

Portfolios as evidence of reflective practice: what remains ‘untold’

Lily Orland-Barak*

University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel

Addressing recent calls for investigating the specific quality of reflection associated with the uses of portfolios in teacher education, this paper describes and interprets the ‘practice of portfolio construction’ as revealed in the construction and presentation of two kinds of portfolio in two in-service courses for mentors of teachers in Israel: a ‘process’ portfolio and a ‘product’ portfolio. The study revealed that the language of practice and form of reflection bore striking similarities across the two practices of portfolio construction, regardless of their differences in content, purpose, organization and the degree of intervention of the course instructors in its construction. In both types of portfolios, the mentors described their learning mostly at technical levels of reflection. This tendency raises the question of whether the genre of portfolio writing, inevitably bound by institutional constraints, is generically conducive to reflecting on controversial experiences at interpretative, critical levels. The study suggests that within a centralized educational system, as in the case of Israel, the documentation of critical reflection is problematic.

Keywords: In-service education; Mentors; Portfolios; Professional learning; Reflective practice; Teacher education

Introduction

There is vast evidence to support the potential of portfolios as tools for enhancing learning and development (Heartel, 1990; Butler & Wine, 1995; Tillema, 1998; Tillema & Smith, 2000). Recently, however, there is a growing call for reconsidering the value of portfolios in reflective practice. In a recent article, Zeichner and Wray (2001) suggest moving beyond the obvious conclusion that portfolios promote greater reflection, towards providing teacher educators with a clearer sense of the specific quality of reflection associated with portfolio use (p. 620).

In my experience with the use of two different kinds of portfolios (referred to as ‘process portfolio’ and ‘product portfolio’) in two professional development courses for mentors in Israel, I analysed the portfolios of 32 mentors to explore the quality of reflection associated with each type. In addition, as the second part of the title of this

*Faculty of Education, University of Haifa, Mount Carmel, Haifa 31905, Israel. Email: lilyb@construct.haifa.ac.il

paper suggests, the study aimed at inferring ‘what remains untold’ from what is ‘told’ in the entries.

The research focus

Consider the following two entries written by Sarah and Aileen, two mentor participants:

when the journal is a requirement of a course, I generally see it as an unwanted burden to be written to satisfy an instructor’s demand . . . I never enjoyed writing them, nor did I feel the time spent was at all beneficial to me. That is until this year. My journal entries in the portfolio for this course ‘flowed’ quickly and easily. I was stimulated intellectually, engaged in the educational process and intrinsically motivated to reflect upon it. (Aileen, mentor portfolio cover letter, April 2000)

Constructing a portfolio was a meaningful learning experience for me: it was the first time, both as teacher and mentor, that I could test in practice what I learned in a seminar course and explore its relevance to my situation almost in real time. (Sarah, mentor portfolio reflections, June 1998)

Aileen’s and Sarah’s entries capture the essence of what the 32 participants attributed to the experience of portfolio construction in the two separate in-service professional development courses that focused on the construction and presentation of a professional portfolio. On the one hand, the mentors’ positive dispositions towards the value of documenting learning via portfolio is reassuring: the portfolio indeed seems to propose an effective mode of documenting and evaluating aspects of the teaching/learning experience. On the other hand, however, we can examine the *quality of reflection* implicit in these documented experiences. What, for example, did Eileen mean by: ‘the entries “flowed” quickly and easily?’ What was the nature of her intellectual stimulation and in what kind of reflection did she engage? Similarly, we can query what constituted a meaningful learning experience for Sarah, and what forms and meanings her ‘testing of theory’ took in practice.

Thus, beyond the mentors’ explicit appraisal of the experience of writing the portfolio entries, we can ask: (1) what language of reflection predominated in each of the practices of portfolio construction?, and (2) what aspects of practitioners’ experiences of learning were *not* represented in the portfolio? These questions framed the design of the present inquiry. Two major notions inform the above questions: reflective practice and the use of portfolios in teacher education.

Reflective practice

Over the past two decades, reflection and reflective practice have been regarded as standards towards which teachers and teacher educators must strive (Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Laboskey, 1994; Rodgers, 2002). Antithetical to routine practice, or to Aristotle’s notion of *techne* (the production or operation of things), reflective practice embeds the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*, a practice that requires skill, character development and openness to confronting the particularities of a given

situation (Benner, 1984). Thus, learning to be a reflective practitioner includes not only acquiring technical expertise, but also the ability to engage in dynamic professional relationships and to establish meaningful connections between theory and practice, providing a rationale for action. These require a stance towards practice that is both affective and intellectual (Eisner & Powell, 2002), integrating practical, ethical, critical and transformational dimensions, and leading the practitioners towards more informed understandings of their practice (Van Manen, 1977, 1991).

The growing concern for educating 'reflective practitioners' (Schon, 1983; Kemmis, 1985) has its roots in philosophy and owes much to the work of John Dewey. As early as 1910, Dewey conceptualized reflective practice as a systematic, rigorous and disciplined, communal meaning-making process, which requires attitudes that value personal and intellectual growth. His work, along with that of many others (Freire, 1972; Habermas, 1974; Schotter, 1975; Mezirow, 1990) has laid the foundation for various definitions and taxonomies attempting to 'tap' levels, forms, and language of reflection (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Kolb & Fry, 1975; Van Manen, 1977; Hatton & Smith, 1995).

Inquiring into possible methods and approaches to enhance reflective practice, the educational literature has focused on the medium of writing (diaries, journal writing and portfolio writing) as potentially conducive to making explicit the implicit or 'tacit' (Schon, 1987). Currently, portfolio writing constitutes a widespread tool for furthering reflective practice.

Portfolios in teacher education

Portfolios have been described as educational measures for encouraging learners to assume responsibility for their own learning, as tools for anticipating learning needs and for monitoring progress and performance in the course of their development (Heartel, 1990; Wiggins, 1993), and as alternative assessment instruments characterized by particular construction, implementation and evaluation processes (Wolf *et al.*, 1991; Wade & Yarbrough, 1996; Smith & Tillema, 1998).

Portfolios are often described in terms of use: they can be purposeful collections of students' work reflecting efforts and achievements in one or more areas and evidence of self-reflection (Messick, 1994). Portfolios can also be seen as mandated dossiers (Graves & Sunstein, 1992) to evaluate performance in relation to external evaluation requirements, and as 'envelopes of the mind', for exploring feelings, values, beliefs and dispositions, collected over time (Kremer-Hayon, 1993; Laboskey, 1994; Hamilton, 1998; Smith & Tillema, 1998). This last function draws on the view that portfolios develop reflective thinking at various levels of deliberation on practical teaching matters (Cruickshank, 1987), as well as at higher levels of questioning institutional goals (Zeichner & Liston, 1987).

In a survey of articles on portfolios in teacher education, Wade and Yarbrough (1996) conclude that most of the articles, which are based on programme descriptions and anecdotal data, stress the potential of portfolios, for enhancing student reflective thinking on key issues and for guiding students to revisit and revise their ideas over time.

Taken together, studies focusing on the value of portfolio and journal writing shed light on their potential for uncovering strengths and weaknesses in learners' performance (Redman, 1994; Smith & Tillema, 1998), for developing competence awareness (Topping, 1998), as evidence of achievement in learning to teach (Loughran & Corrigan, 1995), for promoting reflective practice (Laboskey, 1994; Borko *et al.*, 1997; Bain *et al.*, 1993) and for representing the chaotic 'narrative' of teaching (Woodward, 2000). Research studies have also begun to focus on how collected information from the portfolio should be evaluated and consequently used to guide further learning (Tillema & Smith, 2000).

On the one hand, the general picture that emerges from studies on the potential of portfolio writing for developing reflective practice is favourable; consequently, the widespread demand for integrating portfolio writing in teacher education courses is reasonable (Rodgers, 2002). On the other hand, the literature on reflection and reflective practice reminds us that reflection should not be reduced to a checklist of behaviours because it is 'a complex, rigorous, intellectual, and emotional enterprise that takes time to do well' (Rodgers, 2002). Taking these two perspectives, this study set out to explore the *quality* of reflection associated with portfolio practice in the context of in-service teacher education. In doing so, it attempts to examine further the 'taken for granted' assumption that the portfolio constitutes an effective tool for enhancing the type of reflective practice espoused by educational theorists.

Portfolios in the context of in-service education in Israel: institutional and policy factors

In Israel the use of portfolios in professional contexts is currently popular both in pre-service and in-service education. As a centralized system, the Ministry of Education and Culture in Israel mandates the kinds of changes and innovative practices to be implemented in the school system. To disseminate innovative practices in schools, experienced teachers with a good reputation are appointed by Ministry inspectors to function as in-service mentors. In order to prepare them to be 'teachers of teachers', mentors are required to participate in in-service professional development courses, where they familiarize themselves with the innovative practices that they are expected to disseminate in schools.

The decision to introduce the portfolio as a tool in teacher education has been influenced by recent views of reflective practice (as described above) that emphasize the notion of reflection 'in' and 'on' practice, brought about by systematic engagement and documentation of action, and research cycles of observations and reflections, envisioned as leading to revised practices. Accordingly, practitioners are encouraged to document reflection through portfolios, as catalysts of professional growth and change, and as primary working texts in staff development and mentoring programmes. Thus, in-service mentoring programmes are structured around opportunities for mentors to develop reflective practice as they systematically examine the assets and liabilities of innovative forms of practice. In the two courses examined here, participants were asked to construct and present a portfolio as a way of documenting their learning.

The two in-service courses

The two in-service courses reflected different orientations in the use of the portfolio. In each the criteria for using portfolios were based on different answers to the seven questions for conceptualizing conditions of portfolio use proposed by Zeichner and Wray (2001). These are: what purpose does it serve? Who determines what goes into the portfolio? What is the degree of specification for the kind of evidence? How is the evidence organized? What are the forms of participation in the construction process? What is the involvement of the course leader? How is the portfolio presented? Let us first examine the use of the portfolio in each course in light of these criteria.

The 'product portfolio' course

As the name suggests, the 'product portfolio' course with 20 in-service mentors emphasized the use of the portfolio as a tool for representing *the products of learning* a new national English curriculum. Aileen, quoted at the outset of this paper, was part of this group.

The course, mandated by the English Inspectorate in the northern region of Israel, was structured as a two-year action research course (1997–9). The main purpose of the in-service course was to induct mentors into the reform brought about by the publication of a new national curriculum for the teaching of English as a foreign language in Israel. Policy-makers intended the in-service course to equip mentors to work as agents of change and disseminate the new approach to language teaching in schools.

In tune with the new curriculum's requirement that portfolios be used for alternative assessment in teaching, the in-service mentoring course required mentors to compile a collaborative professional development portfolio as evidence of their learning throughout the year. We now examine the conditions under which the portfolio was used in light of Zeichner and Wray's (2001) criteria.

In terms of purpose, the portfolio aimed at documenting mentors' learning of the new curriculum. Second, the guidelines for the writing of the portfolio entries were given in advance by the course leaders. These included: a cover letter, lesson plans and assessment performance tasks according to the new curriculum, records of the mentors' meetings with teachers on the new curriculum and reflections on the process of learning. Third, the organization of evidence was left to the participants, although they were required to document their learning process chronologically throughout the course. In terms of participation in the construction process, participants were encouraged to construct group portfolios to be presented at the end of the course. Thus, participants chose to collaborate with one another either on the basis of prior professional or personal contacts, or on the basis of relationships that grew out of their participation in the course. Collaboration in the process of constructing entries was not, however, stated as an aim, since the sessions were not structured to allow participants to share their entries, or to construct the portfolio. Thus, the course leaders were not actively involved in the process of constructing the reflective group entries. At the end of the course, the portfolios were presented as

‘final products’ to the rest of the group. As a result, mentors got accreditation for the course.

From the structure of the ‘product portfolio’ it was assumed, at the outset of the study, that portfolio entries would include the mentors’ accounts of their progress in ‘internalizing’ the new curriculum, highlighting their professional development in light of the experience. It was conjectured that participants would try to present a favourable image of their learning, given their high degree of accountability towards the course leaders who had recruited them as ‘agents of change’ and given the fact that the course was mandated by the Ministry of Education. By contrast, the ‘process portfolio’ adapted to a different type of in-service course.

The ‘process portfolio’ course

As the name suggests, the ‘process portfolio’ was seen by the course leaders as an opportunity for mentors of student teachers to become acquainted with the portfolio as an innovative form of practice, for collaboratively experimenting with the process of writing a portfolio as a loop into learning about its uses and, consequently, for disseminating it as a tool for assisting and evaluating student teachers throughout their practice teaching at school. Sarah, the author of the second entry quoted above, was one of the 12 mentors of student teachers who participated in a two-semester university seminar workshop (total 25 weeks) in 1997/98.

The conversations on the use of portfolios provided a basis for the mentors to begin constructing their own portfolio as a form of ‘learning by doing’. As the semester progressed, sections of the portfolios were presented to the whole group during the sessions and participants gave feedback to one another in the process of constructing, analysing and evaluating the entries.

In terms of Zeichner and Wray’s (2001) criteria, the content of the portfolios was left to the participants’ discretion. It should be noted, that after a number of deliberations, it was decided by the group that they would include a section entitled ‘sentence completion’ to create a similar framework for examining one another’s entries. The sentence completion format entailed completing sentence beginnings such as: ‘I learned that . . . I was surprised to hear/ read that . . . I do not agree with . . . I would like to . . . I have changed my mind about . . .’

Regarding the organization of evidence, participants could decide on how they wanted to organize their learning. In relation to forms of participation in the construction process, mentors were asked to construct individual portfolios during the course, yet the entries were brought to the sessions and shared with participants throughout the course. Thus, in contrast to the ‘product’ portfolio, the sessions were structured to promote collaboration by allowing participants to negotiate meanings, and as a result, revise their entries. The course professor, thus, functioned as mediator during the sharing of the portfolio entries, and intervened to assist participants in the process of creating their reflective entries. The portfolio was submitted to the course professor at the termination of the course. Unlike the ‘product portfolio’, the ‘process portfolio’ was not formally assessed. Its completion was seen as part of the requirements of on-going participation in the course. Thus,

given the formative and non-evaluative structure of the 'process portfolio', it was conjectured at the outset of the study that participants would include more critical accounts of their experience.

In sum, the different types of portfolio required for each course, one focusing on *products of learning via portfolio writing* and the other on the *process of writing a portfolio*, were constructed and monitored under different contextual and relational conditions. Table 1 compares the 'process' and 'product' portfolio based on Zeichner and Wray's (2001) framework of the conditions of portfolio use.

Data sources and analysis techniques

The 32 written portfolios (20 product portfolios and 12 process portfolios) yielded around 300 entries, which were analysed qualitatively using methods of within and across-case inductive analysis (Patton, 1990). The portfolios were examined for recurrent *themes* and for *how the language used* disclosed levels of reflective thinking.

Identifying recurrent themes

Initially, emergent patterns within the data of the product and the process portfolio respectively were identified and analysed. This was followed by analysis across cases. Patterns were counted, coded and classified into broader thematic categories. The thematic analysis yielded three recurrent themes across the two portfolio types: Knowledge and learning, Concerns and Professional development. Each of the three thematic categories was divided into sub-categories pertaining to specific dimensions of the broader thematic category.

Sub-categories differed across portfolio cases. For example, whereas for the theme of 'Knowledge and learning' the predominant categories in the 'process portfolio' were themes such as the connection of theory to practice, and evidence of learning that surfaces through a portfolio, the 'product portfolio' included themes such as learning new terminology, learning to adapt lessons to the new curriculum and possible caveats in the use of portfolios in mentoring. Both portfolio types included accounts of possible uses of portfolio as a tool in mentoring interactions.

Differences were also found for the themes 'Concerns' and 'Professional development'. Whereas in the 'process portfolio', 'Concerns' revolved around issues of time, motivation and practical aspects of the use of portfolios, the 'product portfolios' exhibited concerns in terms of integrating old and new terminology, accountability and getting the message of the new curriculum right. Regarding 'Professional development', the 'product portfolio' exhibited entries related to the professional benefits of working as a team, a sense of professional achievement and advantages of documenting learning. The 'process portfolio' included aspects of professionalism related to self-analysis and to the ability to articulate learning through writing.

The identification of recurrent themes in the portfolios shed light on the language of reflection exhibited in the portfolios (the first research question), as well as on those aspects of learning that were *not* presented in the portfolio (the second research question).

Table 1. A comparison of the 'process' and 'product' portfolio, based on Zeichner and Wray's (2001) conceptual framework of the conditions of portfolio use

| Conditions | Process portfolio | Product portfolio |
|--|---|---|
| What purpose does it serve? | To document mentors' process of learning to construct a portfolio | To document mentors' learning of a new curriculum |
| Who determines what goes into the portfolio? | The mentors together with the course leaders | The course leaders |
| Degree of specification of the kind of evidence | <i>Semi-open</i> : To 'reflect' on the process of learning to construct a portfolio. Completing open statements such as: I learned that ... I changed my mind about ... I am concerned about ... I was surprised to learn ... | <i>Standardized specifications</i> : * Lesson plans according to the new curriculum * Specification of sessions with the mentees * Adaptation of materials according to the new curriculum * Integration of the new concepts & terminology into the lessons * Observations of teachers using the new curriculum in class * Reflections on the process |
| Organization of the evidence | Open | Chronological organization of the learning process throughout the year |
| Forms of participation in the construction process | Individual portfolios constructed during the course; entries shared with participants during the course | Group portfolios constructed at the end of the course. No process of sharing of entries during the year |
| Involvement of the course leader | Course leader functioned as mediator during the sharing of the portfolio entries and <i>intervened</i> in the process of creating reflective entries | No active involvement Course leaders <i>did not</i> intervene in the process of creating reflective entries |
| Presentation | Submitted to the course leaders at the termination of the course | Submitted to the course leaders at the termination of the course |

Identifying the language of reflection

The process of identifying the language of reflection drew on Hatton and Smith's (1995) four levels of reflective writing: (1) descriptive writing (reports of events or literature, which is not reflection at all), (2) descriptive reflection (providing reasons based on personal judgement), (3) dialogic reflection (a form of discourse with oneself and exploration of possible reasons) and (4) critical reflection (involving reasons given for decisions or events which take account of the broader historical, social, political contexts). Hatton and Smith's four levels of reflective writing served

as an appropriate analytical tool for identifying the various levels of reflection as suggested in the literature: practical, ethical, critical and transformational.

The entries were read to identify categories of language functions (which are the goals that language can accomplish such as reporting, evaluating, reporting information, explaining, clarifying, etc.) subsumed in levels of reflective writing (see Appendix 1). Excerpts from the data that supported the categories were recorded and examined across portfolio types. Within each general category of language functions, sub-categories pertaining to specific functions were derived.

The data were then consolidated into a matrix organized around two major categories: (a) the content of the portfolios, and (b) the language of the portfolios. The organization of the patterns into these two major categories allowed for hermeneutical cycles of 'close interpretive readings' (Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1994) within and across portfolios simultaneously.

Findings

Predominance of descriptive reflective language

In her discussion of what constitutes reflective thinking, Rodgers (2002) cautions us against reducing reflection to a mere checklist of behaviours (p. 844). Drawing on Dewey's (1933) treatise of reflective thinking, she attends to the limiting effect of experiences that are conducive to routine action. Moving the discussion to the realm of teaching, she infers that reflective teachers do not merely seek solutions, nor do they do things unaware of the source and impact of their actions. Rather, they pursue connections and relationships between solutions, so that his/her practical theory might grow (p. 849).

Rodgers's cautioning is relevant for the major finding of the study: the language of reflection that characterized the two practices of portfolio (question 1) was predominantly of a descriptive, 'behavioural' nature. As mentors described their accounts of learning, they exhibited few critical reflective accounts of the conflicts that these innovative practices might bring to their practice or of the meanings that they had made out of them (Dewey, 1933). Thus, what consequently remained 'untold' in the portfolios, were accounts of experiences that demonstrate in-depth self-criticism. The recurrent use of deliberative and technical language of performance bore striking similarities across the two practices of portfolio construction, regardless of their differences in content, purpose, organization, process of construction, degree of intervention in its construction, and degree of specification and presentation (as described above).

The predominant category of reflective writing identified both in the 'process' and 'product' portfolios (across and within portfolio cases) was the category of 'descriptive reflection', and, in particular, reflection based on a single perspective/factor or rationale. Predominant language functions related to 'reporting actions and plans', and 'describing' what participants had done, prepared, planned and adapted during their sessions with their mentees (80% of the entries per portfolio and 100% occurrence across portfolios).

In the ‘process portfolio’ mentors made comments about how they were learning to use the portfolio as a new tool in mentoring. They also reported on the advantages of the use of particular strategies for evaluating portfolios. Yet, although the mentors reported what they were learning from the process of constructing a portfolio, they seldom elaborated beyond general statements, such as:

I now use only some of the ideas proposed in the seminar. Not all the ideas are applicable to my portfolios or to those of my student-teachers. (Mentor, process portfolio entry)

The technical level of reflection was prevalent despite the fact that the mentors were invited to share their entries with other mentors during the sessions. In the following excerpt, selected from a longer entry in the ‘process portfolio’ course, the mentor describes how the course had helped her to understand the potential of portfolios in teacher education:

Constructing a portfolio was a meaningful learning experience for me: it was the first time, both as teacher and mentor, that I could test in practice what I learned in a seminar course and explore its relevance to my situation almost in real time. (Mentor, process portfolio entry)

The entry is illustrative of many entries in which mentors described the value of ‘learning by doing’ as they constructed the portfolio, but failed to convey a deeper sense of *what* they were actually learning or testing in practice.

Similarly, in the ‘product portfolio’ the mentors and coordinators of English teachers confined themselves to descriptive levels of reflection, reporting on their actions and plans, and exhibiting deliberative and technical language of performance. The entries also exhibited mentors’ accounts of their feelings of success or failure about a particular activity that they had tried out, concerns about getting the messages of the new curriculum ‘right’, and concerns related to learning new terminology and experiencing, as a result, a state of uncertainty. These entries were, again, not elaborated beyond participants’ descriptive accounts of their feelings, excluding exploration of possible implications for their teaching and mentoring patterns:

I wrote a lesson plan according to the new curriculum and the lesson was fine . . . I felt for the first time this year that I can do it. (Mentor, product portfolio entry)

In addition to descriptive reflection based on one perspective, mentors’ writing also exhibited descriptive reflection based on beliefs, opinions and evaluation of particular strategies, sessions and performances. These entries were, however, less frequent (20% across portfolio cases). In the ‘process portfolio’, for example, the mentors voiced their concerns about organizational aspects of using a portfolio in mentoring:

Students may write a wonderful portfolio—but when it comes to actual teaching, they fail. So, what’s the use? How often should the student teachers be required to hand in a portfolio? What are the optimal ways of using it with student teachers? (Mentor, process portfolio entry)

Similarly, in the 'product portfolio' the identified language functions included expressing feelings of incompetence in the face of ambiguity, and accounts of the mentors' behaviour focusing on 'doing the right thing' and on trying to 'adjust' and 'internalize' the new curriculum. In every case, however, the statements did not go beyond reflectively describing that it is difficult to change:

Sometimes I have lots of questions, for example, I don't remember exactly what something is called ... I find myself making mistakes and giving wrong answers to the questions in the sessions. (Mentor, product portfolio entry)

The predominance of technical reflection in mentors' account of their learning can be understood as a consequence of the fact that the teaching profession and the schools operate in ways opposed to the goals of reflective practice (La Boskey, 1994a, b). Instead they encourage conservative, technical aspects of the practice (Lortie, 1975). Alternately, it can also be argued that for levels of dialogic and critical reflection to occur in writing, they must conform to a certain genre and be constructed in a certain form (Hatton & Smith, 1995). It might be the case, then, that the confinement to technical levels of reflection was due to participants' insufficient preparation in using particular genre constructions. For example, in the 'process portfolio' the participants completed statements such as 'I learned that ...' or 'I changed my mind about ...' or 'I was surprised to see/hear that ...' as guidelines for reflection throughout the year. As Hatton and Smith's (1995) study suggests, we can speculate that these syntactic constructions were apparently not appropriate for encouraging reflection at dialogic, critical levels. Results might have been different had the opening statements been more syntactically complex, inviting thinking about alternatives, and the consideration of a variety of possibilities (statements such as 'While it may be true that ...' or 'On the one hand ... yet on the other hand ...' or 'This was quite possibly due to ... Alternatively ...' (Hatton & Smith, 1995, p. 42)).

Dialogic reflection in the product portfolio

Dialogic reflection can be described as a form of discourse with oneself, whereby the practitioner engages in introspection of possible reasons for his/her actions (Hatton & Smith, 1995). This dimension of reflection can be associated with Dewey's notion of 'directedness' or observing oneself in a more detached way and 'open-mindedness', or the willingness to entertain different perspectives and reconsider beliefs and values (Goodman, 1984; Van Manen, 1991; Rodgers, 2002).

It was expected that the 'process portfolio', constructed through active engagement and constant feedback in the writing process, would exhibit more dialogic reflective entries than the 'product portfolio', constructed with a more summative, non-collaborative orientation. Contrary to initial expectations, however, the 'product portfolios' yielded *more* entries with reflections at dialogic levels of writing than the 'process portfolio'.

The dialogical entries, although few in number (20% across product portfolios, and 6.6% per portfolio), managed to convey a more elaborate, multifaceted and insightful portrayal of the mentors' experience. There were entries in which participants stepped back from the events/actions to reflect on their experience, using qualities of judgements and possible alternatives for explaining the conditions that shape the success of innovative practices. These entries were predominantly *group reflections* on the experience of collaborating on the construction of the portfolio, as a representation of the team's products of learning:

The success of this activity can be attributed to several reasons. First, we worked as a team. Second, since the teachers were engaged in deciding together ... they had ownership over the process. Third, the teachers were dealing with material that they felt comfortable with because they had had previous experience teaching it ... We have learned that for an activity to be successful it is important to start from where the teachers are at and give them the feeling that they are part of the process. (Mentor coordinator, product portfolio entry)

As mentioned earlier, participants' tendency to avoid dialogic reflection can be explained through the possible lack of training in writing at higher reflective levels. Had the courses provided opportunities to develop a language of dialogic reflection, participants would have, in Prawat's (2000) terms, been able 'to transform ... inchoate understanding into a form that is more conscious and rational ... allow[ing] the individual to share insight and understanding with others ...' (p. 6).

Absence of critical reflection

Critical reflection, which engages the practitioner in examining actions and reasons about decisions and events by taking account of the broader historical, social, ethical and political contexts within which practice takes place, is geared to moral development, to autonomy and to emancipation (Greene, 1978). Critical reflection would, thus, exhibit accounts of learning at interpretative, critical, moral or ethical levels.

As can be inferred from the predominance of *descriptive* and *emotional* language to represent experience, the mentors' portfolios did not exhibit any language functions pertaining to the level of 'critical reflection'. Thus, we can contend, that although participants *did* question their learning experiences in their portfolio entries, these were *not* problematized beyond technical or dialogical levels of practical reflection. Consequently, what remained 'untold' in both portfolio types, regardless of their different orientation, were the mentors' critical reflections on innovative practices, as related to moral and ethical levels. The overall picture that emerges from the portfolio entries is, therefore, one which depicts the experience as favourable, avoiding confrontation and scrutiny.

This rather 'favourable image' of the experience resonates with recent studies that point to the frequent tensions among teacher educators and their students in regard to the purposes portfolios serve in teacher education. Drawing on the work of Borko *et al.* (1997), Zeichner and Wray (2001) discuss student teachers' focus on presenting

a favourable image through their portfolios. This, they argue, contrasted with teacher educators' vision of portfolios as tools to surface unresolved dilemmas of practice. Similarly, the mentors' portfolios focused on conveying a 'neat' representation of their professional development to the system that employs them and evaluates them (the English inspector and the seminar professor respectively). This probably accounted for the omission of critical reflection on controversial themes.

Appraisal of the experience of constructing a portfolio

Quoting MacIntyre (1984), Farr Darling contends that practices are associated with two kinds of goods, those that are internal to the practice and those that are external to the practice. Goods that are internal to the practice pertain to issues such as pride of accomplishment and successful performance. By contrast, goods external to the practice are the rewards, prizes, grades and recognition goods bestowed on a practitioner subject to the judgement of other persons (Farr Darling, 2001, pp.108–9).

Although the value of the experience for participants' professional development was not initially a focus of this research, the data suggest that both kinds of portfolio yielded benefits for the mentors. These were apparent in the participants' expressed sense of accomplishment in the experience of documenting their professional learning through a writing medium, seldom practised in the teaching profession. In this respect, the findings contrast with Hatton and Smith's findings (1995), where pre-service teachers were reluctant to engage in the task of constructing a portfolio. The present study suggests that the fact the participants were mentors and veteran teachers who benefited from a high professional status relative to other functions in the educational system, contributed positively to the task of portfolio construction. Being highly motivated to succeed in their work, the mentors perceived the task of documenting their learning and of working towards a final written product as an upgrading of their professional status. This was expressed in both 'process portfolio' and 'product portfolio' entries.

In the many entries, mentors wrote about the advantages of collaboration on a joint product, and about the way in which working together as a team had given them a sense of professional pride. In the 'product portfolio', in particular, the mentors make this aspect of the experience very explicit in their cover letter:

This portfolio is the product of joint effort and cooperation among our team. Our continual brainstorming helped us to clarify ideas and to enrich each other (each of us contributing to the group according to her particular strengths). Working with colleagues gave us the opportunity to get to know each other better and to restore a sense of professional pride and accomplishment in what we do. (Mentor coordinator, product portfolio)

Discussion

The predominance of technical, reflective language over dialogical, critical reflective language reinstates the question of the quality of reflection associated with portfolio

use (Zeichner & Wray, 2001). Given this finding, we must indeed ask: is the practice of portfolio construction always conducive to critical reflection on controversial experiences at interpretative, reflective levels?

Drawing on aspects of Wenger's social theory of learning (1998), on the literature of reflective practice and on Farr Darling's concept of portfolio as practice (2001), I examine the question of the quality of reflection associated with portfolio use in light of the programmatic and professional conditions that characterized the two practices of portfolio construction. I then explore the conditions in each portfolio practice that shaped mentors' appraisal of the experience as an opportunity for developing professionally.

Portfolio as a practice within a centralized educational system: issues of accountability and contrived collegiality

Etienne Wenger (1998) contends that it is important to look at contexts for learning about innovative practices as developing in larger contexts within their historical, social, cultural and institutional conditions, with specific resources and constraints, some of which are explicitly and some implicitly articulated (Wenger, 1998, p. 79).

Following this contention, it can be argued that the practice of portfolio in the two in-service courses, regardless of whether they emphasized 'process' or 'product', reflects the larger context of a centralized educational system in Israel, where inspectors and project leaders appoint mentors and define their roles, their mandate and their degree of accountability to the system. It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the entries tended to include accounts of how the mentors were learning to 'internalize' the practice of portfolio (in the case of the process portfolio) or the new curriculum (in the case of the product portfolio), rather than mentors' reservations or hesitations regarding innovative practices (the untold story). As agents of change representing a system that controls policy, their perceived sense of duty was probably to portray a favourable image of the innovations dictated from above.

The occasions in which practitioners are required to collaborate on agendas imposed by policy-makers are described by Hargreaves and Dawe (1990) as occasions of 'contrived collegiality'. Grimmett and Grehan (1992) further explore the notion, contending that this type of administratively imposed collegiality is undesirable, because 'top-down' efforts mandated by policy-makers alone can never succeed in manipulating directly the collaborative practices or behaviours of teachers.

In our case, both portfolio practices were mandated by policy-makers 'from above', and sustained and regulated by the course leaders. Yet, in the 'process portfolio' there was an attempt to manipulate the environment to foster collegiality, closer to what Grimmett and Grehan (1992) would describe as 'an organizationally induced type of contrived collegiality'. As described above, the construction of the 'process portfolio' was envisioned as a collaborative process, whereby the mentors and the course leaders would be engaged in a kind of 'collaborative culture of learning'. The seminar sessions served as a conversational context for the mentors to share their experiences with the use of the portfolio in teacher education. Moreover, the ongoing feedback

that mentors were expected to give each other in the process of constructing and evaluating their entries was assumed to lead participants to higher levels of introspection and scrutiny of innovative practices.

The absence of entries at higher levels of reflection, despite these organizational induced conditions, reminds us that fostering 'bottom-up' problem-solving approaches in a 'top-down' fashion, through the manipulation of teachers' environment is complex and not always feasible. This is especially difficult when the manipulations are conducted in the context of a centralized educational system characterized by contrived collegiality, such as the case of Israel. The present study suggests a less optimistic prospect to the induction of an organizational type of contrived collegiality than that of Lam *et al.*, Yin and Lam (2002), who suggest that successful outcomes of collaboration can be the result of organizationally induced collegiality in a strongly individualistic culture, such as the Hong Kong educational system.

Participation towards a joint product

The predominance of dialogical reflection in the 'product portfolio' can be attributed to the assets of collaborative reflection-on-action towards a joint product (in this case, the presentation of a group portfolio) for enhancing the quality of written reflection (Richert, 1990; Francis, 1995; Hatton & Smith, 1995) and reflective thinking (Dewey, 1933). For example, in her work with teachers in reflective professional seminars, Rodgers (2002) identified three factors that highlighted the benefits of collaborative reflection: affirmation of the value of one's experience, seeing things anew when others offer alternative meanings and support to engage in the process of inquiry (p. 857). These factors, she contends, endorse Dewey's criterion of the need for reflection to occur in community, or in interaction with others. Indeed, resonating with Rodgers's experience, the mentors in the 'product portfolio' shared and negotiated meanings towards the production and presentation of a team portfolio, offered new insights to one another's practice and supported one another assuming shared responsibility. Hence, the depth and richness of their reflection was probably enhanced as they felt, in Dewey's terms, accountable to a group, and responsible for others rather than solely for themselves (Rodgers, 2002, p. 857). This communal form of reflective practice took place despite the fact that participants had not been guided in the process of constructing reflective entries (as had been the participants in the process portfolio).

It follows, then, that, to some extent, reflection was enhanced by the infrastructure of engagement (Wenger, 1998) created in the product portfolio, where participants worked together towards the instrumental goal of constructing and presenting a group portfolio. An infrastructure of engagement provides physical and virtual spaces, mutual access in time and space, joint tasks, availability for help, and casual encounters and activities that bring about occasions for applying skills, devising solutions, making decisions, using creativity (Wenger, 1998, p. 237) and for developing collegial interactions in the larger professional community (Warren Little & McLaughlin, 1993, p. 6).

The above conditions were stronger in the practice of the 'product portfolio' than in the 'process portfolio'. For one, the mentors in the 'product portfolio' course identified strongly with the larger community of English teachers. This community functions as a cohesive and influential professional body in Israel: English teachers, mentors, teacher trainers and inspectors alike meet regularly in regional and national conferences and workshops at least four times a year, and in smaller groups on a regular basis. This has gradually led to the emergence of an ethos of collaboration among English teachers, despite the prevailing culture of contrived collegiality that characterizes the educational system.

By contrast, the university group of mentors of student teachers who engaged in the construction of a 'process portfolio' did not constitute a cohesive professional group with a determined affiliation. This group was comprised of mentors from different disciplinary subjects, who had no other professional connection amongst themselves besides the weekly sessions at the university. Thus, their participation was less supported by an infrastructure of engagement, mutuality and continuity. This might, then, be another possible explanation for the lack of dialogic reflection in the 'process portfolio'.

Appraisal of the experience of constructing and presenting a portfolio

As shown above, the in-service mentors' expressed sense of professionalism brought about by the experience of constructing a portfolio contrasts with prevailing findings that point to pre-service teachers' reluctance to engage in the task of constructing a portfolio.

It seems, though, that the discrepancy between the findings for pre-service training (Hatton & Smith, 1995) and in-service training might be due to the differences in dispositions and expertise between neophyte pre-service teachers and experienced in-service mentors: what might become an emotional burden in the pre-service context can constitute a professional challenge with internal and external goods for the in-service context. The goods external to the practice in the in-service context were the feedback and the accreditation that mentors got by their inspectors and by their course leaders at the end of the courses.

In this respect, the study reinforces the contention that portfolios *can* have a central place in the evaluation of practitioners' performance in teacher education programmes (Barton & Collins, 1993; Loughran & Corrigan, 1995; Wade & Yarbrough, 1996; Borko *et al.*, 1997; Meyer & Tusin, 1999), and, in particular, in the evaluation of experienced teachers and mentors at advanced levels of professional expertise.

Implications for teacher education

This study suggests that the quality of reflection resides less in the use of different types of portfolios to address different purposes, and more in the collaborative process of participation in constructing a group portfolio. This task can yield higher levels of reflective thinking, provided participants share a strong ethos of collaboration that goes beyond the confines of a particular intervention.

Participants' positive dispositions towards constructing a portfolio as an opportunity for development suggests its potential for professional development. Practitioners at higher levels of professional development in their careers seem to find documenting their learning via portfolio a rewarding activity. In Israel, this population sees the practice of compiling a portfolio as a challenging opportunity to be recognized by the system to which they feel accountable. They also see the construction of a portfolio as an opportunity for developing professionally beyond the immediate, present, instant and pragmatic action that usually characterizes the practice of teaching (Elbaz, 1983; McNamara, 1990, quoted in Hatton & Smith, 1995). In this sense, Dewey's notion of possessing an attitude which values the personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others as central to developing reflective practice (Dewey, 1933) seems particularly apt for this population of expert teachers.

Although the study has shed light on the potential of portfolio practice for professional development, it also suggests that within a centralized system of accountability and contrived collegiality, the documentation of reflection at critical levels is problematic. Thus, if the practice of portfolio construction within a centralized system is to move beyond technical levels of description, policy-makers must take up the challenge of encouraging discussions around the 'untold'. This implies focusing on how innovations dictated by centralized policy actually connect (or not) to the unique and dynamic character and needs of local practices. The process calls for supporting critical reflective processes of framing and reframing (Loughran, 2002) of the meanings that innovative practices take as they operate within the constraints of a centralized system.

The findings of this study thus caution us against espousing the popular and somehow inflated view that the mere construction of a portfolio automatically yields critical levels of reflection on action. It behoves us to be attentive to possible 'abuses' of the tool for purposes which might be beyond the scope of its potential in a particular professional context.

Acknowledgment

I am especially thankful to Dr. Devorah Kalekin-Fishman and Dr. Clara Sa for their invaluable comments and critical reading. I also wish to thank the referees of this article for their constructive feedback.

References

- Argrys, C. & Schon, D. (1974) *Theory in practice: increasing professional effectiveness* (Reading, MA, Addison-Wesley).
- Bain, J. D., Ballantyne, R., Packer, J. & Mills, C. (1999) Using journal writing to enhance student reflectivity during field experience placements, *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 5(1), 51–73.
- Barton, J. & Collins, A. (1993) Portfolios in teacher education, *Journal of Teacher Education*, 44, 200–210.

- Benhabib, S. (1992) *Situating the self: gender, community and postmodernism in contemporary ethics* (New York, Routledge).
- Benner, P. (1984) *From novice to expert: excellence and power in clinical nursing practice* (Reading, MA, Addison-Wesley).
- Borko, H., Michalec, P., Timmons, M. & Siddel, J. (1997) Student teaching portfolios: a tool for promoting reflective practice, *Journal of Teaching Education*, 48(5), 347–357.
- Butler, D. & Winne, P. H. (1995) Feedback and self-regulated learning: a theoretical synthesis, *Review of Educational Research*, 65(3), 245–281.
- Cruikshank, D. R. (1987) *Reflective teaching: the preparation of students of teaching* (Reston, VA, Association of Teacher Educators).
- Dewey, J. (1933) *How we think* (original work published 1910) (Buffalo, NY, Prometheus Books)
- Eisner, E. & Powell, K. (2002) Art in science? *Curriculum Inquiry*, 32(2), 131–159.
- Elbaz, F. (1983) *Teacher thinking: a study of practical knowledge* (London, Croom Helm).
- Farr Darling, L. (2001) Portfolio as practice: the narratives of emerging teachers, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17(1), 107–121.
- Francis, D. (1995) The reflective journal: a window to preservice teachers' practical knowledge, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11(3), 229–241.
- Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Harmondsworth, Penguin).
- Goodman, J. (1984) Reflection and teacher education: a case study and theoretical analysis, *Interchange*, 15(3), 9–26.
- Gore, J. M. & Zeichner, K. M. (1991) Action research and reflective teaching in preservice teacher education: a case study from the United States, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 7(2), 119–136.
- Graves, D. H. & Sustain, B. S. (1992) *Portfolio portraits* (London, Heinemann).
- Greene, M. (1978) *Landscapes of learning* (New York, Teachers College Press).
- Grimmett, P. P. & Grehan, E. P. (1992) The nature of collegiality in teacher development: the case of clinical supervision, in: A. Fullan & A. Hargreaves (Eds) *Teacher development and educational change* (London, Falmer Press), 56–85.
- Habermas, J. (1974) *Theory and practice* (London, Heinemann).
- Hamilton, M. L. (1988) *Reconceptualizing teaching practice: self-study in teacher education* (New York, Corwin).
- Hargreaves, A. & Dawe, R. (1990) Paths of professional development: contrived collegiality, collaborative culture, and the case of peer coaching, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 6(3), 227–41.
- Hatton, N. & Smith, D. (1995) Reflection in teacher education: towards definition and implementation, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11(1), 33–49.
- Heartel, E. H. (1990) Performance tests, simulations and other methods, in: J. Millman & L. Darling Hammond (Eds) *The new handbook of teacher evaluation* (Newbury Park, CA, Sage), 278–294.
- Kelchtermans, G. & Vandenberghe, R. (1994) Teachers' professional development: a biographical perspective, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 26(1), 45–62.
- Kemmis, S. (1985) Action research and the politics of reflection, in: D. Boud, R. Keogh & D. Walker (Eds) *Reflection: turning experience into learning* (New York, Nichols), 139–163.
- Kolb, D. A. & Fry, R. (1975) Towards an applied theory of experiential learning, in: C. L. Cooper (Ed.) *Theories of group processes* (Chichester, John Wiley).
- Kremer-Hayon, L. (1993) *Teacher self-evaluation* (Boston, MA, Kluwer Academic Publishers).
- Laboskey, V. K. (1994) A conceptual framework for reflection in preservice teacher education, in: J. Calderhead & P. Gates (Eds) *Conceptualizing reflection in teacher development* (London, Falmer Press).
- Lam, S., Yin, P. & Lam, T. W. (2002) Transforming school culture: can true collaboration be initiated? *Educational Research*, 44(2), 181–195.
- Loughran, J. J. (2002) Effective reflective practice: in search of meaning in learning about teaching, *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(1), 33–43.

- Loughran, J. & Corrigan, D. (1995) Teaching portfolios: a strategy for developing learning and teaching in pre-service education, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11(6), 565–577.
- Lortie, D. C. (1975) *Schoolteacher: a sociological study* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).
- MacIntyre, A. (1984) *After virtue* (2nd edn) (Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press).
- Meyer, D. & Tusin, L. (1999) Preservice teachers' perceptions of portfolios: process versus product, *Journal of Teacher Education*, 50(2), 131–139.
- Messick, S. (1994) The interplay of evidence and consequences in the validation of performance assessments, *Educational Researcher*, 23(2), 13–23.
- Mezirow, J. (1990) *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood* (San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass).
- Patton, M. Q. (1990) *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (Newbury Park, CA, Sage).
- Prawat, R. S. (2000) The two faces of Deweyan pragmatism: inductionism versus social constructivism, *Teachers College Record*, 102(4), 805–840.
- Redman, W. (1994) *Portfolios for development: a guide for trainers and managers* (London, Kogan Page).
- Richert, A. (1990) Teaching teachers to reflect: a consideration of program structure, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 22(6), 509–527.
- Rodgers, C. (2002) Defining reflection: another look at John Dewey and reflective thinking, *Teachers College Record*, 104(4), 842–866.
- Schon, D. A. (1983) *The reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action* (New York, Basic Books).
- Schon, D. A. (1987) *Educating the reflective practitioner: toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions* (San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass).
- Schotter, J. (1975) *Images of man in psychological research* (London, Methuen).
- Smith, K. & Tillema, H. H. (1998) Evaluating portfolio use as a learning tool for professionals, *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 41(2), 193–205.
- Tillema, H. H. & Smith, K. (2000) Learning from portfolios: differential use of feedback in portfolio construction, *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 26(1) 193–210.
- Tillema, H. H. (1998) Design and validity of a portfolio instrument for professional training, *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 24(3), 263–278.
- Topping, K. (1998) Peer assessment between students in colleges and universities, *Review of Educational Research*, 68(3), 249–276.
- Wade, R. & Yarbrough, D. (1996) Portfolios as a tool for reflective thinking in teacher education? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 12(1), 63–79.
- Warren Little, J. & McLaughlin, M. W. (1993) Perspectives on cultures and contexts of teaching, in: J. Warren Little & M. W. McLaughlin (Eds) *Teachers' work: individuals, colleagues, and contexts* (New York, Teachers College Press).
- Van Manen, M. (1977) Linking ways of knowing with ways of being practical, *Curriculum Inquiry*, 6, 205–228.
- Van Manen, M. (1991) *The tact of teaching: the meaning of pedagogical thoughtfulness* (Albany, NY, State University of New York Press).
- Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of practice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Wiggins, G. (1993) *Assessing student performance: exploring the purposes and limits of testing* (San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass).
- Wolf, D., Dixby, J., Glenn, J. & Gardner, H. (1991) To use their minds well, in: G. Grant (Ed.) *Review of research in education* (Washington, DC, AERA).
- Woodward, H. (2000) Portfolios: narratives for learning, *Journal of In-Service Education*, 26(2), 329–348.
- Zeichner, K. M. & Liston, D. P. (1987) Teaching student teachers to reflect, *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(1), 23–48.
- Zeichner, K. & Wray, S. (2001) The teaching portfolio in US teacher education programs: what we know and what we need to know, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17, 613–621.

Appendix A: Levels of reflection across portfolio practices

| Portfolio type Levels of Reflection | Process portfolio | Product portfolio |
|--|--|--|
| DESCRIPTIVE | | |
| Reporting & describing | Reporting on the uses of a particular strategy of portfolio construction Describing the benefits of learning to construct a portfolio Reporting on the assets of learning by doing | Describing learning how to use the language of the new curriculum Reporting on lesson plans and activities according to the new curriculum Describing uncertainties about adjusting & internalizing a new form of practice |
| Expressing feelings | Expressing feelings of success as they implemented what they had learned at the workshop with their students in class | Expressing feelings of success and failure about a particular practice Expressing feelings of incompetence & uncertainties about getting the message right |
| Providing reasons and articulating ideas based on personal experience | Articulating concerns about organizational aspects, issues of time, practicality and relevance based on their accounts of using the portfolio in class Describing concerns about the link between the ideas behind a portfolio and their actual realization in practice based on experience Evaluating students' performance as future teachers based on their experience as mentors | Expressing opinions about the problems experienced in adjusting & internalizing a new form of practice & about getting the message right |
| DIALOGIC | | |
| Articulating conditions & exploring reasons | Articulating processes that were conducive to learning and development | Exploring and articulating conditions that are conducive to change Exploring reasons for certain pedagogical behaviours |
| CRITICAL | | |
| Problematizing experience at ethical & moral levels Explanation with theory or principle as rationale | None | None |