in an interpretive activity, and the data gathered show their changing understandings, as they initially read the standards and then reread them within the context of their ongoing professional practice. As researchers, we were not only interested in whether the teachers could construct accounts of their teaching that showed they had accomplished the standards. We were also interested in investigating whether the standards documents actually provided a valid frame of reference for individual teachers of Mathematics and English to review their practice and engage in professional learning that was personally and professionally meaningful to them.

Another way of putting this is to say that the goal of the project was to investigate whether the standards actually provided a framework for constructing professional knowledge and for putting that knowledge into circulation. In this respect, we felt that the policy environment in Australia provided a unique opportunity to gain insights into the value of professional standards and portfolio preparation for teachers. This is especially so in comparison with the United States, where there is a strong emphasis on measurement, as reflected in the operations of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). Although documentation exists about the professional growth experienced by US teachers when preparing portfolios for certification by the NBPTS, this tends to take the form of stories told by teachers who have achieved certification. 'Never before,' writes one Board certified teacher, 'have I thought so deeply about what I do with children, and why I do it. I looked critically at my practice, judging it against a set of high and rigorous standards... I am not the same teacher I was before the assessment, and my experience seems to be typical of other Board certified teachers I've met' (cited in Ingvarson, 1998a, p.39). Yet the trustworthiness of such accounts of professional learning is compromised by the fact that they are told by teachers who have achieved NBPTS certification, for whom the standards have validity precisely because they have been deemed to have accomplished them (cf. Ingvarson, 1998b, Buss, 2000). They have accepted the protocols for certification developed by the NBPTS, involving certain assumptions about standards and their measurement. Needless to say, as an account of an almost miraculous transformation of professional identity, the statement we have quoted hardly has any more warrant than a conversion story. Only other 'true believers' would find it convincing.

When we initially conceptualized this project, we argued that the 'outsider' teachers would not be engaging in high stakes assessment for promotion or other professional recognition, and so they would probably not be inclined to tell success stories of the kind told by certified teachers in the US. For this very reason, they would be likely to generate significant accounts of their professional learning and the value of standards for facilitating such learning. Further, by observing how teachers developed portfolio items, we expected to generate valuable knowledge about the contrasting ways in which teachers of Mathematics and English understand their disciplinary fields, the very different forms of knowledge they involve, and the characteristic pedagogies associated with each subject. It seems fair to say that stereotypical notions of the differences between Mathematics and English teachers continue to shape their professional identities, and the project provided an opportunity to explore the extent to which professional identity actually involves an allegiance to a particular disciplinary field. This meant revisiting Shulman's arguments about the relationship between disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987). We were poised, in short, to scrutinize many of the assumptions that have shaped the development of standards, not only in Australia but elsewhere.

3. Implementing our research design

A good research design exhibits a clarity that is difficult to maintain once it is implemented. We made every effort to inform participants about the purpose of the research, and we went to some trouble in selecting teachers from a fairly large number of expressions of interest, only to find that some individuals misunderstood what we were trying to do (two teachers thought that the focus of the project was on students' writing folios). We occasionally experienced a mismatch between our ideas and the way they were taken up by teachers who participated in the project (both 'insiders' and 'outsiders'), and some assumptions behind the original research design proved to be wrong.

One obvious misjudgment we made when conceptualizing our research design was our belief that teachers would engage in the process of developing portfolios differently because there were no high stakes involved. For all our efforts to assure them that their professional accomplishment was not in dispute, their journals show that they harboured fears about how their teaching would look to their assessors. On the day when they gathered together to submit their portfolios for assessment, they were very nervous (one even withdrew her portfolio at the last minute, to submit it at a later date). Curiously, their apprehension was matched by concerns voiced by their assessors about how to meet the challenge of assessing the work of teachers who 'were in a sense laying themselves on the line'. Any attempt to promote a professional culture in which teachers are willing to share accounts of their professional knowledge and experience seems to be overshadowed by the growth of managerial practices in Australia which require teachers to demonstrate their individual accomplishments, thereby positioning them as competing for recognition (although one might also argue that teachers have always preferred to close their classroom doors, rather than putting their professional knowledge and practice on display). When the AATE, ALEA and AAMT initially developed their standards, they provided spaces in which participating teachers could talk openly about their professional lives, though it is noteworthy that those spaces were located outside their schools, rather than offering a forum where teachers could participate on a day-to-day basis. While this new project consciously sought to emulate this model of professional learning by giving both 'outsiders' and 'insiders' support to engage in professional talk and inquiry, there was no escaping the fact that the 'outsiders' were producing portfolios that the assessors would be judging against the standards, and that the professional credibility of those teachers who produced the portfolios was indeed 'on the line'.

The following comments give a glimpse of how two teachers felt about the project. That the experience of preparing portfolios is a complex and contradictory process is shown by the range of feelings these teachers recorded in their journals.

Figure 1

'How does one compare teachers' work on a "level playing field" while acknowledging that teachers have individual styles and different levels of creativity in their teaching? Some say the only way to do this is in "measurable" things such as students' results on standardized tests. Has the teacher "added value" (a phrase I abhor) to the students' abilities over the course of their teaching? I can't fully agree with this. Teaching is such a complex thing and learning even more so. How can one quantify such a complex human experience? Whilst my subject is Maths, I basically interact with the world through "feeling". "How does it feel?" is my guideline. A portfolio of work (with the opportunity to speak in one's own voice about how people feel about teaching) seems a good compromise between "economic rationalist" accounting of students' results and the "human" side of teaching.'

Linda Shardlow (June 6, 2003)

'I also rebel against the idea of choosing a topic to be the "portfolio one". Shouldn't it be an example of what one normally does instead of deciding next week is the portfolio topic and designing learning activities especially for it?'

Linda Shardlow (August 1, 2003)

'I finally pull a portfolio together and look proudly upon it – after all, it represents a lifetime of work. I then worry about how it will appear to others – is it worthy of other's respect? Does it convey what I want it to? Would someone else get a feeling of a "good" teacher out of it (or merely a "desperately-seeking-some sort of affirmation" one)? I decide to show it to my critical friend and the Dean of Staff and see their reactions'

Linda Shardlow (January, 2004)

‘At this time of the project, I have become disillusioned about the worth of what I have done... (the project has been) time consuming and I am still unsure what benefits there are for me as a teacher. The point of the research is what? When I began I felt it was a noble project to understand what constitutes an experienced teacher. Where are the outcomes of the project going to be used? Who is going to provide the baton to ensure that teachers achieve these standards? Many of them are assumed, by me at least, to be part of what makes a good teacher. But how do you prove you have achieved these standards?’

Louise Piva (March, 2004)

‘Creating the portfolio was one of the most significant professional developments I have done and probably the only one to have made a meaningful improvement in my teaching practice... I have no desire to promote a false perception of teaching. Teaching and learning are inextricably linked, hence the need to inquire into one’s teaching practice to improve it.’

Louise Piva (May, 2004)

These journal entries come close to reflecting the full spectrum of opinion with respect to the value of developing portfolios within a standards framework. They show how these teachers negotiated their way between conflicting demands, both at the level of school politics (Linda’s decision to show her portfolio to the Dean of Staff) and in response to pressures to ‘add value’. To speak in ‘one’s own voice’ means contending with a range of voices and ideologies.

These comments simultaneously evoke a professional world that teachers collectively inhabit and a sense of their individual isolation, as each teacher scrutinizes her professional practice in relation to the standards. Their language occasionally reifies the standards into something foreign or alien, against which (as Louise remarks) they have to ‘prove’ their qualities as teachers, rather than affirming the values and beliefs they share as teachers. And even when they have ‘proved’ their qualities by producing their portfolios, there is a lingering doubt whether they have convinced anyone. When Linda decides to show her portfolio to the Dean of Staff , she has to remain content with a half-embarrassed acknowledgement that it was a ‘privilege’ to be shown the portfolio, especially when it contained such ‘intimate’ and ‘personal’ details. There are undoubtedly signs that these teachers have benefited from the process of constructing accounts of their professional knowledge and practice by preparing portfolios, but their professional learning is something that they have achieved by going against the grain, and might even be viewed by colleagues as a somewhat eccentric pursuit. Teachers have become habituated to a policy environment which positions them as ‘individual professionals’ (Caldwell and Hayward, 1997), undermining their efforts to work in genuinely collaborative ways and to share their professional knowledge and experience.

4. How did the assessors judge the portfolios?

The deliberations of the assessors, as they developed protocols for assessing the portfolios and then reflected on the challenges they faced when judging the material presented, likewise reflect the contradictions and complexities of our current policy environment. The English teachers, in particular, resisted the notion of assessing the portfolios by using rubrics that described a continuum of performance. They were much more interested in engaging in what Delandshere and Petrosky call ‘interpretive discussions’ (Delandshere and Petrosky, 1998), not only reaching judgments about the quality of each portfolio, but carefully monitoring and documenting the process by which they arrived at those judgments. This meant cultivating a reflexive awareness of the interpretive frames they were bringing to their readings of each portfolio, and being prepared to subject those frames in turn to critical scrutiny. They thereby hoped to acknowledge the deeply contextualized nature of each teacher’s professional learning, the fact that any teacher’s professional learning is a function of the school community in which he or she is working, and that it is not necessarily easy to make comparisons between the challenges which teachers face when they are operating in radically different settings. They were attempting to extend the process that they had all experienced when engaging in discussions that produced the standards, imagining that the process of developing portfolios might be part of an ongoing professional dialogue, despite the fact that they were taking on the role of assessors. They were, in short, committed to the possibility of genuine professional dialogue, even though that dialogue was being mediated by managerial practices, namely the preparation and assessment of portfolios.

In addition to producing accounts of their teaching by analyzing samples of students' work and providing examples of curriculum development and evaluation, the teachers who were preparing portfolios were invited to construct 'professional journeys', thereby locating their current knowledge and practice as episodes within their life stories. Although the assessors expressed doubts as to whether many of the teachers had provided convincing evidence of the quality of their teaching, they usually affirmed the 'lively' and 'engaging' quality of this autobiographical writing. They responded to one teacher, for example, by saying that 'we found your teacher's "voice" engaging and convincing as you not only took us through your career, but importantly, gave us a sense of the challenges that you had engaged with and which inspired you. You also clearly articulated the values and beliefs that you hold and which inform your work as a teacher, and your ongoing professional learning.'

That the teachers produced lively accounts of their professional journeys can be shown by referring once again to the work of Linda Shardlow and Louise Piva. Linda conveys a sense of her beliefs and values as a secondary Mathematics teacher by recalling the 'standard' Maths lesson 'before the 1980s', which 'consisted of teacher-led theory at the blackboard, examples so that students could attempt the homework then individual practice on problems that were frequently frustrating and had no perceived relevance to the world students occupied'. She continues:

Many people experienced Mathematics as a dull, tiresome subject full of drilled routines, rules and testing that served to confirm students' beliefs that they couldn't "do" Maths. It had (has?) an aura about it that only served the needs and interests of the chosen few that had been initiated into its secrets. It provided a vocational basis but was really more useful as an intellectual sieve; sifting the academically capable from the rest.

In similar vein, Louise revisits a moment in her early career as an English teacher, when she was arbitrarily transferred to a new school where they streamed students:

At the first English meeting it was pointed out to me that the classes were grouped by ability - the judgments made on the end of year results for each student. My shock and horror was probably evident when I said, 'So they are streamed?'. I was told in no uncertain terms, that no, they were not streamed, but grouped into similar ability classes. Streamed! I thought that process went out with the dinosaurs. There are some obvious benefits to grouping the students into like ability groups, but I believe and know through first hand experience that the negatives far outweigh the positives when this is done on a school wide basis. The 'attitude' each group develops is insular and sets a predetermined path of achievement. The old self fulfilling prophecy. Therefore I wasn't surprised by one of the first comment from Ashley in 10D.

The class were seated and I was introducing myself as their new English teacher for the year.

Ashley yells from the middle of the room, where incidentally he is sitting with his feet on the desk, 'Yeah, and we're 10D, for Dummies'.

If accounts of achieving NBPTS certification sometimes read like 'cover stories' (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995, p.15) that elide the contradictions and complexities which teachers experience in their professional lives, these narratives might be classed as heroic tales, in which the central character does battle against the status quo. Both Linda and Louise are reacting against traditional practices that stream students, limiting their potential and undermining their capacity to engage in socially productive and meaningful relationships during their time at school.

They both locate their professional knowledge and practice within a tension between existing conditions and their desire to find a better way of doing things (or to achieve what 'ought' to be). Linda goes on to observe that 'unfortunately, teaching practice is most resistant to change' and that many of the most innovative aspects of the new Year 12 curriculum 'only became "add-ons" to traditional lessons rather than integrated into the methodology of teaching practices' - a stance vis-à-vis her colleagues that is matched by Louise's account of her struggle with 'Pat-the-Rat', the English coordinator at her school who made a virtue of belittling students, eroding their self esteem by denying them any opportunity to experience success. As heroic tales which show teachers doing battle with the powers-that-be, their stories might be read as showing

their capacity to maintain a critical perspective even in the face of the most repressive conditions. This is not to criticize their narratives, but to identify a text type or genre that is often a feature of professional discourse (cf. Swidler, 2000).

By recounting their struggles with traditional school practices, Louise and Linda imply a view of professional 'excellence' or 'accomplishment' as involving a critical perspective on their professional landscape. They are reading the standards as aspirational, a statement of shared values and beliefs, involving a vision of 'accomplished' practice that arguably nobody could possibly sustain on a daily basis. They show how their professional lives have continually been shaped by a tension between what 'is' and what 'ought' to be, tracing how their values and aspirations have emerged out of a process of trial and error, of successes and failures, of worthwhile professional learning and occasional misjudgments.

Yet while the professional journeys constructed by the teachers generally reflected a critical stance vis-à-vis existing policy and curriculum, other aspects of the portfolios suggested that they were struggling to resist regressive educational reforms and to give convincing accounts of accomplished practice. Although the assessors felt that all the professional journeys conveyed a lively and critical engagement in professional issues, they were often disappointed by the other material presented in the portfolios. Some teachers failed to present enough evidence to support claims made about accomplished practice. Other teachers did not select the right material to substantiate their claims. Several assessors reported making guesses about the contexts in which the teachers were operating that might explain why they chose to approach a topic in a particular way. Some questioned whether the examples of classroom teaching provided in the portfolios actually reflected the kind of reflective practice described by the standards.

At this point it is worth dwelling on the critical stance taken by the assessors. During the early stages of the project the Mathematics and English assessors appeared to disagree about protocols for developing and assessing portfolios – the Mathematics assessors were more prepared to use the standards as a vehicle for discriminating between levels of accomplishment, whereas the English assessors were more sensitive to contextual factors that would make it difficult to reach universal judgments about a teachers' professional practice. Yet in the course of their deliberations, the English assessors swung around to affirming the need for statements about accomplished teaching that might provide an alternative to existing practices, and they were prepared to use those statements to evaluate the portfolios. Far from being products of a managerial culture, the standards provided for them models of accomplished teaching, including a vision of classroom settings where talk was a vital medium for learning, where teachers were capable of providing targeted feedback to students in an effort to improve their writing, where teachers and students were jointly engaged in a sustained exploration of the complexities of language and meaning. Although they recognized that the standards embodied an ideal of professional practice that was probably beyond the reach of teachers as they struggled with their commitments from day-to-day, they felt that this was an ideal worth striving for, even if it could only be realised in imperfect ways. (One assessor remarked that it was still possible to do magical things in stinking hot portables on a Friday afternoon, and that teachers should not be excused for slipping into habitual routines and for giving up on the struggle to create conditions for authentic learning!) With this vision of accomplishment in their minds, it is perhaps little wonder that their initial excitement at receiving the portfolios and reading the professional journeys was followed by 'disappointment'. Here are some of their remarks:

Figure 2

The teachers involved were clearly engaged in reflection on their practice, but I found that some failed to carry that through to an in-depth understanding of students and their literacy learning. If a sequence of lessons is presented as evidence, it not only has to be sound in itself but also draw in the understandings of professional knowledge, context and student engagement. Some of the portfolios perhaps left too much to be assumed by the assessor.

(Meredith Maher)

One problem I have is that I tend to be "cool" first – I was initially less than impressed by the portfolios I looked at, in fact I was quite disappointed. My disappointment started with the achievement levels of the student work... the work samples contained almost nothing in the way of student response to the text being studied ... Now, I know we are not assessing these teachers in terms of the 'standard' their students are demonstrating, I'm not edging towards that at all – BUT if I'm looking at fairly low level student work

samples and I'm reading very limited teacher comments with almost no critique or reflection by the teacher, I tend to assume that this teacher will not rate highly in terms of the Professional Knowledge standard (e.g. teachers know their subject, teachers know how students learn to be powerfully literate) and also the Professional Practice standard (e.g. teachers assess and review student learning and plan for future learning). I'm looking at those work samples ... as evidence provided by the teacher At the very least she would need to annotate and comment on the student work, and probably also to supply more appropriate evidence. (I could suggest that to her, of course, in form of "warm feedback").

(John Davidson)

These reactions were subsequently tempered when the assessors revisited the portfolios in order to provide feedback to the teachers, when they once again affirmed the quality of the professional journeys. (Meredith Maher comments: 'The Professional Journeys, in the three portfolios I read, were engaging and lively, evidence of high levels of reflectiveness, professional responsibility and engagement and a desire to learn/improve practice. In this respect they surpassed my expectations... The liveliness, the sense of personality and commitment evident in all or some parts of the Professional Journey for each of the teachers, was powerful in influencing my sense of the teacher's professional growth.') They also acknowledged the challenge of operating at the level of accomplishment described by the standards when teachers have been forced to implement curriculum and assessment practices of an increasingly reductive kind. When, for example, a state wide examination system judges students on the basis of one shot pieces of writing, it becomes difficult for teachers to resist drilling and skilling to enable students to perform under exam conditions, rather than promoting the value of drafting. How is it possible to sustain a professional memory about the complexities of the writing process, when the system constructs school writing in a completely antithetical way?

5. Conclusion

For the teachers involved in this project, the task of preparing their portfolios was never straightforward. The experience and expertise of several of them had already been acknowledged by their peers in a variety of ways and they were not seeking professional recognition by preparing a portfolio. Yet none of them felt confident about demonstrating their professional accomplishments, and they were beset by doubts as to how their assessors would read their material. For Linda and Louise, their initial choices of aspects of their professional practice on which to focus was largely dictated by reasons other than showing their professional accomplishment. Louise treated the exercise as an opportunity to inquire into aspects her teaching, while Linda was driven by a desire to gain a perspective on her professional identity, choosing aspects of her professional practice that revealed who she was as a teacher, 'warts and all' (personal communication to researchers). These are not necessarily sensible choices if they were to seek promotion or a position at other schools, when it would in all likelihood be a matter of projecting a sparkling image of supreme accomplishment and speaking the language of performance management.

As Mark Howie observes in a narrative published as part of the STELLA project, the difficulty with professional standards is that they can be used to highlight teachers' sense of inadequacy as they 'flagellate' themselves 'with the barbs of (their) perceived weaknesses and failings'. Conscientious teachers feel that their teaching is never likely to match the ideals embodied in the standards (Howie, 2002, 25). But the problematical nature of standards is manifested less in this kind of tension than in the danger that they will simply be used to validate managerial processes that occur at a remove from the interactions and personal relationships that constitute every classroom. Is it really possible for portfolios to be used as a vehicle for practitioner inquiry in a managerial climate that obliges people to talk up their accomplishments, to offer 'cover stories' (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995) that gloss over the complexities and ambiguities, the missed opportunities and failures, the challenges and small victories (they are usually not 'big' ones) that teachers experience in the course of their professional lives?

The quality of the portfolios produced for the research project does suggest that they might provide a valuable means of engaging in practitioner inquiry and putting professional knowledge into wider circulation. Too often the professional knowledge and practice of teachers remains confined to the schools in which teachers are working – sometimes it does not even get beyond the legendary classroom door and become available to other teachers working within the same school! But it is obvious that much work needs to be done to create a professional culture in which teachers are prepared to share their knowledge and experience in a spirit of inquiry into teaching and learning.

If the professional standards developed by AAMT, AATE and ALEA can provide a framework in which teachers can give currency to their professional knowledge and practice within the wider community, then they will have performed a valuable service. There is no reason why these standards should not continue to provide a framework for the kind of workshopping and professional conversations that produced the standards themselves. Yet there is no point in pretending that such work cannot be accomplished other than through a constant struggle with contending versions of teachers' professional practice. Even though the associations might have begun to use the word 'standards', they can never imagine that they have wholly appropriated this word, that this word does not echo with meanings that are antithetical to their purposes, even as they speak it. And the same can be said of any attempt to advocate the value of portfolios as a vehicle for professional learning and inquiry. Such purposes will always be in conflict with managerial attempts to use portfolios to regulate teaching and to measure teachers' performance 'against' (the preposition 'against' just about says it all) a reified set of standards that are completely unanchored in the complexities of professional practice.

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