

38 Professional Digital ePortfolios: Perceptions on Employability, Reflective Practice and Professional Identity for UK Undergraduate Childhood Studies Students

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Research Domains

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Abstract

This research examines the integration of digital ePortfolios in UK undergraduate Childhood Studies courses. With graduate employability a key driver for UK universities to attract students, strategies to connect learning to employment are becoming increasingly valuable in higher education. Although ePortfolios may not be a novel approach in degree programmes, their integration as a central element of curriculum and assessment has not been fully explored. This study investigates how ePortfolios can affect students' interaction with their university experiences by enhancing professional identities and reflective, lifelong learning. Data collected for this project draws upon students' perceptions through recorded online interviews adopting a phenomenological approach, eliciting meaning through reflective, subjective understandings. Findings portray that reflective work in ePortfolios can be challenging through exposing vulnerabilities whilst also positively playing a role in the 'bigger picture' of students' development. This is through the facilitation of digital skill development and evolving professional identities.

Full paper

This research investigates digital ePortfolios in the undergraduate curriculum in Childhood Studies at a UK university. An ePortfolio is an online resource created by students that detail professional experiences linked to academic study. It culminates in a structured collection of learner work that is primarily framed by reflection (Wolf & Dietz, 1998).

Research into ePortfolios in Higher Education is ongoing and well-informed. Closely related to employability, ePortfolios showcase applicant credentials and digital competence, allowing universities to assess students, and for organisations to determine applicants' skills for entering the job market (Ring et al, 2017). In a competitive graduate employability climate, degree programmes are perceived as a 'product' with an emphasis on value for money with students as customers (Modell, 2005). As pressure builds around student recruitment, action is needed to improve graduate employability metrics, with ePortfolios proven to enhance these.

The qualitative nature of this research draws upon participant perceptions of ePortfolios through recorded online interviews, with discussions surrounding work placements, digital skills, professional experiences and employability. Participants are in 2 groups; current students and graduates, with data collection adopting a phenomenological approach, relying upon specific contexts and circumstances (Willig, 2008). This elicits a richness of meaning forged through reflective, subjective understandings (Finlay, 1999). The data collected encompasses the perceivers' *angle* of perception, basing reality on human experience (Willig, 2008) and taking an idiographic stance (Burrell and Morgan, 1999).

ePortfolios "develop engaged, reflective, lifelong learners," by collecting valuable evidence of career-based skills, and promoting "professional digital identities" (McKay & Watty, 2016). This study recognises this shift in identity for students, with findings outlining how ePortfolios **"help you to reflect and develop as a professional person,"** and that students did not **"feel like a student when [...] writing this" (Graduate Participant)**. This is arguably caused by the facilitated connections between practical learning and reflective summative assessment: **"I've got this theory and understanding of things from uni and I can apply that. And everything makes so much more sense which moving forward has meant Oh, my gosh! I can work even better now" (Graduate Participant)**. As students reflect on professional experiences, value exists in the connections between theory and practice, with ePortfolios aiding reflection on an individual's strengths and weaknesses. This in turn improves the quality of work and addresses multiple identities (Ring et al, 2017). Embedding ePortfolios in the curriculum as a summative assessment

enforces accountability for students' professionalism, leading to an increased level of perceived value from degree study. The requirement to self-author reflective accounts, and build connections between experiential and theoretical learning leads to "heightened awareness and preparation for professions" (Svyantek, Kajfez & McNair, 2015, p.137). When students have an idea of their professional trajectories, this leads to valuable consideration of career plans: **"You've got clarity in your writing as well, which is probably a nice feather to the bow when you were reflecting on [your career]" (Student Participant)**. As ePortfolios prompt students to present their professional personas for large audiences to "intentionally curate their digital presence" (Svyantek et al, 2015, p. 146), the development of professional identity aids career planning significantly.

Reflection is key in Childhood Studies, with a need to effectively embed this in the curriculum. "Danger lies in [reflection] being a separate curriculum element with a set of exercises" (Bolton & Delderfield, 2018, p.1), and with ePortfolios, reflective writing characterises their creation. The meaning of this reflection is evident in the findings: **"This is the only assessment that you go and do something real, and then you have to bring it back to our lovely, fluffy theory of 'Oh, this is how things should be,' and no one else really makes you do that" (Student Participant)**. This recognises integrative thinking for students encouraging the management of complexity and problem-solving by connecting ideas akin to professional experiences (Svyantek, et al, 2015). Reflection brings challenges, however, with vulnerability associated with articulating learning from experience. Findings showed: **"[There was a] vulnerability that you felt when you submitted those reflections" (Graduate Participant)**; the cause arguably in revealing more of the 'self' than other assessment methods (Lewis & Gerbic, 2012). Accompanying this is the requirement to adopt alternative ways of thinking that encompass purposeful goal-directed tasks that personalise the learning experience (Lewis, 2017).

To conclude, ePortfolios in undergraduate Childhood Studies degree programmes positively affect students' perceptions of professional identities, employability and digital competence. Reflecting on learning is challenging and vulnerability arises from recounting experiences for assessment purposes. ePortfolios had a positive impact on the undergraduate Childhood Studies degree programme, encompassing wider contexts and individual learning experiences.

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