



# Reflecting on Electronic Portfolio Experience: A Comparative Analysis of Perceptions of English Language Teacher Trainees in Slovak Republic and Great Britain

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## Abstract

*Recently, a considerable literature has grown up around the theme of electronic portfolios in teacher training programmes. The past decade has seen the rapid development of technology in many aspects of education. In light of recent developments in technology enhanced learning, it is becoming difficult to ignore the existence of electronic portfolios and their possible use in various fields of study or research. One of the greatest challenges is to implement electronic portfolio in a way that it is purposeful and meaningful. However, there is also an increased need to address the possible drawbacks of electronic portfolios which might be caused by a number of factors. Therefore, this study seeks to obtain data which will help to address these research gaps. Data from several studies suggest that electronic portfolio has a potential to become an effective tool in promoting professional development, peer-to-peer learning and collaboration. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the experience of using electronic portfolios in teacher training as well as to compare perceptions of English language teacher trainees in Slovak republic and Great Britain with the emphasis put on teaching practice. The paper presents data obtained from focus groups conducted on a sample of English language teacher trainees in Slovak Republic and Great Britain. Reflecting on the experience provides an opportunity to obtain useful information from the perspective of student teachers who were the main reason for the implementation in the first place. Moreover, by comparing the way electronic portfolios have been implemented and the experience of the trainees in two different countries, we may deepen our understanding of the use of electronic portfolios on a whole new level and this creates space for new insights into the topic. This study aims to contribute to this growing area of research by exploring two culturally different settings where electronic portfolios have been implemented.*

**Keywords:** *electronic portfolio, comparative analysis, online environment, teacher trainee, teaching practice;*

## 1. Introduction

Portfolio as such has been an object of research for a longer period of time (Imhof, M. - Picard, C. 2009, Ketter, J. - Pool, J. 1997, Westhuizen, G. - Smith, K. 2000, Akşit 2011). However, the last two decades have seen a growing trend towards the use of electronic portfolio (or e-portfolio) in teacher training. There is a growing body of literature that recognizes the importance and usefulness of its implementation (Sung, Y. et al 2009, Hernández, M. E. 2007, Pour, M. G. 2012). E-portfolio can play an important role in addressing the issue of professional development of teacher trainees (Chetcuti, D. et al 2011, Bokiev, U. 2018). Therefore, investigation of the usefulness of e-portfolio is a continuing concern within the field of teaching and learning.

This study aims to contribute to this growing area of research by exploring and comparing the different experience of teacher trainees in Slovak Republic and Great Britain and thus investigate the use of e-portfolio in two different settings. By comparing the teacher trainees' first-hand experience with e-portfolio, it is intended to discuss its usefulness and possible drawbacks of the implementation while looking beyond the surface and examining the factors responsible for either success or failure of the e-portfolio implementation. It is hoped that this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the issue of electronic portfolio implementation in teacher training programmes. A full discussion of the matter lies beyond the scope of this study.

## 2. Research Aims and Methodology

Data for this study were collected using qualitative approach in order to gain insights into the topic. The study was conducted in the form of two focus groups. The focus group method is one of the more practical ways of obtaining qualitative data through an in-depth analysis because it offers an effective



way of reflecting on the teacher trainees' experience with the use of e-portfolio. The collaborative nature of the focus group offers another advantage, which is a deeper understanding of the effectiveness and usefulness of e-portfolio from the perspective of the teacher trainees and thus it helps to capture the complexity of the phenomenon. Altogether, two focus groups with eleven participants (Slovak focus group – 6 participants, British focus group – 5 participants) were conducted with the teacher trainees from Slovak Republic and Great Britain. In both cases, e-portfolio was used especially for the purpose of teaching practice (uploading lesson plans, reflections, observations, giving / receiving feedback, leaving / receiving comments). Data obtained from the focus groups were transcribed and analysed.

### 3. Data Analysis and Research Findings

After data were transcribed, the following three categories were recognized: general perception (i.e. reflecting on e-portfolio experience, general impression); benefits (i.e. advantages of using e-portfolio); drawbacks (i.e. disadvantages of using e-portfolio). In the analysis, Slovak participants are marked as S1, S2 ... S5 and British participants as BS1, BS2 ... BS5.

#### 3.1 General Perception

In general, some of the Slovak teacher trainees considered e-portfolio as useful (S1), however, using the tool was also perceived in some cases as an obligation (S3). This could have been caused by being required to work continuously on the portfolio during teaching practice and the trainees' lack of time (S3). On the contrary, other trainees appreciated the continuous process of uploading artifacts and the option to express themselves and their feelings in a self-reflection journal (S2).

From the perspective of teacher trainees from Britain, the balance between the online environment and face-to-face environment is crucial (BS2, BS4, BS5). The trainees are aware of a potential in the implementation of e-portfolio (BS3, BS4). However, at the moment, they are using the e-portfolio system especially for the purpose of the assessment (BS2, BS3, BS4). With the earlier implementation, proper training with intensive workshops, support and encouragement from a tutor, working with e-portfolio could be more effective (BS3, BS4, BS2, BS5). If the trainees were a bit more aware of how to use it, it could promote professional development too (BS4, BS2, BS3).

#### 3.2 Benefits

What Slovak trainees found useful with regards to the use of e-portfolio during teaching practice is the accessibility of the tool (S2), leaving comments and giving feedback (S4, S3), getting inspiration from the classmates (S1, S2, S6), either by looking at each other's lesson plans (S1) or activities uploaded (S3). Furthermore, the trainees appreciate the fact that if the e-portfolio was available after the graduation, they could still have access to it (S6). The e-portfolio could also be a motivation booster (S6). Continuous feedback can be helpful for the trainees during teaching practice (S4), especially if given by a professional in the field (S6). Another benefit of e-portfolio is the option to edit the content, e.g. a lesson plan (S6) or self-reflection. All the participants used this option (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6).

With regards to the online environment, teacher trainees from Britain value the possibility of sharing resources (BS1, BS2, BS3) / information (BS2, BS3, BS4) during their teaching practice. As was the case with the Slovak teacher trainees, the British trainees point out the accessibility of e-portfolio (BS4, BS2), the fact it cannot "get lost" (BS3, BS4, BS5) and the environment-friendly aspect of it (BS1, BS2, BS3, BS4, BS5).

#### 3.3 Drawbacks

With regards to disadvantages of the tool or platform, some Slovak trainees find it difficult to orientate in the portfolio artifacts, especially when sharing lesson plans with the classmates (S3). Another reason for not accessing lesson plans of the classmates was lack of time. However, the trainees are aware of the potential the tool has (S6). Interestingly, some of the trainees did not feel "the sense of the online community". Again, this could have been caused by the trainees' lack of time and thus using the tool only as means to an end (S3). In addition, a different social network is still preferred as an online platform for communication among the trainees (S2). However, it is suggested that the communication within the platform should be encouraged and the trainees motivated (S1).

Interestingly, a different social network was reported to be preferred over e-portfolio for the purpose of communication also among the British teacher trainees (BS1, BS2, BS3, BS4, BS5). Therefore, in terms of the online community, discussion and collaboration, there are some trainees

who prefer asking and talking with the peers face-to-face rather than through the online platform (BS4). Moreover, some of them would feel like they are “nosy” when looking at someone else’s portfolio (BS5). The trainees highlighted the need for mentors to know how to work with e-portfolio (BS2, BS1, BS3, BS4, BS5). The tool is still perceived as something new and, therefore, not everyone knows how to use it (BS1, BS3).

#### 4. Conclusion

The research has showed that both groups of participants are aware of the potential of e-portfolio used in teacher training programmes. The combination of findings from the perspective of both Slovak and British teacher trainees provides some support for more complex understanding of the matter. As noted by the British group of teacher trainees, early implementation, proper training and encouragement from tutors may lead towards successful implementation and thus meaningful use of e-portfolio. Furthermore, British teacher trainees emphasise that it is crucial for teacher trainees to be aware of all the features and options which e-portfolio offers.

As to the benefits and drawbacks of the tool, Slovak teacher trainees point out the accessibility of e-portfolio as well as the possibility of leaving comments, giving feedback during teaching practice etc. British teacher trainees also appreciate the element of sharing information. For the purpose of communication, other social networks are still more preferred among the trainees in both cases. The benefits provide us with reasons for using e-portfolio in the first place. The findings suggest that although e-portfolio is perceived as a tool with great potential, it does not guarantee the successful realization of the process. The current data highlight the importance of the initial stage of the implementation process and these data suggest that it can be achieved through workshops and proper training not only for teacher trainees, but also tutors and mentors. This study has raised important questions about the usefulness and meaningfulness of the use of e-portfolio in teacher training.

Taken together, these findings emphasize the role of the proper implementation in promoting e-portfolio as a key towards the meaningful use of e-portfolio and successful realization of the process. The scope of this study was limited in terms of a small sample size which can make the findings less generalizable. The issue of e-portfolios is an intriguing one and could be usefully explored in further research. More information and research would help us to establish a greater degree of accuracy on this matter.

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