

Reflections on ePortfolio Professional Learning: Harnessing an Unconference Approach

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This practitioner-led article documents the journey of a cross-institutional multidisciplinary team to support the development of practitioners' ePortfolio professional competencies through an "Unconference." We describe the approach used to support an ePortfolio unconference hosted in January 2018 at Dublin City University. According to Budd et al. (2015), the most meaningful professional learning at conferences tends to occur at the coffee breaks when delegates are free to engage in open dialogue. An unconference is a dynamic participant-driven conference which features discussion and collaboration at its core to support professional learning. This approach was chosen to capture, develop and document current ePortfolio practice in Ireland and the United Kingdom.

This article outlines key facets of professional learning generated as a result of the unconference including the promotion of ePortfolio competencies and the generation of collaborative research outputs. At the unconference, attendees participated in experiential learning opportunities which enhanced and extended their personal and professional ePortfolio competencies as well as developed practice-focused research outputs collaboratively in real time using a range of technological tools.

Participant feedback highlights the impact of the unconference on their professional ePortfolio learning and practice, and the critical

reflections of unconference organizers inform future ePortfolio professional development.

Context

Over the last 10 years, ePortfolios have emerged as an integral element of the learning landscape in higher education. They are seen as a dynamic medium for recording and showcasing student learning as well as a powerful tool for reflection (Hosego & Parker, 2009; Dreissen et al., 2007; Eynon & Clark, 2009). Although ePortfolios are ubiquitous in American higher education, in Ireland they have seen a relatively slow pace of adoption. This lag has been due to the lack of government policy drivers, the absence of a distinct Irish ePortfolio community, and a scarcity of funding (Eynon & Gambino, 2017; Farrell, 2017). In Ireland, traditional forms of assessment still dominate in higher education. A recent study indicated that the creation of digital artefacts for assessment were one of the least used assessment methods, with 63% of respondents stating they were never used (YI Feedback, 2016).

There are indicators, however, that Irish institutions of higher education are beginning to engage with ePortfolio. This is evident in the emergence of an ePortfolio community of



practice, (Lave & Wenger, 1998) initially called MaharaIrl. This community currently has 92 members from 21 institutions (Donaldson, Buckley, Farrell, & Uí Choistealbha, 2018). MaharaIRL, founded in 2017, was rebranded Eportfolio Ireland in 2018 to better represent the broader interests of all members. This grass-roots community with a volunteer steering group holds online and face-to-face events to support faculty professional development and ongoing collaboration between ePortfolio practitioners in Irish institutions of higher education.

There is growing evidence that ePortfolio practice can enable students to integrate their learning and make connections between modules (Buente et al., 2015; Eynon & Gambino, 2017; Morreale et al., 2017); learn in an authentic and meaningful way (Baird et al., 2016; Lambe McNair, & Smith, 2013); improve their academic writing (Desmet, 2008); learn independently (Clarke & Hornyak, 2012); and learn in a self-regulated way (Alexiou et al., 2010; Jenson, 2011; Nguyen & Ikeda, 2015; Stoten, 2016).

There is very little empirical research on ePortfolio practice in Ireland. A recent search of the ERIC database revealed only four peer-reviewed journal articles about ePortfolios in the Irish context. Two recent surveys of Irish higher education faculty found that 31% of respondents were only beginning to use ePortfolios and that 403 of 580 Irish academics surveyed stated they were not using ePortfolios in their teaching (Eportfoliohub, 2016; Harding, 2018). It is within these contexts that the Eportfolio Ireland and the unconference team sought to support the development of Irish practitioner ePortfolio professional competencies and to grow the ePortfolio community of practice, answering Wenger and Snyder's (2000) call to "bring the right people together and provide an infrastructure in which communities can thrive."

Our belief is that the movement towards ePortfolio-based assessment in Ireland needs to be scaffolded. Respondents to an Irish study indicated that ePortfolio technology and process

are often perceived as complex, stating a lack of appropriate resources as a reason for a lack of ePortfolio adoption (eportfoliohub.ie) Thus, there is a need to ensure that key competencies facilitating ePortfolios are developed for higher education practitioners. Through Eportfolio Ireland we are seeking to address this need by developing a proactive and open community where expertise can be shared and resources collaboratively developed to promote and encourage impactful ePortfolio practice.

The Unconference Approach to Professional Learning

"Unconferences" are voluntary, informal learning experiences that reject traditional conference structures such as a predetermined slate of speakers and sessions (Boule, 2011).

An unconference is an informal learning experience where no topics have been predetermined, no panels or working groups have been arranged. Instead, the event is organized through the participation of its attendees. They feature timely and often primarily discussion-based sessions that are participant driven. Unconferences have been described by Greenhill and Wiebrands as "gatherings of people united by a passion (p2)."



Figure 1. Unconference Welcoming Team DCU, January 2018

The concept of unconference is not new, having been referenced as far back as in 1997. An unconference is a novel format for collaborative discussion. Unconferences have been used predominantly in the area of programming under the name of bar camps since 2005. The first one boasted 200 attendees who arrived for a

weekend with their sleeping bags! However, the unconference concept has experienced a surge in popularity in the last 10 years. Edcamps, which are based on this concept, have become quite common in the U.S. for educators, and Teachmeets, which are also very informal, exist in the UK and Ireland.



Figure 2. Unconference Collaborative Session Coffee Break, DCU, January 2018

The prospect of organizing a learning event of great fluidity and lack of control can be daunting. It certainly was for this organizing committee. After initial planning and scheduling by the team, the onus was on the participants to come prepared, be engaged, and talk about ePortfolio topics that mattered most to them. At the unconference participants contributed their ideas for session topics. Typically, this process is paper based; however, in this instance the team introduced enabling technologies to manage the topic generation and selection. All participants voted online on the suggested topics and those that received the most votes became the agenda for the day, which in our case was posted virtually during the keynote presentation by Sam Taylor of Cranfield University. After that, the breakout sessions were self-organized and fueled by coffee and snacks. The benefits of this unconference approach to professional learning are emerging. While there is very little formal research in this area (Carpenter, 2016; Greenhill & Weibrands, 2008), anecdotal evidence and reflections from the organizing team suggest:

- A higher energy level. An unconference is an

engaging and energising approach to professional learning.

- Less up-front planning. While planning is required, there is no need to call for abstracts and set up a detailed agenda ahead of time.
- Greater flexibility. The agenda is dynamic, which allows participants to spend time discussing often unexpected topics that are of particular interest to them.
- Spontaneous conversations. An unconference prioritizes informal conversations, allowing participants to exchange knowledge and build connections.
- An opportunity for collaborative development. Unconference sessions can lead to a greater level of productive collaborations, professional development opportunities, and the development of resources, in our case these included an ePortfolio eBook and rubric.



Figure 3. Unconference Collaborative Session, DCU, January 2018

Unconference Tools for Facilitating Organization, Learning, and Sharing

Technology was the enabling factor for our unconference, and the creative use of technology was a differentiating factor for this event. The organizing committee for Eportfolio Ireland was committed to building community through collaboration, and the unconference used various technologies as the backbone to support professional learning. The flexible and open format enabled lively conversations to cultivate ePortfolio competencies of participants and supported practitioner-led outputs like a Padlet wall of session summaries and key discussion points through the use of the technological tools such as Tricider, Google Docs, Padlet, Twitter, and Zeetings.

While there is great fluidity in an event driven by attendee participation, an unconference

still needs a coordinating mechanism. Zeetings (Zeetings.com) was the tool selected for this purpose. It allowed for an organizing session outlining the “rules” of the event and managed the topic generation process and conference schedule through embedded links that participants could access once they logged into the Zeetings presentation.

With an Unconference, active participation is expected. Attendees were asked to use Tricider (Tricider.com) and engage with the question: What presentation, conversation, or collaborative design work would you like to engage with? This approach enabled individual professional learning needs to be shared. Tricider also supported a voting mechanism, and participants then voted on all suggestions with the top 12 being given a slot on the programme agenda. This process ensured that the generation of the agenda was truly a collaborative and participant-driven event.

The areas of greatest interest from the ePortfolio community in the room can be seen in Figure 4.

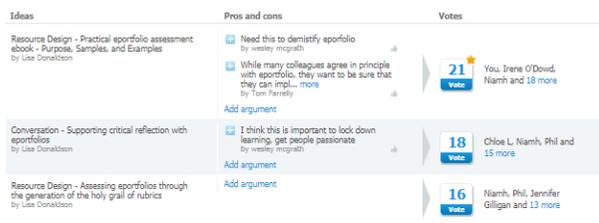


Figure 4 Tricider table of participant-generated topics

The formal agenda was quickly drawn up by the organizing committee during the keynote presentation by copying the sessions with the most votes into a Google Doc. The link to the Google Doc was provided via the Zeetings presentation to give participants instant access to sessions and locations. A link to a Padlet wall (Figure 5) was also provided through Zeetings so that the key points from each session could be recorded and shared more widely to all participants, including those attending other sessions.

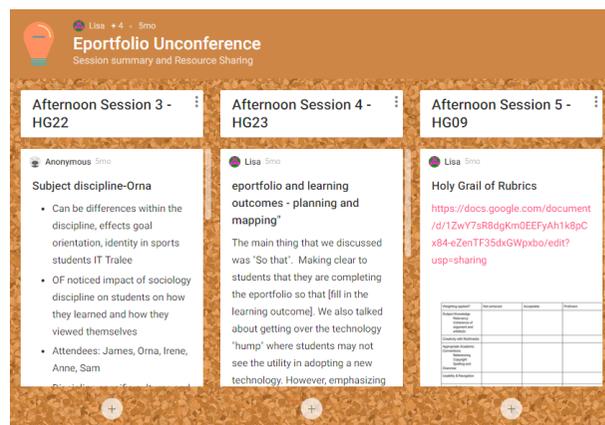


Figure 5. Padlet wall of session focal points

Some of the most productive sessions used technology to support collaboration. Two such sessions utilised Google Docs to collaboratively design ePortfolio resources. In one session, participants shared sample ePortfolio assessments with a view to developing an eBook of collective expertise which could subsequently be published and shared with all ePortfolio practitioners. This eBook (Figure 6) has been edited and was published as an Open Educational Resource (OER) in September of 2018.



Figure 6 Screenshot of interactive eBook on ePortfolio-based assessment

Another session revolved around the design of an ePortfolio assessment rubric (Figure 7). The initial work on the rubric was conducted in this session in a Google Doc and was completed afterwards by the organizing committee. The assessment rubric has been shared with all Eportfolio Ireland members. Because it has proven to be a valuable resource, the rubric was shared more widely via the Eportfolio Ireland

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Weight Criteria as Appropriate	Not Achieved	Acceptable	Proficient	Exemplary
Subject knowledge Relevancy Coherence of arguments and artefacts	Does not address concept, topic or key points. Most ideas are underdeveloped, unoriginal, or lack relevancy/critical thought. Artefacts do not support argument or are not included.	Content indicates thinking and reasoning applied with original thought on a few ideas. Not all key points included or fully developed. Some artefacts included which support argument.	Content indicates original thinking and develops ideas with sufficient evidence. Clear argument supported by appropriate, relevant artefacts.	Content indicates synthesis of ideas, in depth analysis and evidences original thought and support for the topic. Thoughtful artefacts selected that advance main argument
Creativity with Multimedia	No inclusion of audio/video, or graphics or photos, audio or video are distracting/no relevant to the content of the portfolio.	Audio/video/ graphics/ photographs are included but used without purpose or design in mind. Some artefacts may not function correctly.	The use of audio/ video/graphics/ photographs are appropriate and contribute to understanding concepts, ideas and relationship. The artefacts enhance the written material and create interest.	Innovative use of audio/ video/ graphics/ photographs is integrated seamlessly into several different artefacts. They effectively enhance understanding of concepts, ideas and relationships, and create interest.
Appropriate Academic Conventions Referencing Copyright Spelling and Grammar	Poor or incorrect use of required referencing scheme. Multiple spelling or grammatical errors. Copyright references not included for artefacts.	Inaccurate use of required referencing scheme. Some spelling or grammatical errors. Some care has been given to copyright and fair usage of images/ artefacts.	Largely accurate use of required referencing scheme. Few spelling or grammatical errors. Copyright and fair usage of images/artefacts noted.	Excellent grammar, spelling, syntax and punctuation. Content fully supported by reference to relevant, up to date, and accurate referencing. Copyright and fair usage issues well considered.
Usability and Navigation	Organisation and structure is confusing. The navigation links are poor or missing making navigation difficult. Many external hyperlinks do not connect to the appropriate website.	Some navigation links included to provide structure. Some external hyperlinks do not connect to the appropriate website.	Organisation, structure and flow of the portfolio page/s is clear. Navigation links function well. Most external hyperlinks link to appropriate website.	Well organized page/s and structure facilitates the reader's accessibility and navigation to the content. Navigation links seamlessly to appropriate websites.

Figure 7. Completed ePortfolio rubric by unconference participants

Twitter feed-- @EportfolioIRL-- and other social media channels. This Twitter feed has been used to promote ePortfolio engagement, raise interest in the unconference, and expand the Eportfolio Ireland network. Some of the various interactions on the day can be viewed on [YouTube] (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9QFOdl1rZs>)

Feedback from the Unconference

Formal evaluation of the conference was collected by the funding partner, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. The response was overwhelmingly positive. For research purposes and to provide additional understanding of the impact of the event, the organizing team sought ethical approval and additional feedback was garnered through an online evaluation form.

The aim of ePortfolio Ireland is to support learning and collaboration on ePortfolios across Ireland. The development of collaborative resources is fundamental to this goal, and a number of sessions at the unconference featured such co-development. The team sought to understand how successfully this aim was met. The survey results were indicative that the unconference approach is highly supportive of this goal (Figure 8).

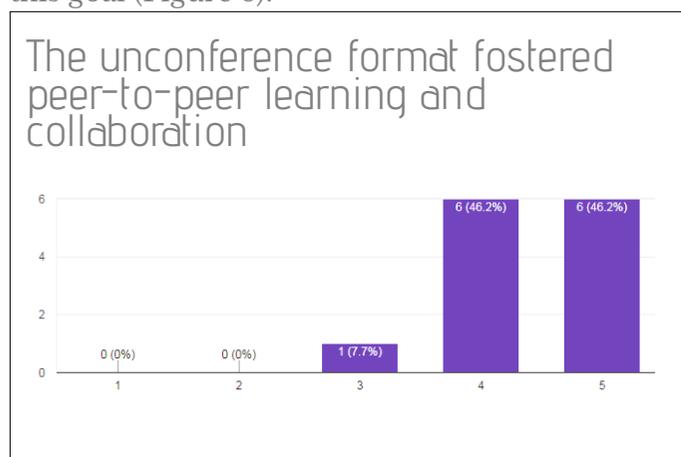


Figure 8. Post Unconference Survey Results 'Fosters peer-to-peer learning'

Interestingly, results also indicated that the unconference format was more impactful than a traditional conference for supporting professional development (Figure 9).

In your opinion, which is more impactful from the point of view of your own professional development

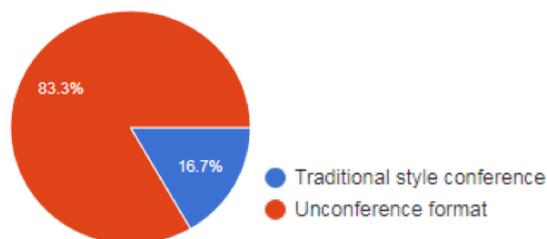


Figure 9. Post Unconference Survey Results 'Professional development impact'

A common theme of collegiality and meaningful interaction was evident among survey respondents. When asked what were the most impactful elements of the unconference, respondents chose shared peer learning; engaged, deep and meaningful conversations; networking and sharing of ideas; and format encourages discussion. Additional unsolicited feedback via email to the unconference organizers included the following comments:

"Just a little thanks for a huge, mind-blowing unconference on Friday!" (Participant 1)

"I was very taken with the concept of the unconference and the democratic way it ran – I definitely felt that I got more out of it than the normal conference sessions." (Participant 2)

"Superb conference. You and your team deserve to take a bow." (Participant 3)

Reflections of the Organizing Group

As well as seeking feedback from the participants at the unconference, the organizing team created their own feedback using a reflective self-study (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Schön 1983). This allowed us the time and space to examine our own individual reflections and also an opportunity to share our thoughts and reflections with one another (Lassonde et al., 2009; Evans, 2002). Moon (1999) provides

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Gibbs Stage	Key reflections from the unconference organizing team
Description	<p>Aim/purpose of the unconference Centrality of people Structure and format of an unconference</p>
<p>Indicative narrative: <i>“An unconference is a dynamic and highly interactive participant-driven conference which features discussion and collaboration at its core. This format fosters peer-to-peer learning, collaboration and creativity. The event that I ultimately designed enabled participants to propose and facilitate discussion on the topics that were most relevant to their own context.”</i></p>	
Feelings	<p>Cyclical nature of feelings--- excitement – anticipation--- trepidation -- enjoyment/ fulfilment Comfort levels with the format -- need for trust, nervousness, level of risk</p>
<p>Indicative narrative: <i>“My initial feeling about the conference was that it was great to have something new and dynamic at a time of conference saturation in the field of education. ... This soon became a sense of trepidation. ... However, it was reassuring that the open nature of the unconference meant that I could contribute in a way that I felt comfortable with.... In the lead up to the conference there was a heightened sense of anticipation as the actual schedule was unknown and totally reliant on others.”</i></p>	
Evaluation	<p>Value of conversations Building the ePortfolio network Collaboration is key Strength of unconference for professional learning</p>
<p>Indicative narrative: <i>“I think the unconference format is very effective for sharing practice, networking and growing the eportfolio community.”</i></p>	
Analysis	<p>Cross institutional commonalities Technology dichotomy -- practical focus an advantage for implementing learning but at the same time the technology focus meant that it was reliant on the organizers to ensure that it worked and that conversations were more technology-based as opposed to research/ theory-based</p>
<p>Indicative narrative: <i>“The sessions proved to be more discussion than presentation focused which contributed greatly to the vision of collaboration and community that I had originally envisaged.”</i></p>	
Conclusion	<p>Unconference approach -- springboard, adapted in future, mechanism for ongoing professional learning</p>
<p>Indicative narrative: <i>In conclusion, the eportfolio unconference achieved more than it set out to do. It will be remembered as the springboard for enhanced collaboration on eportfolios in Ireland and beyond.</i></p>	
Action plan	<p>Need to build ePortfolio community Harness unconference approach Another conference in the future</p>
<p>Indicative narrative: <i>“Positive feedback.... posted on Twitter highlights the desire amongst the Irish community to improve eportfolio competencies and that unconference style events may well be a highly relevant mechanism to provide ongoing professional learning.”</i></p>	

Table 1 Unconference organizing team reflections based on Gibb's Reflective Cycle

many justifications for reflective work such as this, but the most applicable to this paper are:

- To record experience
- To develop learning in ways that enhance other learning
- To deepen the quality of learning, in the form of critical thinking or developing a questioning attitude
- To facilitate learning from experience
- To increase active involvement in learning and personal ownership of learning
- To enhance professional practice or the professional self in practice
- To explore the self, personal constructs of meaning and one's view of the world.
- To enhance the personal valuing of the self towards self-empowerment
- To foster reflective and creative interaction in a group

In this collaborative self-study exercise, each member of the team wrote a personal reflection on the unconference experience using the six stages of Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988) as a guide:

1. Description
2. Feelings
3. Evaluation
4. Analysis
5. Conclusion
6. Action Plan

These individual reflections were then used as a data source mined for emerging common themes under each of Gibbs' headings (Table 1: Previous page).

Key Facets of Professional Learning Generated Through the Unconference Approach

The key facets of professional learning generated by the unconference are evaluated by applying Guskey's (1994) guidelines for successful professional learning and development:

1. An individual and organizational process
2. Think big but start small
3. Team support
4. Feedback
5. Follow-up
6. Integration

Using these six headings, the unconference approach can be described as a successful

professional learning and development activity for the following reasons:

An individual and organizational process	The unconference focused on both the individual and their organizational contexts and involved many participants from institutions across Ireland and the UK.
Think big but start small	The unconference is a new and innovative idea for the Irish education sector. The speed at which the event sold out and the need to move to a larger venue are indicative of the appealing nature of such a dynamic event.
Team support	The organizing group harnessed one another's strengths to ensure a smooth operation, and outside bodies actively sought to be part of this unique event.
Feedback	Feedback was sought not only from participants but also from the organizing team by means of a self-study reflective exercise and was overwhelmingly positive.
Follow-up	A second unconference building on the learnings from the original unconference is planned.
Integration	Technology was key in integrating learning from the unconference into collaborative and openly shared resources like the eBook and the rubric.

Table 2 Success of Unconference Based on Guskey's Guidelines

Conclusion

This article documents the journey of a cross-institutional multidisciplinary team to support the development of practitioners' ePortfolio professional competencies through an unconference. The organizing committees' reflections, supported by participant feedback, indicates that the unconference approach is an effective format for professional learning and competency development with ePortfolios for practitioners across Ireland.

Our experience is that an unconference can be an easily replicated and empowering event. Furthermore, the topics generated through the Tricider activity on the day of the event, specifically those related to supporting critical reflection and sharing best-practice examples of student creativity and ePortfolio-based assessment, served as the basis for ongoing discussion at subsequent events following the

unconference. Professional learning events that allow conversations to start and continue to flourish will improve ePortfolio competencies for all. The development of practitioner ePortfolio competencies through these ongoing conversations and the generation of collaborative research outputs were key elements of the professional learning generated through the unconference.

Reflecting on our first unconference experience, which was transformed by technology and powered by participant interactions, the organizing committee is confident as to the efficacy of this type of professional learning for ePortfolio practitioners that we look forward to the next scheduled unconference in September 2018 at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin, where we propose to push beyond the boundaries of an unconference to the collaborative development of an “unpaper.” We look forward to reporting on this further foray into ePortfolio professional learning!

About the Authors



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