
A CROSS SECTION OF E-PORTFOLIO USE IN DANISH EDUCATION FROM PRIMARY SCHOOL TO UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: In Denmark the use of e-portfolio within the educational world is emerging. On many levels of education from primary school to university level e-portfolios are being used for various purposes and with various results. At Knowledge Lab, University of Southern Denmark, and Danish E-portfolio Konsortium we are setting out to examine a cross section of these uses. We specifically want to look at various examples of use – to inductively describe how e-portfolio is used at present. The purpose of making this “stratigraphy” – a cross section of e-portfolio use in Denmark – is to focus on what the use of e-portfolio terms actually means in different contexts. What are the important terms when talking about e-portfolios in primary schools? How do you measure progression in secondary schools? How is meta-reflection detected in an e-portfolio at university level? The result will be a book, based on interviews with practitioners – with an introduction chapter which aims to give an overview of the field. At E-portfolio 2007 the presentation will address the setup of this enquiry and its preliminary results – while focusing on the use of one term, “reflection”, in different contexts.

Keywords: use cases, stratigraphy of eportfolios, Danish eportfolio use, definitions of terms

Introduction

In Denmark the use of e-portfolio within the educational world is emerging on many different levels of education. As a recent survey report from CSCS (Pellea 2004: 50-59) shows portfolios are used in education from primary school to university level in Denmark.

At the recent e-portfolio conference “Scaffolding Learning - Web 2.0 and e-portfolios”, hosted by Knowledge Lab, University of Southern Denmark, and the Danish E-portfolio Konsortium, one of the participants, a researcher in the field of learning and e-portfolios, asked the following question during a workshop: “What are we actually talking about, when we talk about e-portfolio?”. She pointed to the fact that we all seemed to agree that the subject was very important, but asked if, upon closer inspection, we actually were talking about the same thing?

The fact that the group had gathered for a workshop during the conference showed that the participants shared an interest, and that we seemed to agree on certain central terms. But as the participants of the workshop introspected none of us seemed sure that the way we practised, researched and worked with e-portfolios meant exactly the same as what the person sitting next to us understood by it.

We all agreed that it was *not* important, *nor* maybe possible to have exactly the same understanding of every term used in relation to e-portfolios, but that it *would be* interesting to examine the differences in use and in understanding.

A cross section of uses

At Knowledge Lab, University of Southern Denmark, and Danish E-portfolio Konsortium we are planning to describe a number of different ways of working with e-portfolios – thus describing the different ways terms like ‘reflecting e-portfolios’, ‘developmental e-portfolios’ or ‘presentation e-portfolios’ and ‘e-portfolio assessment’ among other terms are being used and practiced.

We could choose to do so by starting a desk research session deducing the meaning of the terms used from the relatively few books and articles published in this field in Denmark. On the other hand, this way of starting the enquiry would not take into account the various ways the terms are already being interpreted and used in practical contexts in different levels of education around Denmark.

We want to look at various examples of use – to inductively describe how e-portfolio and a number of key terms are used at present from primary school to university level. The purpose of making this

“stratigraphy” – a cross section of e-portfolio use in Denmark – is to focus on what the use of e-portfolio terms actually means in different contexts.

How is reflection described and detected in primary schools? How do you measure progression in secondary schools? What is considered the correct way to assess an e-portfolio in high school? How is reflection detected in a portfolio at university level?

A book for practitioners

The aim is to publish a book, based on interviews with practitioners – with an introductory chapter aimed at giving an overview of the field. The introductory chapter will discuss a “schematic outline” for describing e-portfolios and their use. The purpose of this is to establish a frame of reference within which the different use cases can be described and, to a certain extent, compared.

This schematic outline we understand as a type of scaffolding in the sense Erving Goffman uses it: “Scaffolds, after all, are to build other things with, and should be erected with an eye to taking them down.” (Goffman 1959: 246). Thus the outline should be understood as surrounding the understanding of the different e-portfolio use cases, in order to format a framework of questions which can be posed to the different practitioners. The rest of the book will consist of 12 interviews with practitioners of e-portfolio distributed among as many levels of the Danish educational system as possible.

During the work with the interviews and the writing of the book the schematic outline will be discussed and reviewed, as it will be challenged by what actually happens when e-portfolio is being practised in various circumstances.

The target group for the book is practitioners themselves, who are about to start working with e-portfolio. Through the book they should be able to gain knowledge about different ways of addressing the issue of planning, implementing and using e-portfolios in education by reading about the experiences others have had before them.

The book will be edited by a group of e-portfolio researchers in Denmark. Among the editors will be Hans Henrik Helms, who is director of Knowledge Lab, University of Southern Denmark.

A framework for a question guide

Lars Qvortrup (2006: 83) introduces digital portfolio in a learning environment as a “particular interface for interaction between the individual student and the teacher, among students, but also between the individual student and the education system”. The digital portfolio, or e-portfolio, is here seen as support for “communication and individual and collective learning reflections of the students”. Learning is described as “structural couplings between the students in the classroom and the communication orchestrated by the teacher” (Qvortrup 2006: 83) and understood within a constructivist paradigm of learning (Luhmann 2002).

E-portfolio is thus considered a support system for the learning context – and the purpose is to give students and teacher an extra “room” for communication and reflection. Qvortrup divides this room into first two and then three spheres.

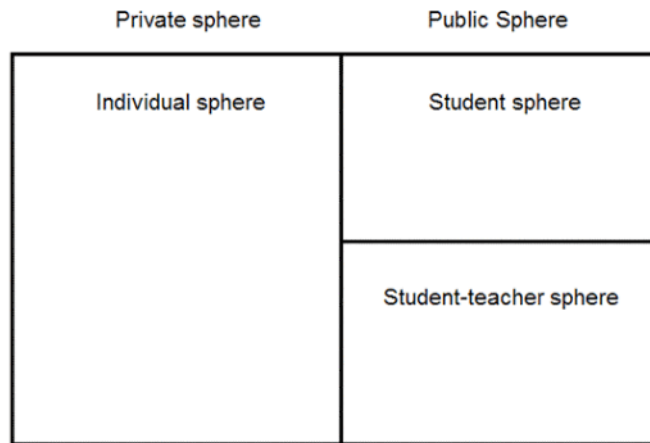


Figure 1. (From: Qvortrup 2006, p. 95)

The illustration above shows the different spheres. This room can be (and often is) provided by the teacher or educational institution, but is owned by the pupil/student, because he or she decides whether or not she or he fills it and uses it to communicate with others. A completely private e-portfolio is not unthinkable – as it would still “constitute an interesting medium for the observation of changes of self” (Qvortrup 2006: 94). But it would only constitute what in Qvortrup's theory of learning, is considered first order or factual learning. He explains this as learning about a subject – to achieve “ready at hand skills” e.g. using a word processing program (Qvortrup 2006: 30). Even self observation can be of this nature if you do not communicate your observations to anybody.

To reach the next levels of learning – interaction with others is vital. Second and third order learning happens when the student looks on his achieved knowledge as a source of knowledge for others. This is done either in relation to the other students – thus addressing the student’s sphere – or in relation to the teacher – thus addressing the student-teacher sphere.

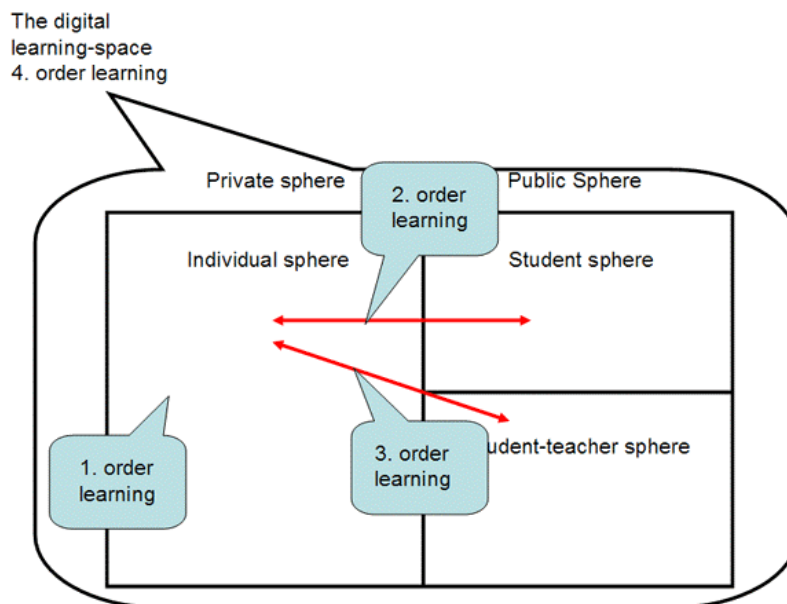


Figure 2. (From: Qvortrup 2006, p. 95)

In the public student sphere the individual student observes and reflects on the learning of others and compares his or her own learning to that of the other students. The e-portfolio shows the reflections on this comparison and it shows the level of situative skill the student has achieved. Situative skills show “knowledge about knowledge” (Qvortrup 2006: 28) and are the ability to know what knowledge to use in a specific situation. The learning on this level is of the student seeing him/herself as a learner in a field of learners.

Third order learning occurs when the student interacts (e.g. by writing in his/her portfolio, if e.g. mandatory) with the educational system, and acknowledges it as such. The student sees the educational system and addresses it, thus achieving “creative skills”, which is the ability to see the boundaries within which you learn.

If then the student suggests changes, or reflects on the system as such, he/she is fourth order learning. He/she then not only responds to the educational system’s expectations – but also challenges and takes part in developing it. He/she is using “metaflective knowledge” (Qvortrup 2006: 92) and has the possibility to reflect on the teaching culture or organisation.

Question guide

The framework for understanding e-portfolios provided by Qvortrup could be the framework for a series of question that can be asked of e-portfolio practitioners. Firstly, a very important issue is how e-portfolio setup at the schools/colleges/universities addresses the issue of private vs. public sphere.

- Is there a specific area for private reflection – e.g. a place where personal work is selected and stored, or is room on the school server considered enough?

Within the public sphere there are several rooms – e.g. one to which students have access and one specifically for teachers.

- Which room is accessed by students individually, students collectively, teachers only or students and teachers – and for what purpose?
- Is there a specific “room” for student to student communication digitally?

The next axis of questions revolves around the issue of levels of reflection.

- Does the educational institution demand reflection (as opposed to merely asking the students to collect examples of work)?
- If so does the educational institution describe what is meant as reflection to the students?
- Of what kind is the reflective level – creating second, third or fourth order learning?
- How, if at all, is it assessed?

Asking e-portfolio practitioners these questions will allow the examination to address the setup of the “e-portfolio system” at the educational institution – and it will address the issue of whether or not reflection is pre-described by this setup.

A vital moment in the student’s work with the e-portfolio arises when the student “places him/herself in the place of the other” (Qvortrup 2006: 94) – that is, acknowledges an audience, be it fellow students, teacher or the industry. This is the moment when the student passes from first order learning to second, third and even fourth order learning. How this can be perceived by the student or instigated by the educational system is not described in detail in Qvortrup’s book.

Representation of self through performance

To focus on this issue it is beneficial to turn to Erving Goffman, who in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) widely uses a metaphor of the theatre to describe the performance of individuals in social life. Performance “refer[s] to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his (sic) continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers.” (Goffmann 1959: 32).

He is in fact writing in a micro sociological context about everyday interactions of groups, but his use of terms can be transferred for no other reason that this “presence before observers” could be in an e-portfolio. What is generally asked of an individual – be it a person or even an organisation – in portfolio work is that they represent themselves through their work and sometimes their reflection about it.

Front – performing for an audience

Goffman uses the theatre metaphor to describe how the individual interacts with his/her surroundings. The concept of “front” is describing the way an individual responds to standards of behaviour when acting before an audience: “Front, then is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance” (Goffman 1959: 32). The front has a “setting”, some “props” and can be addressed either cynically or sincerely. The last two concepts Goffman uses to describe the individual's attitude towards his role. He/she can be “fully taken in by his own act: he can be sincerely convinced that the impression reality with which he stages is the real reality” (Goffman 1959: 28). Or he/she can lack belief in his/her own act.

The point here is that Goffman uses the theatre metaphor to underline that in human communication and interaction there is more than one reality. Representation as performing, points to the fact that in everyday life we represent many versions of ourselves. The “fronts” we perform differ with the settings. When asking students to create e-portfolios we are supplying a specific setting within which they perform.

Back

While performing on the front of the stage an individual is in Goffman's terms relying on a backstage where “stage props and items of personal front can be stored in a kind of compact collapsing of whole repertoires of actions and characters” (Goffman 1959: 114). The purpose of the backstage is to have a place where the performer can relax when not performing. During the performance the backstage is a repository for assistance, and momentary relaxation.

But more importantly – “the passage from the front region to the back region will be kept closed to members of the audience” (Goffman 1959: 115). The point of the back region is to have a place where you are not performing – but where you can store materials used in the performance. The audience is not supposed to see this because it in a sense is the opposite of the front. “A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (Goffman 1959:114).

Goffman and e-portfolios

Goffman wasn't writing about e-portfolios – so his terms will have to be interpreted to be used in relation to this. The idea of the e-portfolio as a performance is not the invention of the present author. Helen Barrett in the online paper “White Paper: Researching Electronic Portfolios and Learner Engagement” quotes a definition from the American “National Learning Infrastructure Initiative”: “a collection of authentic and diverse evidence, drawn from a larger archive representing what a person or organization has learned over time on which the person or organization has reflected, and designed for presentation to one or more audiences for a particular rhetorical purpose” (Barrett 2003:5).

Here the word “designed” should be accentuated, as it points to the fact that the e-portfolio is not only a collection but a manufactured collection of work for a specific audience. As such it is not unlike the definition of performance quoted from Goffman above.

Seen from the perspective of the teacher or the educational institution employing e-portfolios, the e-portfolio gives the students a stage for self presentation. The enquiry we want to make deals with asking the educational institutions or the teachers how they set this stage up.

A series of questions based on Goffman

To widen the understanding of reflection one can, following Goffman's line of thinking, ask the practitioners of e-portfolio in a learning environment a series of questions about the e-portfolios.

- Is a collection of work selected by the individual student in itself an indication of learning?
- Is the setup of the e-portfolios allowing students to actually leave the back stage?

Following Goffman one could look into, if entering the public sphere in itself is proof of reflection (or of second, third or fourth order learning) if it is not done as a performance, thus acknowledging the presence of the audience. A mere collection of work is in this sense not a reflected portfolio.

So one could ask the e-portfolio practitioners if they describe to the users of the e-portfolios what they demand of the pupils/students in relation to different audiences.

- Do they give feedback in relation to whether or not they are aware of the “stage” they are entering?
- Do they explicitly address the audience?
- Do they go ‘frontstage’?

One of Goffman's many points is that every front has a set of “sign vehicles” (Goffman 1959:34) designed to demonstrate the front. So the leaving of the back and the entering at the front stage can be interpreted as the moment where the sign vehicles of the front are employed.

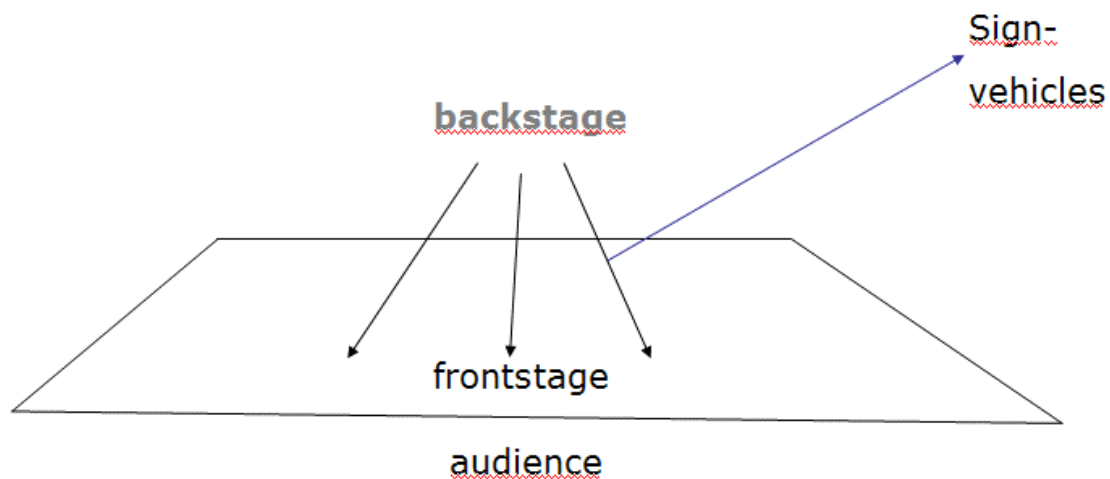


Figure 3.

In an e-portfolio connection this means looking for specific actions that constitute the actual transcendence from one ‘sphere’ to the next. This might be uploading a specific folder on a server, writing a declaration or something similar. Finding and describing examples of these ‘sign vehicles’ could be an interesting outcome of the examination. A series of questions evolving around this issue are:

- How does the setup of the portfolio system ask the pupils/students to demonstrate that they have selected certain work and put it into the portfolio?
- What kind of ‘sign vehicles’ are used to actually allow the students to demonstrate their performance?
- Are there different ‘sign vehicles’ according to different audiences?
- Does the setup differ between audiences?

- Are the sign vehicles explicit or implicit – e.g. do you ask them to make a declaration?

Presentation at E-portfolio 2007

At E-portfolio 2007 the presentation will not only address the setup of this enquiry. We will briefly discuss the schematic outline; but the presentation at the conference will present some preliminary results – understood as examples of use cases from the first three interviews, which will be finished by October 2007.

During the presentation we will discuss and revise the outline based on the first interviews. This will be detailed in the presentation.

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