

# Joining the dots and colouring in the spaces: Facilitating the acquisition of a social work professional identity with e-portfolio

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## Introduction

Field placements in social work education are considered pivotal in providing students with the opportunity to integrate what they have learnt in the classroom with that which can be achieved in practice (Cleak & Wilson, 2007; Parker, 2007), but maybe more importantly, they also create a liminal space in which the student can explore, acquire and demonstrate a professionally recognized identity (Bowles, 2010; Hawkins and Shohet, 2000). While much attention is placed by Universities on ensuring that particular professional and educational standards are met so that their graduates can meet qualifying requirements, they also recognise the need to provide appropriate guidelines and tools which can facilitate and support a learning process by which the students can move towards performing and recognising themselves as beginning practitioners (Bowles, 2010). However, developing a tool that can both facilitate and best assess a student's capacity to meet the goals of the field placement experience can be challenging - especially when students are placed in diverse practice settings that are also facilitated by individual supervisors who have different levels of experience and understandings of what a pass grade may entail.

Up until recently, James Cook University (JCU) social work program relied on paper based assessments to undertake this task. However following largely negative feedback from key stakeholders about the cumbersomeness and linear nature of these assessments, we decided to explore e-portfolio assessment tools with the aim of creating an instrument that would include both formative and summative evaluation of the students learning (Taylor, Thomas & Sage, 1999). Rather than provide a linear experience, it was hoped that the e-portfolio would: (1) help students 'join the dots' between what they had learnt in the academy, the AASW professional standards and what they experience in practice, and (2) an opportunity to 'colour in the emerging spaces' with their own individually developed learning goals towards becoming a social worker. With the support of a teaching and learning grant received in 2012 and with continuing consultation with key stakeholders, an e-portfolio tool was developed and is in the process of being trialed and evaluated in 2013. This paper briefly describes the background and context in which the tool has been developed; the tool itself and the artefacts it includes; and an overview of how it meets the accreditation requirements of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW).

## Background:

In the Australian context, students wishing to become social workers are required to complete two field placements totalling 140 days during the final 2 years of their degree program. Each placement experience is given the status of a full academic subject (AASW, 2010) and must have:

10. Clear expectations for learning goals and performance outcomes, based on the AASW *Practice Standards for Social Workers* (2003) (and pending Practice Standards 2013) and the AASW *Code of Ethics* (2010) are established through a consultative process between the SWAOU (social work academic organisational units), the field educator and the student, and are documented in a learning plan. (AASW , 2012(b), p.4)

As stated above, until 2013 JCU's Social Work Field Education programme had used a number of different paper-based tools to engage students, field educators and university personnel in developing a learning plan that identified individual learning goals, activities and assessment for each student that also satisfied the AASW requirements. However while some stakeholders were able to use the tools effectively, most felt that they not only failed to capture the learning experience and outcomes achieved during placement, they also failed to provide a platform for students to demonstrate skills learnt to the workplace once they had graduated. We felt that the use of a portfolio approach would help address these issues.

The benefits of using portfolios to enhance student learning by linking theory to practice and as a tool for self-reflection are well documented (Fitch, Peet, Glover Reed & Tolman, 2008). They have been used within a range of professional education settings including Social Work (Heron, 2011) and are well established for collecting evidence of competence in Tertiary education (Taylor, Thomas & Sage, 1999). However, physical portfolios are "cumbersome to store, transport, present or display" (Swigonski, Ward, Mama, Rodgers & Belicose, 2006, p814). By contrast e-portfolios provide a more manageable digital space for students to engage with collected artefacts in diverse ways that not only allows the creation of a product, but also facilitates a process for learning (Fitch et al, 2008, p38). As a part of this process, social work students can

reflect on artefacts to “build a theory or narrative to understand ‘self’ in context” (Cambridge, 2010, p49), or a professional identity, something required by the AASW Standards (2003) and encouraged in the JCU Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy (2011).

## The JCU Social Work e-portfolio tool

With the support of the teaching and learning grant and drawing on the expected professional and practice standards defined by the AASW and university, we invited key stakeholders (students, field educators and liaison and university staff) to advise on, trial and evaluate an e-portfolio assessment tool for JCU’s field education programme. The e-portfolio tool was developed in Pebble Pad and is currently in the process of being trialled and evaluated.

The e-portfolio tool consists of:

1. **A webfolio** consisting of six learning goal templates named according to areas that are typically accounted for in a professional practice framework (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2012): (a) the practice settings’ context, history and philosophy; (b) the theoretical and practice knowledge needed to work as a social worker in the setting; (c) the values and ethics that guide practice; (d) the methods and processes of social work practice drawn upon; (e) the specific skills needed to work within the setting, and finally; (f) the impact that the student’s own personality and characteristics could have on the setting and the influence of the setting and the development of their personal and professional identity.
2. **Six templates** (described above) in which students: (a) develop their learning goals in conjunction with their field educators and university staff; (b) link their learning goals to the appropriate AASW Practice Standard (AASW, 2003); (c) collect evidence to demonstrate their achievement of learning goals while in the practice setting, and; (d) reflection, feedback and grading by the student and field educator on the student’s progress at mid-placement and at the end of the placement.
3. **Journal template** in which student’s reflect weekly on their learning ; identify links to their course work; explore any ethical dilemmas they may encounter, and; highlight their awareness of a developing professional identity.

At this stage of the project, evaluation has been focussed on the participation of stakeholders in the design and development of the e-portfolio. Using York and Itzhaky’s (1991) evaluation framework for stakeholder participation, the project design has been effective in facilitating key stakeholders active engagement in a diverse range of activities to inform the e-portfolio design. Engagement activities have included focus groups, education workshops, surveys distributed by email and student workshops. Staff members, Field educators and students have demonstrated their support and engagement by consenting to participate in the proposed stages of this project. Initial feedback from stakeholders has been positive about both the approach and proposed content of the portfolio.

## Conclusion

Although still a work in progress, the e-portfolio tool has provided students with an opportunity to think in a less linear fashion and brought with it the recognition of the ‘messiness’ that can accompany the formation of a professional identity while in the practice setting. It is becoming clear that because of the inherent flexibility of the tool that there may be a need for future training for all stakeholders to better understand the ways in which the tool can be used to facilitate learning and the assessment process. Moreover, we as developers have also recognised the need to introduce the model earlier in the students’ education so that they are more than just familiar with the foundational areas identified in the e-portfolio. While students in the first year of the degree are introduced to the visual diagram that underpins the e-portfolio model, familiarity with the templates could scaffold their understanding and future use of the tool in the practice setting.

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