

SABBATICAL REPORT and REFLECTION

Term 2, 2011

Investigate how students' engagement in learning and plain language reporting to parents is enhanced by the use of eportfolios.

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Principal, St Patrick's Primary School

Acknowledgements:

I have appreciated the support and encouragement from St Patrick's school staff, Board of Trustees, parents and the St Patrick's parish especially the parish priest.

Thanks also are due to the Ministry of Education for the school staffing funding enabling my release.

Special thanks to our deputy principal for efficiently running the school during the term of my sabbatical. To be able to leave ones school for a term without having to worry about or get involved in the day the day business is real privilege.

Purpose of Study:

Key investigative questions were:

- How and what eportfolio systems are being implemented in schools and for what purposes?
- Who has responsibility for implementation and how is it maintained?
- How, when and what skills are students being taught, at what level, to enable them to take responsibility for their own eportfolios and use them to show evidence of learning?
- What impact does implementing eportfolios have on the classroom learning and teaching programme?
- What are the benefits regarding students' engagement in learning and plain language reporting to parents?

Process:

My learning inquiry involved a variety of methods to consider and gather information on the topic:

- (1) Initially I undertook a range of background reading with an emphasis on web based presentations, papers, blogs and journals.
- (2) I listened to a number of 'on line' audio visual presentations.
- (3) I followed a number of 'on line' forums.
- (4) I visited a number of schools, both those identified as 'leading the field' in the introduction and use of eportfolios and those who use and promote the use of digital learning but not specifically eportfolios.
- (5) I also visited a range of primary, intermediate and integrated schools with a bias towards schools of a similar decile rating to St Patrick's.
- (6) In the schools...
 - I spoke with school leadership or those with responsibility for leading digital leaning.
 - I spent time talking to children in classes and viewing their digital work.
 - Limited access was given to spend time talking to classroom teachers.
- (7) I was granted permission to view a number of children's blogs and other digital work.
- (8) I attended two seminars:
 - MoE MLE
 - Digital leadership – Facilitated by Innes Kennard private digital learning consultant.

My professional inquiry has been an interesting process. It has raised more questions than it has answered. The speed with which technology is developing it is more about learning to be

adaptable and having a clear idea of the direction one needs to go to achieve a particular outcome, than focusing on a particular digital resource, tool or methodology.

The inquiry has helped me to begin to clarify the best way forward for my school in implementing effective digital learning practices, harnessing the power of web 2 cloud computing. I also gained ideas for engaging children and staff in using digital technologies wisely to promote effective learning and develop positive and safe digital footprints.

I have a colleague who always challenged me to remember the fable of the Emperor's new clothes when it comes to 'new ideas'.

The proliferation of apps, online social networking, digital hardware and media is driven by multi corporates desire to make profits. We are being told that this is the way it is going to be, get on board or be left behind. Have you got the latest designer digital interactive mobile device? It's new, it's faster, its better so it must be good for our kids.

Technology.

"That it will change us is not in doubt but how it will change us is still up to us.

Technology challenges us to assert human values , which means that we first of all have to figure out what they are and that's not so easy.

Technology is not good or bad. It's powerful and it's complicated.

Take advantage of what it can do, learn what it can do but also ask what it is doing to us. We are going to slowly, slowly find a balance but it's going take time."

Proff Sherry Turkle MIT Initiative on Technology and Self. Documentary Digital Nation 2010

So the key issue for me as the educational leader is very clear. When thinking about and planning the 'digital outfit' for our school am I being wise about who is selling me the latest fashion... what it should look like, sound like, feel like and why our school should be using it... to make sure I'm not out parading myself and our school in the 'Emperor's new clothes'.

Martin Elms
July 2011

How and what eportfolios systems are being implemented in schools and for what purposes?

The following purpose built systems are available to schools as listed in early 2011 by the MoE.

COMMERCIAL

KnowledgeNET (contains an ePortfolio module)

My Classes (contains an ePortfolio module)

Ultranet (contains an ePortfolio module)

WEB 2.0 TOOLS

OPEN SOURCE

MyPortfolio (Mahara).—a New Zealand developed ePortfolio service supported by the Ministry of Education (MyPortfolio is a specific instance of Mahara)

GOOGLE

Google Aps for Education

Google now also provides *Digication for ePortfolios* which is a well established ePortfolio tool having been available since 2004

MICROSOFT

Office 365 (formerly known as Live at Edu)

Source MoE 'Digital Portfolios' Guide for beginners. Draft 2 2011

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In addition there is also available:

The eportfolio module in 'Spike@school'
Edcube eportfolios system.

During my visits into schools I saw the following in use in various forms and used for a range of purposes.

- Wikis
- Blogs
- Google apps
- MyPortfolio

Wikis and blogs were being used effectively by a number of primary schools to engage children in writing about their learning, as an authentic context for their learning and for giving and receiving real time feedback.

My portfolio was being used at intermediate level in a limited way with emphasis on teachers learning to use it first. Some individual and groups of children were engaged in using the platform. There seemed to be two types of thought. Those who believed this is the way of the future and everyone has to get on board and this is mandated across the school. Others saw it as a tool and were allowing its use to grow from within the school using the passionate teachers and children to lead the way, encouraging others to join in the journey.

The places where I saw the biggest engagement by the children in whatever systems were being implemented appeared to be where reliable digital infrastructure and equipment was available to teachers and students.

It also relied on enthusiasm and leadership by the principal, one or two enthusiastic teachers and other teachers willing to learn (often from the children).

There appeared to be the potential for greater 'resistance' when implementation was mandated as opposed to where teacher 'buy in' was encouraged, fostered and grown.

For some a priority was placed in having a structure in place first and engaging teachers using apps and web 2 tools for teacher reflection, planning, appraisal and performance management.

For others the priority was children sharing their learning in an authentic context.

There appears to be on-going debate around which tools should be used for which purposes and levels of access by the general public, peers, educators and parents.

Who has responsibility for implementation and how is it maintained?

Each school I visited, where digital learning was being used meaningfully in classrooms, the following were occurring:

The principal was either leading the project because of their own interest, skills and passion

or

They were actively encouraging specialists in the school to lead implementation and trying to keep up themselves.

Some were attempting to market their schools as digital schools and this included:

Actively recruiting staff who were digitally skilled (or digital natives) and making it clear to existing staff that becoming digitally literate was not an option and this was a key component of the schools performance management systems.

Additional Observations...

I also noted there can be issues of sustainability regarding maintaining a staff who are capable of implementing digital programmes. There are also issues around maintaining the levels of funding required to provide and maintain equipment to ensure high levels of school wide digital learning, once started, can be continued and developed. There have been recent reports of schools having access to ultra high speed broadband and using their data plan all too quickly and then having to ration staff and students, causing frustration, blocks to on-going learning and massive budget blowouts.

Having and maintaining the necessary hardware, infrastructures and systems appears to be an important part of the effective implementation of any sort of eportfolio system.

Cloud computing is potentially offering schools a cost effective way to stay 'up to date' without huge capital outlay or upgrades and not to be so reliant on school based servers.

Hand held devices such ipods / iphones, touch pads and android mobile phones are enabling more reliable, user friendly and access to the cloud by teachers and students from anywhere.

Netbooks are starting to provide a more financially viable option for ensuring maximum access to the net by students.

Access has also been addressed by some schools leasing/ selling netbooks to parents or adding them to the book list.

Security and access, which continue to be big issue, are being assisted by MoE led moves towards single sign on technologies but these do add an extra financial burden to schools particularly the smaller schools.

The MoE's and schools' investment in SNUP and the government commitment to ultrafast broadband is helping to ensure schools have fast reliable broadband to assist access and address learning barriers caused by lack of internet access.

There is a real challenge to avoid being totally reliant on one application, digital resource or digital provider. This can help avoid the problems of the past when schools have been left high and dry with overpriced or outdated contracts and superseded equipment when the digital landscape has rapidly changed or increasing costs have become an issue.

There appears to be a real advantage to not having one's eggs all in one basket and accessing a range of services and digital learning resources then being clear about how and why they are being used. This should enable a school to develop and maintain a cost effective user friendly digital learning environment.

How, when and what skills are students being taught, at what level, to enable them to take responsibility for their own eportfolios and use it to show evidence of learning?

These are some of the skills I observed being specifically taught and used in schools' digital learning environments, for the most part middle and upper primary school.

Sharing and writing class blog, recording own reading.

Using digital images.

How to use the following tools to record learning and as a vehicle for learning...

animations, stop go animations,

power points, free 'on line' digital story telling applications.

videos, blogs, wikis, you tube videos.

How to use digital tools to...

give effective feedback,

respond to feedback received.

set goals setting and reflect

ask effective questions

record and store learning and how to share safely.

Touch typing.

Skills around safe 'on line' behaviour.

Using and keeping passwords safe.

What learning is appropriate for general audiences, what is for restricted access and which tools are used accordingly.

How to decide what to keep and why.

Use of creative commons.

It became clear that specific teaching teacher/student, peer/peer or e tutorials are necessary to ensure students have the necessary 'on line' skills to make best use of tools available and to keep them safe.

I observed teachers who incorporated many of these lessons specifically in their learning and teaching programmes and spent time teaching or facilitating the learning of specific digital skills as they were needed.

It became clear that a key role for primary schools is to provide a safe, moderated digital learning environments where students can learn online, begin to create a digital footprint and engage in the digital landscape safely.

What impact does implementing eportfolios have on the classroom learning and teaching programme?

Presenting learning and reflecting on learning have been important components of NZ learning and teaching programmes for many years. Where the processes of inquiry and reflection have been taught practised and encouraged they have resulted in worthwhile learning and engaged children authentically in the learning process.

In the online digital environment these skills don't happen by chance. It is clear where they are taught, encouraged and modelled they appear to result in positive outcomes. Where they are left to chance then digital learning becomes another 'keeping busy activity'. They also can develop a new raft of excuses for disengaging. Battery flat, lost password, can't find file, computer frozen, no computer at home, no internet at home etc. etc.

It certainly appears that where the teacher is energised and enthusiastic about elearning then children are engaged in their learning and there appears to be increased engagement in learning with the boys, children who struggle with traditional pen and paper and children in lower socio economic schools, for example the Manaiakalani Project which can be found online on the tki web site.

I have a few reflective questions...

Do all teachers have to teach the same way?

What about those important traditional teaching practices and practical learning opportunities already identified through research as supporting effective learning?

Writing it down, handwriting skills, manipulating equipment.

I found the following very thought provoking:

The World at our Fingertips.

The sense of touch helps children to ground abstract ideas in concrete experiences.

by Derek Cabrera and Lauri Colosi

Scientific American Mind Sept/ Oct 2010 issue.

One evening while one of us was making dinner, her six year old daughter, Gianna, appeared with 10 little pieces of paper in her hand. She had been doing her homework, she said, and each scrap contained one of the words she was supposed to learn. When her mother asked why Gianna had torn apart her spelling list, she shrugged: "So I can do stuff with it." For Gianna, abstract concepts became easier to understand after she had transformed them into physical objects – in this case, piece of paper she could hold, feel and manipulate.

The connection between touch and understanding is deeply instinctual, beginning in infancy and continuing, in varying forms, throughout our lives. Experiments have found that touch is as important as vision for learning and retaining information.

The documentary 'Digital Nation' presented by Rachel Dretzin for WGBH Educational Foundation 2010 screened on channel 7 TVNZ.

This documentary touches on concerns about information overload and multitasking and the role of computers and digital technology in education and learning.

They shared some very positive stories about improved educational outcomes being achieved by using digital technology as well as raising some interesting questions and conundrums.

For example:

Issues around multi tasking and ability of student to successfully engage in a range of digital tasks at the same time and be successful in them all. The disparity between how successful students thought they were being and actually how successful they actually were was significant.

The challenge of having quality research available to back up the implementation of new technologies and their touted positive influence on learning.

Technologies are changing so rapidly that by the time a properly constructed research proposal is formulated, approved and carried out the results are worthless because the technology has been superseded. The documentary suggested were are in danger of implementing programmes based on anecdotal and perceived benefits and then finding out that the unintended consequences outweigh the possible benefits.

During my school visits I noticed that many digital schools had moved away from digital interactive whiteboards towards multiple plasma screens providing flexibility and less capital outlay. Some teachers felt interactive white boards had encouraged a return to a focus on traditional 'chalk and talk'.

Teacher comment

In one digital classroom where each child has their own laptop, one teacher became so concerned about children's handwriting skills the teacher reintroduced regular handwriting practice. The concern was around legibility and ability to maintain periods of sustained writing. Skills still required as children move through into higher learning.

They had also introduced regular touch typing instruction and practice.

Additional anecdotal observations

Children appear to engage with the social networking aspects of eportfolios, they look for the feedback, value where the comments come from and the quantity rather than reflecting on the feedback, where it originated and the quality of the feedback

Some of the writing was for a real purpose, both meaningful and insightful.

Much of content that I observed was generally not any better than 'paper and pencil' work and in some cases the digital enhancements shrouded the lack of content.

Points to ponder

Have we created a generation of digital natives who crave their two minutes of fame on blogs, facebook, tweets, youtube and the like and we have provided them with an easily accessible forum to present themselves in the hopes of becoming famous?

How many budding artists, writers, singers or musicians hope, that by posting themselves on line, their work will go viral and they will become the next Justin Bieber?

How are we helping them to ensure that their digital footprint is positive and helpful and to understand that whatever they write 'on line' will be there forever?

What are the benefits regarding students' engagement in learning and plain language reporting to parents?

Blogs and wikis have potential to give parents a real time window into classrooms and aspects of a child's everyday learning. This can help with the 'what did you learn at school today – nothing' syndrome.

There was some evidence that children's engagement in learning improved when parents took some interest in their on line digital footprint and provided constructive and positive feedback.

There is the potential for higher levels of engagement by parents in their children's learning in the digital environment as they can have access from work or outside school hours.

There is potential for using digital evidence of learning, artefacts, recordings and reflections to be used by students and teachers to provide hard evidence to parents of learning beyond the scope of books and just 'telling'.

There are some blocks to parents actively engaging with children on line.

- Access to computers, untrafast broadband, skills and interest.
- Anxieties about information being widely accessible on the net and by whom.
- Security.
- Lack of knowledge by parents regarding what they are looking at and therefore appropriate ways to respond.

Questions and issues that need to be considered at St Patrick's as we develop our on line digital learning environment and help students learn to create a positive digital footprint.

What do we mean by a digital footprint?

How can we best use this digital footprint to enhance reporting to parents?

How can we best educate and engage our parents about their children's online digital learning?

Which digital learning activities should be school server based and which should be cloud based?

When using cloud based tools for elearning or as a repository for learning (eportfolios) what can be shared publically or semi publically and what needs to be kept secure with managed access?

How 'on line' digital learning is to be funded and managed. Can we totally rely on free apps that are based around generating advertising revenue. What happens if companies change hands?

How long will MoE funded eportfolios apps be available and do they actually meet our student learning needs?

Is digital and online better for our students?

What is the long term cost and impact of internet access and effects of ultrafast broadband on school budget?

Be careful when committing significant resources to one provider, digital tool or application?

In conclusion a 'post' from Nick Rate

Nick Rate

[eLearning Infusion](#)

Engaging learners and leaders through technology.

To reinforce and expand on what Helen has said above, I think the answer to the question needs to be framed around your pedagogical approach to learning that is defined through your eportfolio use and implementation. Other questions such as:

- What pedagogical approach are your eportfolios grounded in?
- What research supports that approach and results in improved outcomes for students?
- Can the same methodologies in that research be applied to the context of eportfolios?

For me, the approach to eportfolio implementation has always been firmly grounded assessment for learning practices. Black and William (1998) in their publication *Inside the Black Box: Raising standards through classroom assessment*, discuss assessment for learning and how it is at the heart of effective teaching. In their extensive review referencing over 250 published research articles on the subject, they have concluded that *assessment for learning is one of the most powerful ways of improving student learning*.

When you look at AFL's characteristics...

- it is embedded in a view of teaching and learning of which it is an essential part;
- it involves sharing learning goals with pupils;
- it aims to help pupils to know and to recognise the standards they are aiming for;
- it involves pupils in self-assessment;
- it provides feedback which leads to pupils recognising their next steps and how to take them;
- it is underpinned by confidence that every student can improve;
- it involves both teacher and pupils reviewing and reflecting on assessment data.

...many are supported by other research into effective teaching and learning. For example, Hattie's effect sizes, where feedback comes in at 1.13.

So how about these questions to guide your teachers' inquiry into practice:

- are the *eportfolios* embedded in a view of teaching and learning of which it is an essential part?
- do your *eportfolios* facilitate sharing learning goals with pupils?
- are your *eportfolios* helping pupils to know and to recognise the standards they are aiming for?
- do your *eportfolios* involve pupils in self-assessment?
- do the *eportfolios* provide feedback which leads to pupils recognising their next steps and how to take them?
- are the *eportfolios* underpinned by confidence that every student can improve?
- do the *eportfolios* involve both teacher and pupils reviewing and reflecting on assessment data?

ePortfolios are part of a bigger approach to teaching and learning and I think that definitively capturing the direct impact of them will always be difficult. However the research supporting the bigger global pedagogy behind them should be well understood and harnessed.

Follow-up post.

It is a very good question you pose Karen as e-portfolios are currently re-emerging and surging back as a trend in education. I would be really interested to know how schools are capturing their effectiveness or whether their approach is similar to mine, where it is the effectiveness of the pedagogy measured, not a vehicle.

Finally a challenge...

[Lisa Nielsen](#)

The Innovative Educator Blog

Is Your Child's School Leaving Him/Her Behind?

Life in the 21st century provides a whole-new world of opportunities for self-directed, passion-driven, personalized learning. Unfortunately, many of our schools are set in their ways and stuck in the past when it comes to student learning. Here are tools and strategies that are available for schools whose staff is ready to move on from teaching the way they were taught, if their administrators will let them. If you have a child that goes to a school that is not incorporating strategies such as these, ask them why they are leaving your child behind?

1. Personal Learning Networks

Perhaps the core of passion driven, self-directed learning is the development of personal learning networks which can be developed through blogs, social networks like Facebook, Ning, or Group.ly, Twitter, and discussion boards. Read "5 Things You Can Do to Begin Developing Your Personal Learning Network," "The PLN Matures. The Progression of the 21st Century Personal Learning Network" and "5 Ways to Build Your 1.0 and 2.0 Personal Learning Network to learn how to get started."

2. Skype an Expert

You can make your classroom a global communication center for free with Skype by connecting with anyone around the world about topics of interests. These experts may be people you have conversations with or perhaps they are people you learn from. Author, blogevangelist, teacher, thought leader and father, Will Richardson uses Skype to supplement his children's learning. Paul Bogush, an 8th grade social studies teacher not only supports his students in doing this, they take it up a notch with a program they produce called Lunchtime Leaders. Students interview leaders from around the world on their opinions about what they should do to be prepared for the future. Paul and his students do most of their interviews using Skype and they turn the interviews into Podcast. You can listen to their podcasts at <http://lunchtimeleaders.podbean.com> where students choose to interview experts in topics they are interested in and then turn their interview into a podcast.

3. Authentic Publishing

In the 21st century, irrelevant hand-it-in teaching should be a thing of the past. If a student's work has no authentic audience beyond the teacher, it shouldn't be assigned. A student who is self-motivated to do something, counts, btw. A teacher directing him/her to do it does not. Most 21st century kids love to share with real audiences and are doing it outside school already. Inside school, work should not sit lifeless on a computer, or even just the school website. Support students in finding real audiences for their work in their Global Community. If you're not sure how find out by reading, "21st Century Educators Don't Say, 'Hand It In.' They say, 'Publish It!'"

4. Use YouTube and iTunes to Learn Anything

It's rather outrageous that many schools still block one of the most powerful tools for learning available for students today: YouTube. While iTunes is a powerful option for learners on the go,

YouTube adds the visual element, making learning even more powerful and FREE! With YouTube Education and iTunes University, more and more colleges, universities, and their professors are sharing content for free. While some schools are paying for pre-packaged online learning options, they're really all already out there for free. Empower teachers and/or students to design their own learning and learn about whatever they want with these free resources. Not only are these good resources to go to learn from others, they're also a smart place to ask for help like this student did who needed help with his bowdrill set.

5. Develop Authentic Learning Portfolios

When done right ePortfolios can be a powerful tool that not only helps remind students of all their accomplishments, but it also enables them to share these with the world. In the 21st century, creating an ePortfolio is free and easy. Student simply select a container (blog, wiki, website, Google site), decide how they'd like to organize it, and then post their work. I strongly advise against using any paid for portfolio site. It is important that students have ownership of their own work and that it can travel with them wherever they are. When it comes to ePortfolios, Helen Barrett is the go-to person. To learn more, visit blog.helenbarret.org where she shares fantastic ideas.

In our globally connected world, it is no longer acceptable for teachers to teach the way they were taught nor is it okay for administrators to allow it. It is also no longer acceptable for administrators to take the easy way out and require connected kids to learn in a disconnected environment where they are banned from accessing sites or bringing to school the tools and technologies they love and need to succeed in the world. In the 21st century, if we truly care about student success we will lift the bans, unblock the filters and connect our students to the world so they can learn effectively.