2015

Preparing students for diverse careers: developing career literacy with final-year writing students

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Abstract

Graduates from generalist science and arts degrees can face diverse careers characterised by portfolios of simultaneous, self-managed roles. This paper reports from a study on identity and career literacy in which final-year professional writing and publishing students developed an ePortfolio and engaged in open blogging during their industry internships. The ePortfolio emerged as a vehicle through which identity was challenged and negotiated with educator and peer support. However, students engaged only when the ePortfolio was mandated, and deep engagement was the result of the ePortfolio being presented as a practical career development tool. Findings suggest that the combination of ePortfolio and internship is an effective strategy for developing the career literacy needed for the transition to graduate life.

Introduction

This paper reports findings from an Australian study that linked ePortfolios with learning, identity and career. Working with final-year writing students, the study employed Cook's (2002) "layered literacies" framework. The study asked how the combination of an ePortfolio, industry internship and open blogging might heighten final-year students' career literacies, and to what extent the concurrent professional internship might help or hinder this development.

The paper begins with a discussion of the labour market for professional writers. This is followed by an overview of the literature and a description of the research context. In presenting and discussing the findings, the article considers the value of incorporating identity development and ePortfolios alongside an internship. It closes by highlighting the importance of career literacy among professional writing and publishing students.

Background

The labour market for writing graduates

This study adopted a social constructivist approach to career development: it held that interactions with others – in this case peers, lecturers and industry practitioners – continuously influence, reshape and reinforce personal realities. As we have argued elsewhere (Rowley, Bennett & Dunbar-Hall 2015), the efficacy of ePortfolios has to be considered within the context of specific disciplines and the labour markets in which students will work.

There is little research on the destinations of professional writing graduates in Australia (Baverstock 2007; Robertson 2011); however, anecdotally they are known to work across a number of associated professions and industries including public relations, advertising, communications, government, information technology, publishing, administration and journalism. Given the increasing popularity of writing degrees (Morrison 2013), it is unsurprising that creative and professional writing programs have become an object of scholarly enquiry, emerging as a distinct field of academic research. Despite this interest, however, little has been done to understand the transition between study and work.

Trede, Macklin and Bridges (2012, p.378) suggest that writing graduates face a complex world of work that is increasingly common for graduates from multiple disciplines:

> Professional identity development is about being in the world, but increasingly it must also be about being in a multiplicity of worlds or communities, and professional identity and its development is thus complex.

It is likely, therefore, that a growing proportion of graduates negotiate highly individual self-initiated and self-managed portfolio careers (Handy 1989) that transcend the boundaries of employers, clients and task orientations, and the traditional, online and digital environments (Daskalaki 2010). Thus, the formation, negotiation and renegotation of digital identities emerge as "challenging issues in today's environment of mobility, ambient intelligence and increasingly complex and evolving digital representations and interactions. As digital interactions become ubiquitous, the representation of identities plays a significant role as a gateway into these interactions" (Bennett et al., n.p.).

The role of the ePortfolio in developing learner identity and self-concept

Career identity is the definition people have of themselves in terms of work or career (Meijers 1998). It influences, regulates and supports work, learning and career-building strategies (Bennett 2013), and it changes according to activities, motivations, meanings and values. Many educators are striving to answer the question of how students might be prepared to negotiate and manage complex work and identity. In our case, we looked to the ePortfolio as part of the solution.

An ePortfolio can be described as a "digitized collection of artefacts, including demonstrations and resources, and accomplishments" (Lorenzo & Ittelson 2005, p.3). The relationships between ePortfolios and identity are of interest because identity can be imagined, manipulated, conveyed and refined as the ePortfolio is developed. Thus, the development of an ePortfolio has the potential to weave "an individual's learning and feedback to provide a reflection of who they are and what they have learned" (McAlpine 2005, p.384).

This evidence indicates that the ePortfolio and identity might be integrally linked. Further, Brooks and Rowley (2013) note that in using technology in this way, students actively engage in the higher levels of thinking required for active and meaningful reflection. Similarly, Blom et al. (2013) find that in the process of building ePortfolios students begin to represent multiple interests and to consider these in relation to their initial learning, career development, employability and lifelong learning. We see in this a process of professional transition in which provisional selves (Ibarra 2003) or possible selves provide a springboard for experimentation.

Against this background, in this paper we first present and discuss the findings. We then suggest how these findings might inform future practice.

Context and Research Approach

Context

University writing programs have undergone significant change in light of globalisation, new technologies and associated changes to industries such as publishing and newspapers. The professional writing and publishing (PWP) major in which this study was located seeks to develop a new generation of professional communicators, writers and editors. In line with other programs, it integrates creative practice and academic inquiry with training and experience in professional competencies. Students learn to research and convey information for a range of potential audiences using different genres and forms. Students are also exposed to print and electronic publishing, concept development, scheduling, copyediting and structural editing. Graduates are known to work in government, the private sector, the not-for-profit sector, arts organisations or the magazine and book industries; they may be self-employed.

The program is located within a liberal-arts environment and recognises writing (and publishing) as a specialty subject of study rather than as a means to an end. Unlike professional writing programs that focus solely on corporate-authorship genres, students study individual-authorship non-fiction genres. The broad nature of their training reflects the changing work environment, and means that students develop a wide range of evidence to show to potential employers and clients; however, the course had not previously included the development of a professional portfolio, and this evidence was not formally curated during the program.

The liberal-arts location and the exploration of both corporate and individual authorship reflect the desire to go beyond teaching workplace writing as a collection of "rules to follow". Rather, educators recognise the need for students to acquire complex skills in and associated with research, writing, editing and publishing. This approach is in accord with Surma's (2005, p.17) theorisation of professional writing as a "creative, critical and dialogic process, central to which is the imaginative negotiation of rhetorical and ethical issues and choices relating to language and to its forging of specific relations between writing and readers".

Given the professional writing and publishing context, the study adopted Cook's (2002) "layered literacies" framework for technical communication pedagogy. Based on the notion that workplace writers need a "repertoire of complex and interrelated skills to be successful" (Cook 2002, p.7), Cook's six literacies comprise:

Basic literacy	The ability to communicate clearly and efficiently in numerous contexts
Social literacy	The ability to collaborate and work well with others
Rhetorical literacy	The ability to conceptualise and shape documents for specific purposes or audiences
Technological literacy	A critical knowledge of relevant technologies and their potential for promoting social interaction
Ethical literacy	Knowledge of professional ethical standards in relation to all stakeholders
Critical literacy	Recognition of ideological stances and power structures, and the ability to take action to assist those in need.

The framework aims to conceptualise how all six literacies might be developed across a program in a layered and interactive way, thus providing students with the "increasingly complex range of knowledge and skills" (Cook 2002, p.24) required for successful communication and writing roles in the contemporary workplace.

Within this framework we were mindful of the value of future-oriented approaches in encouraging students to consider their future lives and careers. This was informed by our earlier work with ePortfolios, which suggested the potential merits of embedding the ePortfolio as a requirement within a course that was highly focused on industry (Bennett & Robertson 2014). As we were using a qualitative approach, the inclusion of possible selves was particularly important because we were working with students for whom work and career were likely to be complex, as outlined earlier. This led us encompass the theory of "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius 1986), which advocates the influence of possible future selves perceived as desirable, disconcerting and/or achievable. Two formative instruments were central to our thinking. These were the Identity Status Interview developed by Marcia for his Ego-Identity Status research (1966), and the Possible Selves Questionnaire originally constructed by Markus and Nurius for their work on "positive" selves (1986).

Approach

We sought through the study to answer two research questions:

1. In what ways might the development of an ePortfolio heighten final-year writing students' career literacies?
2. To what extent might a concurrent professional internship and open blogging help or hinder this development?

In the final year of the PWP program, students have the opportunity to take a capstone unit involving an industry internship. Lee (2015, n.p.) describes capstones as "culminating curriculum experiences for students, undertaken in their final year of study". As such, they signify a crowning achievement for students and are one of what Kuh (2008) refers to as high-impact educational practices. The study was delivered within the capstone unit because we saw the potential for internships to give students the opportunity to create a portfolio of evidence as they progressed through their industry experience. Within the unit, students were required to establish an ePortfolio, using the University-provided ePortfolio space. They were required to submit two career-development tools and their ePortfolio "home page" as part of their assessment tasks. A capacity statement was a required item for the ePortfolio homepage. Regular posting to an online group blog was also part of the assessment for the unit.

The study sample of 14 students (two male and 12 female) was drawn from this unit. Four students were studying a Bachelor's degree with a PWP major, three were graduate students undertaking a coursework component of a Masters or Graduate Diploma in Professional Communication, four students were studying double majors in PWP and creative writing (n=3) or history (n=1), and three were undertaking double degrees with a PWP major and a business or commerce major. Eight students were in their final semester of study, with the others due to complete within 12 months. Students are identified here with pseudonyms appropriate to their gender and cultural background.

Students were invited to participate in the study as part of their enrolment, and could withdraw at any time without prejudice. Students attended two career-related workshops and an instructional ePortfolio session; they also attended three meetings with their lecturer and had access to technical support. All students were required to participate each week in an online blog that connected students with peers and their lecturers. Each student had to contribute a minimum of six blogs posts of 200-250 words as well as at least six responses to other students' posts; however, many of the students participated to a greater extent than this. Students used open blogging. They did not need to submit any materials for analysis by the research team.

Data collection involved the online blog and two focus-group discussions. Focus-group interviews (4,020 and 8,890 words respectively) and blog entries (a total of 66,263 words) were transcribed into Word documents. Initial analysis involved inductive coding by both researchers, after which coding was compared and refinements applied. This analysis led to categories that were considered within the framework of Cook's literacies. The following discussion was generated from the refined categories.

Findings and Discussion

ePortfolios and heightened self-awareness

Reviewing the literature on higher-education students' development of professional identities, Trede, Macklin and Bridges (2012, p.379) found support for the contention that "[p]rofessional identity development is fostered by the authentic experiences of students in the workplace". The construct of a successful internship, then, is not merely about solving practical problems: it is a matter of students developing a real life "case" so they can develop their identity as graduates (rather than students) through knowledge production within local contexts.

This knowledge production demands higher-order thinking, critical engagement and self-reflexivity, which, as Surma (2005) and others (cf. Cook 2002; Spigelman 2006; Williamson 2011) indicate, is often in conflict with students' desire to develop a set of practical skills and formulae that they can use to gain good grades and create an income. This is a conflict that arises within the PWP program quite regularly. Students may, for example, express frustration that they are not provided with "templates" for each assessment task, failing to recognise the value of the skills they develop in researching and conceptualising the complexities of a task for themselves. Indeed, it may only be in their final-year internship unit that some students come to identify the nature of the higher-order skills required in the workplace to address problems and to work collaboratively with others.

Viewing this through the lens of Cook's (2002) "six layered literacies", we might suggest that students are generally aware of the value of Cook's basic, technological and, to some extent, rhetorical literacies, but do not see the importance of her social, ethical and critical literacies. Nor do they see the fluidity, layering and interrelationship of these literacies within writing (and pedagogical) practice. When students undertake their final-year semester internship they are often required to use these higher literacies; it is only at this point that they recognise the complexity of what might initially appear to be a simple task. Our experience in other programs suggests that these concerns are common to educators across multiple disciplines.

When applying for graduate positions, students also begin to grasp that employers may be more interested in generic or transferable skills than they are in discipline-specific skills. This realisation often occurs as graduating students encounter a labour market where they learn that communications roles are diverse and rapidly changing and many workers have multiple concurrent and overlapping roles. For the successful accomplishment of writing tasks in professional settings, situation-specific types of writing knowledge need to be used in practice and links made between general and specific knowledge.

Students in this study were keenly aware of their limited professional experience. They were also concerned about the labour market itself, particularly given that they were graduating into a local economy that was contracting:

> What are your thoughts on future jobs? Are you enjoying the [internship] industry you are in? Applying for jobs is quite difficult, some of the applications are really comprehensive! Daunting task! (Lee, blog)

> I think more than anything at the moment I am realising that uni is finishing soon along with this placement and the job hunt will have to begin! With this placement experience, I discovered that I really would like to try and find an editorial job in Perth. Sadly, that is way easier said than done. I am sure a handful of us here have looked up [recruitment website] only to find maybe one or two positions available. (Qiang, blog)

> It appears the challenge in securing employment is not so much lack of opportunities, but having enough experience, and being able to sell ourselves, which is something that is in our control to improve. (Suzi, blog)

In practical terms, the ability to demonstrate skills and capacities is crucial; hence an ePortfolio has the potential to become a valuable repository of evidence. Although such a repository is undoubtedly useful when job-seeking, there is growing evidence that the *process* of developing a

portfolio might have considerable impact on students' self-efficacy and professional identity. This study found links with this evidence when students made choices about what to include in their portfolios (Johnsen 2012), considered the audience/s to which their portfolios might be shown (Bacabac 2013) and presented the persona/s they decided to adopt (Ramírez 2011). Each of these tasks required future-oriented thinking.

ePortfolio and concurrent internship

We had hypothesised that the process of developing an ePortfolio during their internship might help students develop self-awareness and professional identity, and that it might provide us with evidence of the development of Cook's social, ethical and critical literacies. Central to the discussion of ePortfolio development is what competencies students choose to display (Janssen, Berlanga & Sloep 2012; Skiba 2005). Whereas in some professional programs, accreditation requirements determine the types of evidence to be included and the rationale or purpose of each artefact, the students of generalist degrees such as writing must determine for themselves what evidence and persona/s they wish to present to future employers and clients. Further, the complex labour market into which they will transition will require regular renegotiation of identity in line with new tasks and skillsets (Bennett et al. 2014). This requires a portfolio that is both a site of evidence and an adaptable "showcase" of the skills and experiences relevant to each opportunity.

In this study, students seized opportunities to collect evidence throughout their internships and often requested the permission of supervisors to include a piece of work or positive feedback. Ten of the 14 students completed ePortfolios that were more involved than was required for the course. These portfolios represented effective personal archives as well as being professional tools for sharing with potential employers and clients. Students created self-narratives and connected aspects of their lives and study to existing self-efficacy, possible future careers and professional identity. They were self-reflexive in their thinking and able to dialogue with themselves. Moreover, they learned to interrogate what they had learned and the evidence they were placing in their ePortfolio in the context of career goals and interests. This forced them to demonstrate social, ethical and critical literacies as they made choices of evidence for their ePortfolios and contextualised that evidence for potential readers/employers.

The issue of *whom* to portray was particularly problematic. For many students the project presented an opportunity to challenge their professional identities for the first time:

I still have a semester to go and I have no idea what I want to do. (Clare, focus group 2)

I've gotten much more focused this year, but I still have another year and I don't really know, because I'm doing a double degree, I'm still trying to feel the waters, I don't really know. (Peta, focus group 2)

These students progressed from diffuse or unconsidered identities to identity crisis, which Marcia (1987) advocates as a crucial stage in the development and negotiation of identity. This phase can be thought of as a moratorium during which identity is challenged and new opportunities are considered. In terms of identity development and self-discovery, crisis is a prerequisite to identity achievement.

By the end of the semester, many of the students had realised the links between the project, self-discovery and building an ePortfolio. In many cases students employed more-complex literacies to make these connections:

I actually liked doing it and trying to figure out myself and everything. [There are] things I couldn't have vocalised without the sessions we've done. And you think, "I don't know myself." Well, in some respects, no...I think that the portfolio facilitates that to some extent, and that's so valuable to know or understand...that you fit into certain boxes, that you can fulfil certain criteria. You are a certain type of person or you have a certain set of skills. Actually compartmentalising things like that, I think, is difficult to do in life in general unless you have a framework, and I think the portfolio provides that framework. (Clare, focus group 2)

I was doing all these assignments but I didn't realise what the practical applications were, and now that I've got some experience I can look back and say, "Oh, this actually applies!" And I think particularly with "professional writing and publishing", when you say that to someone, no one knows what that is, and I didn't really know what it was either. And it's only now that I have these sort of practical examples that I can go, "Oh, it's just writing in a whole series of forms," and they can go, "What kind of forms?" And I can go, "Well, you know…." And I think the ePortfolio kind of helped me understand what I'm actually doing, if that makes any sense. (Wendy, focus group 1)

Seen here, students employed future-oriented thinking as they reflected back on previous experience, creating new meaning as a result. These quotes illustrate the students' recognition of Cook's interlayered literacies. Wendy, for example, identified Cook's basic and rhetorical literacies as a key part of her skillset ("writing in a whole series of forms") but illustrated social and critical literacy in the way she translated her own understanding of her academic studies into a format that might appeal to potential employers. Clare's recognition that at some level she didn't "know herself" and that the framework of the ePortfolio provided her with additional self-knowledge is a demonstration of the self-reflection that is inherent in working across Cook's full range of literacies.

Similarly, aligning the internship with the professional portfolio enabled us to support students as they began the transition from student to professional, which was troublesome for many students:

I've got one more semester, but in this year there's been serious contemplation about what to do. I'm still not sure, but [I'm] more sure than I was before I did this unit. (Paul, focus group 2)

I think I started thinking about it [my career]…when we were talking about going into the workplace, so I think I went home and started researching about what I wanted to do. (Qiang, focus group 2)

I think I started thinking actually about employment at the beginning of this unit. It's always been in the back of my head, but I think having a placement, it's like, "Okay, I'm working, and there's a tangible career at the end of it!" And so it definitely makes you think that it's a possibility, not just a vague writing degree – there're actually jobs at the end of it! (Billie, focus group 2)

It's made a big difference for me, this unit...this last year has changed my view and I'm making smarter decisions. (Suzi, focus group 2)

> I did it [the unit] because I knew it would force me out into the workplace, and once I had the confidence from the internship I'd be able to go, "Okay, I survived that, now I can apply for positions." (Wendy, focus group 2)

Students often recognised multiple stories that they could tell about themselves, and realised that they needed to focus their ePortfolio development around only one or two of those stories. Some students expressed the need for multiple home pages to illustrate different writing selves, such as an aspiring creative writer and a professional writer or editor. This is likely to trouble many undergraduate students whose career pathways are undefined. Logically, given that many of the students in this study were in their final semester of study and were seeking work, students focused on providing evidence of their abilities as professional writers; however, many students created additional pages on which to house their creative writing, and a few students took advantage of an available tool and developed capacity statements that encapsulated multiple writing selves.

ePortfolio and blog discussions

The online blog was designed to be a reflective and social resource during the internship period, and the simultaneous ePortfolio development meant that the process and content of the portfolio were brought into the blog discussions. Students, for example, used the blog to share draft capacity statements written for their home pages. The cohort worked as a learning community, giving and receiving feedback and constructive criticism and allowing students to benefit from multiple sources of feedback, as shown in the blog-comment exchange below. We note that in most cases students began by acknowledging the difficulty of the task and affirming the quality of the draft.

Wendy: I've just about had it with my capacity statement, have redone it a dozen times and am not sure it works…. I'm also not in a position to talk along the lines of "I bring ten years of experience in the public and private sector to the table blah blah" because we're obviously still studying.... Any feedback on the statement I've attached would be absolutely fantastic.

Jo: Sounds a lot better than mine! Perhaps include a bit about other things aside from unit to give yourself more character? Are you involved in any groups/organisations?

Billie: Great start! I also find it challenging – we need to be convinced that we are very interesting people ☺ …. I like the fact that you detail the tasks you could undertake – it implies your skills!... [Grammatical advice follows] I got curious when you said that you changed degree. How about elaborating on that…so we can see that on top of loving to learn new things, you keep growing. It is not just a list of skills – once you have the skill, you find a use for it in other things that you do.

Here, the students undertook a collaborative writing task that resulted in a final capacity statement for Wendy that was more sophisticated than her original draft. Another common theme was the point at which one could claim the identity of a writer. At the second of the focus-group interviews, one student prompted a discussion about how students described themselves and the point at which one "becomes" a professional writer. An abridged version of this conversation follows:

Suzi   Oh it's so tough. At the moment [if I'm asked what I do], I just go "uni student". It's much easier than trying to – I don't even know yet –it's kind of....

Wendy: I just kind of fall back on "publisher", because people understand that, even though it's not really what we do. They kind of latch on to the publishing part, and go, "Oh, so like you publish books?" And I go, "Yeah that will do."

Suzi: It's just hard, isn't it, because if you're at uni, you know to try and say, "I'm trying to get into writing"....

Lee: I don't think you need to be paid as a writer to be a writer. I mean…if something was to come up, then I would say, "Oh, I'm a writer".... So just because I'm not being paid as a writer, doesn't mean that I'm not a writer.

Suzi: For me, if I'm getting paid to write, I know that's bad to say, but if I'm getting paid to write, then I would go, "I'm a writer." Like, even if I'm published, I still...to actually get paid to write, for me, would be the definitive thing as a writer. I don't know if that's a bad thing.

Lee: I think if I feel I'm qualified to apply for writing positions, then I'm a writer.

Jen: Be it! (Agreement from around the room.)

Suzi: I'm a professional writer! (Everyone laughs and applauds.) (Focus group 2)

Students' concerns are logical given that publications and paid employment form the basis of a writer's career or reputation. Focusing on creative writers, Janssen (1998) proposes that being considered a writer depends on publications, and not on academic qualifications or other formal criteria. For students planning to work as freelance writers or editors, however, identifying as a writer is crucial to self-concept and self-efficacy.

The process of building a portfolio involved searching for a wide range of evidence, and this led students to think beyond writing to the value of other work and experiences. The majority of students had not previously considered the relevance of these to their professional portfolio, but they began to include evidence of skilled and unskilled work, languages, overseas work and voluntary roles:

Lee: I will use it [the portfolio] to keep records of examples of my work, and constantly update my achievements and experience so that whenever I am applying for a new job, or whatever I am doing, you can go…"Okay, I did that," or "This piece of work is really relevant to this job I'm applying for, so I'll use that." (Focus group 2)

Suzi: I haven't done anything yet, but I want to kind of get some of my creative stuff up there as well, because I paint.... (Focus group 1)

Clare: (Responding to Suzi.) To show that you have got interests that extend beyond just the university stuff you've been studying or just the work you've been doing, you've got another dimension. And perhaps if an employer was looking for someone with an eye, it might, maybe, like, for design in magazines and stuff like that, that could be an advantage. (Focus group 1)

As seen, students began through these conversations to construct broader self-narratives and to offer peer support. As they shared diverse previous and internship experiences, new possibilities for the inclusion of evidence emerged naturally.

Encouraged to look at common selection criteria, students started to use diverse experiences to collect evidence for their attributes; for example, noting they had learned effective customer service and communication skills through their part-time or voluntary work. They began to think of graduate attributes in a different light:

Lee: You could just say, you know, "Evidence that I have great intercultural skills is blah, bah, blah". It could work nicely…seeing them more as selection criteria than as only graduate attributes. They are key things that you sell to an employer. (Focus group 2)

Many students felt they would have benefitted from making these links earlier in their studies:

Clare: For me it's not until second semester of third year that I've gone, "Oh, graduate attributes, yeah, I could do that. I could do that, too. Maybe I should do that particular thing a bit more." But I'm at the end of my degree, so I have to do it by myself. (Focus group 2)

The clearest evidence of rethinking graduate attributes in terms of professional identity was found in students' capacity statements. Students whose capacity statements integrated their skills and experience also developed strong ePortfolios generally. These students chose evidence wisely, contextualised the evidence appropriately and approached the ePortfolio as an opportunity to present a job-ready self rather than simply loading the assessable items as individual tasks.

In other cases, students needed assistance to be self-reflexive and dialogic. This was provided through the two focus groups, the blog and lecturer feedback on draft portfolios. A key aspect was self-reflexivity rather than high-level writing skills, although often the two went together. This is in line with Peel (2005) and Trede, Macklin and Bridges (2012), who stress the importance of reflexivity in professional-identity formation. One student, whose writing skills were not at a high level for a graduating student, created a comprehensive and well-designed portfolio. She used her internship to reflect deeply upon her own interests and skills and to target areas in need of development. Her proactive use of the internship and her thinking about the ePortfolio were more sophisticated than she had demonstrated in any previous study, leading us to conclude that the combination of internship, portfolio creation and blog tasks had helped her gain new skills. The student herself reported on her growth during the semester:

> Looking back, I believe this has been the most beneficial unit of the professional writing major.... The skills I learnt on my placement have been transferable.... This semester, I have found myself better managing my time, completing drafts of my assignments before the deadline, and going over them several times before submission.... the quality of my work has definitely improved, which has been noticed by some of my lecturers. I am proud of the personal growth I have gained this semester.... I am more focused on the future, have more confidence, and am excited about my future as a professional writer. (Suzi, blog)

This student was very active on the online blog, commenting 49 times on other students' posts as well as writing her six mandated posts. Based on the comments of her workplace supervisor (in the final employers' report) and her lecturer, as well as her own self-reports, it appears that her

internship helped bring into focus some of the interrelationships between basic literacies and social, ethical and critical literacies. We saw her begin to use critical literacy in her work and to develop a more sophisticated approach to writing tasks. Suzi's sense that she was actively helping other students through the blog, coupled with her workplace experience, appeared to contribute to a growth of confidence in working with others. Collaborative work can often be a challenge for writing students (some of whom are drawn to writing degrees because of discomfort with what they think of as more people-oriented domains). Suzi's workplace supervisor noted her initial lack of ability to contribute to team meetings, but also that this changed over time, so that by the end of her work experience she was beginning to speak up and make useful contributions.

In contrast, another student, who was a good writer and very quick to learn and who received excellent reports from his employer, did not embrace the ePortfolio as a focus for any sort of career-identity development. He completed the assessed tasks without any apparent impact on his identity, career goals or ability to present himself as employable. He also participated in the online blog only enough to meet the requirements, and we wondered if this was one reason he didn't develop his ePortfolio more. Whereas other students thought through aspects of their identity collaboratively on the blog, Tim presented only factual information about his workplace experience. The lack of self-reflection is illustrated in the difficulties he faced when creating his capacity statement:

> I wasn't sure how to sell myself or my abilities. I mean, I don't consider myself useless, but when I was writing it I did, because I just had no idea what to put in all the boxes. (Tim, focus group 2)

For this student, basic, rhetorical and technological literacies were at a high level, but he did not integrate ethical, social or critical literacies.

Building Cook's literacies

Thinking through Cook's framework of layered literacies enabled us to become aware of the powerful effect of the online blog discussion between students as they provided technical and discipline advice and feedback (peer learning) for each other, as well as a supportive community of learners (peer support). For example, student discussions over what aspects of their internship work could or should be included in an ePortfolio addressed ethical literacy, as did discussions about ethical dilemmas faced during the internships. Similarly, discussions about the degree to which writing in the workplace is a group activity, and how their own work was edited many times by others, explored social literacy. This finding aligns with Bryce's (2014) work with students engaged in online discussion groups in which students "used each other as resources, and expanded the range of experiences and ideas beyond what they could think of and write about on their own" (n.p.).

One student, placed in an Australian Indigenous community organisation, took the role of educating other students about Indigenous issues as part of her contributions. One week she noted the health gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and another week she raised the issue of inclusive language. This created group discussion about disadvantage and how, as professional writers, they may be able to counter this. Critical literacy and the interrelation of all six literacies further became evident when students discussed what aspects of their academic degree related to future employment and should be included in their ePortfolios. In line with Bacarab's work (2012, p.93), the portfolios enabled students "to make preliminary rhetorical

choices that showcase the best samples of their academic and professional work from a prospective employer's point of view".

As expected, the internship led students to better understand what writing work might involve and the blog enabled them to look into multiple workplaces and contexts through the words of their peers. Peer learning came to the fore here and was clearly shown in the blog posts, where students prompted one another to seek permission to include work samples. Developing an ePortfolio within a supportive environment also enabled students to overcome fears about showcasing their work. For some students this prospect was initially daunting:

> I'm scared to let anybody look at it. And I'm worried about that I don't want people looking at my work, which is bad, because I know I'm going to have to get over that, I realise that, but I still feel really nervous about it. (Suzi, focus group 2)

> I think as people we don't like to talk ourselves up, we are a bit modest and you kind of feel pressured. (Jo, focus group 2)

Despite the challenges, this much-enhanced career preview was possibly the greatest influence on the portfolio as students realised the range of tasks they were likely to undertake and then strove to develop and produce evidence for relevant capabilities.

One negative aspect of the study was the added pressure of developing a portfolio whilst juggling other commitments such as the internship, family and work. Introducing basic portfolio work earlier in their degree program (as happens in many programs) could have mitigated this pressure. Students supported the earlier introduction of the ePortfolio, but they also noted they would have been unlikely to build an ePortfolio if it hadn't been a mandated, assessable item, as shown in this exchange during focus group 2.

Tim: I thought that maybe if you started at the start in the first units and you just put a little bit on it, and then you refined it as you went through each semester.

Clare: I reckon at least first semester of second year would be more realistic.

Lee: Yeah, because you're really busy and anytime you say to students, "You should do this, and you should do that", if it's not assessed, then they don't have time or energy or whatever, because there's so many things that they are juggling.

The study reported here was our third attempt to engage writing students in the development of an ePortfolio, and we agree with the students that learner engagement most often occurs once it is required as an assessment item. In this respect the students' comments reflect our own experiences of earlier years' ePortfolios; however, we believe that the early introduction of portfolios can deliver some of the benefits seen here if those portfolios are relevant, engaging and supported, if their use is embedded throughout a program and if they are in a format that gives ownership to students throughout their learning and into graduate life. We believe that the deeper engagement encountered in this third study is due to the fact that the ePortfolio was positioned as a relevant, practical and timely career-development tool.

Concluding Comments

As educators we understand that deep learning transpires from discourse in which contrary perspectives are travelled in mutually sustaining and constructive settings. In this study we hoped that the idea of collective argumentation would incorporate the collective values that enable learners to communicate with one another. As a process we hoped that this would encourage students to divulge their individual thinking about self and career, to mediate the different experiences through logical reasoning and to resolve contradictory statements. We believed that this was particularly important for the students of generalist degrees such as writing, where graduate careers can feature multiple roles, multiple entry attempts and multiple professional identities (Bennett, Richardson & MacKinnon 2015). Through the study we questioned in what ways the development of an ePortfolio might heighten final-year writing students' career literacies, and to what extent a concurrent internship might help or hinder this development.

Students' experiences within the class-based activities, online blog and internship enabled them to amass a diverse range of evidence for future employers or clients. In this sense the ePortfolio served as a repository for both experience and learning. Discussion of the learning and new knowledge gained within the workplace, together with debate as to how this might be shown within a portfolio, challenged students to better understand the relationship between theory and practice. The ePortfolio also enabled students to articulate their learning in a holistic way, as individual stories in which they reflected on the outcomes of their internships. It is true that not all recollections were positive, and the project offered students opportunities to reflect on challenges as well as achievements. Such reflection elicits an honesty and authenticity to the learning process alongside the concept of reflexive practice (Piihl, Rasmussen & Rowley 2013).

Combining the internship and ePortfolio enabled students to gather evidence during their internships. We note, however, that the added pressure of creating a professional portfolio weighed on a number of students. We have realised that students would benefit from creating the basic elements of their portfolios prior to their internships. This would ensure that technical challenges were already overcome. With the strong evidence described in this study for the positive impact of the combined approach on student learning and career literacies, the ePortfolio has been embedded within the capstone course, but it will be introduced earlier.

Hirst and Brown (2008, p.183) support the idea that educators should allow abundant classroom space and time for students to "represent, compare, explain, justify, agree with and validate their ideas". In this study the concept of classroom was much more broadly defined. The alignment of internship, ePortfolio development and regular face-to-face and online interactions prompted students to explore views of self and career – to develop literacies – from multiple perspectives. Cook's layered literacies emerged as a useful pedagogical framework and provided a conceptual tool for us to understand how students develop their skills and knowledge in the context of final-year studies.

The integrated approach resulted for some students in the development of what we describe as a seventh layer of literacy – career literacy. We define this as awareness of industry structures and potential roles and the ability and confidence to locate one's self within them. We argue that career literacy is realised only through industry-relevant learning and engagement through which each layer of literacy is explored and contextualised.

Today's professional writing and publishing students face a highly dynamic and unstable employment situation, where in-house digital publishing is more prevalent than traditional print publishing, where writing and communication activities are shared across many roles within organisations, and where the employment market is dominated by contract and portfolio work.

Career literacy in this setting emerges as a complex and unstable concept with which students need help and guidance, and in this sense the results may have relevance across multiple student cohorts. We assert that it is our role as educators to help students within generalist degrees – in our case, professional writing and publishing – develop their career literacy. In achieving this aim, the combination of ePortfolio and internship has great promise.

Earlier, we noted growing evidence that the *process* of developing a portfolio might have considerable impact on students' self-efficacy and professional identity; this study added to that body of evidence. The process of creating a homepage challenged students to consider what and whom it would represent. They had to think about potential audiences and the persona or personae required for each; the evidence that might interest each audience; and the relevance of their formal and informal experiences in creating this evidence.

In the *process* of this development, which involved peer discussion and multiple stories of work, students began to critique both their competence and perceived areas of deficiency. Within these discussions we caught a glimpse of learners who were becoming learners with agency, and, in turn, professionals with agency. The reason for this lay in the development of identity, which in this capstone course prompted the process of identity transition through the observation of role models (including peers), experimentation with possible or provisional selves, and opportunities to intrinsically and extrinsically evaluate their experience. We anticipate that such interventions, with appropriate scaffolding, have the potential to develop career curiosity and self-authorship far earlier in a student's learning journey.

Acknowledgements

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