The Next Generation of Online Learning: How can digital portfolios enhance the nature of the learning experience and the development of criticality among flexible learners?

This paper reports on a doctoral research project which examines the nature of the learning experience of using an eportfolio and whether it enhances the development of criticality among flexible learners. It aims to interrogate the process of the development of criticality rather than the product. The project adopts a case study approach, following 20 flexible learners over the course of one academic year in a Dublin based third level institution. The research questions for the study are:

- How can eportfolios enhance the nature of the learning experience and the development of criticality among flexible learners?

- How can eportfolios be used to enhance criticality in learning?

- What is the nature of the learning experience when students are interacting with the eportfolio technology?

This study is using an exploratory holistic single-case design where the "object of the study" or the single issue/ the of the learner experience of using an eportfolio and the process of developing criticality are investigated. (Creswell 2007,Stake 1995, Yin 2014)

The setting is a unit which is a provider of online, 'off-campus' programmes in a Dublin based higher education institution. The participants are intermediate flexible sociology learners studying a module called Soc3A- Power, Social Order, Crime, Work and Employment as part of the BA (Hons) in Humanities which is a modular humanities programme whereby learners can study a combination of history, sociology, literature, psychology and philosophy. The modules are delivered through a blend of virtual online tutorials and face to face sessions. The participants are mature adult students (over the age of 23) combining study with work and family commitments, in the context of this project they are defined as flexible learners. (Brunton, Brown, Costello, Delaney, Fox, & Galvin, 2015)

In order to gain a rich, thick and personal description of the experience of using an eportfolio the following data collection methods are selected; physical artefacts contained in an eportfolio and interviews. The main source of data will be the written, visual and multimedia

artefacts from the learner's eportfolios, and the focus of the interviews will be the learner's eportfolios and their experience of the process of learning with an eportfolio. Participants will use their eportfolios to create a critical commentary of their learning and will complete five eportfolio entries over the course of one academic year at key points in their learning journey. Eportfolio entries will follow a prescribed structured template of critical questions intended to encourage reflection about their learning. Data collection is commencing in September 2016.

Key readings

1. Simatele, M. (2015). Enhancing the portability of employability skills using eportfolios. Journal of Further and Higher Education, 39(6), 862-874

2. EUFOLIO. (2015). EU ePortfolio Pilot Project 2013-2015. Summary Report Ireland. http://eufolio.eu/docs/PilotEvaluationResults.pdf

3. JISC (2008) Effective Practice with e-portfolios: Supporting 21st Century Learning. www.jisc.ac.uk/elearning

4. EUROPORTFOLIO (2016) Green and White Papers. http://europortfolio.org/resources/contributions/announcement/join-conversation-about-future-eportfolios

5. Mohamad, S. N. A., Embi, M. A., & Nordin, N. M. (2016). Designing an E-Portfolio as a Storage, Workspace and Showcase for Social Sciences and Humanities in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). *Asian Social Science*,*12*(5), 185. http://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v12n5p185