

Enhancing Social Work Education Through E-Portfolios: Pedagogical Practices and Praxis at the University of Fort Hare

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Abstract: The integration of digital tools in higher education has transformed pedagogical practices, particularly in professional disciplines such as social work. This study explores the use of e-portfolios in social work education at the University of Fort Hare, emphasizing their role in enhancing student learning, reflection, and professional identity formation. By adopting a praxis-oriented approach, the study examines how e-portfolios facilitate experiential learning, critical engagement, and competency development. The findings highlight best practices in implementing e-portfolios, including student support, and assessment strategies. Furthermore, the study discusses challenges such as digital accessibility and the need for faculty capacity-building. Ultimately, the research examines the potential of e-portfolios to bridge theoretical knowledge and practical application, equipping students with essential skills for professional social work practice.

Keywords: E-portfolios, Social Work Education, Pedagogy, Praxis.

1. Background

In 2019, the Teaching and Learning Centre at the University of Fort Hare introduced e-Portfolios to address the persistent challenges associated with managing large volumes of hardcopy portfolios submitted by students for work integrated learning. Within the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, and specifically in the Social Work programme, the move to e-Portfolios was driven by a need to streamline submission processes, reduce physical storage burdens, and align assessment practices with the growing emphasis on digital literacy in higher education. Initially piloted in professional education programmes, the e-Portfolio initiative was progressively extended to include students in social work, especially as part of their fieldwork and practice learning requirements. By 2020, in response to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the University shifted to online modalities, and e-Portfolio training was integrated into the institutional Learning Management System called Blackboard. Using Blackboard Collaborate, students were introduced to digital tools on Blackboard for their e-portfolios to document their learning, reflections, and professional growth. The transition to digital portfolios represents a significant pedagogical shift. It enables students to curate evidence of their theoretical grounding and applied competencies in a dynamic and accessible format. E-Portfolios have since become a central component of the teaching and learning strategy in social work education at the University of Fort Hare, supporting critical reflection, experiential learning, and professional identity formation. This paper explores how e-Portfolios are enhancing pedagogical practices and shaping a praxis-oriented approach to learning in social work, contributing to more holistic and student-centred education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 E-Portfolios in Higher Education

The integration of e-portfolios into social work education at the University of Fort Hare reflects a broader pedagogical shift in higher education aimed at promoting reflective, experiential, and student-centered learning. E-portfolios are digital collections of student work that showcase evidence of learning, growth, and competency development over time. In social work education, they serve as dynamic platforms for integrating academic knowledge with field-based practice, fostering a praxis-oriented approach essential for developing ethical and competent practitioners (Panke, 2014).

2.2 Role of Digital Tools

The integration of digital tools in higher education has significantly transformed pedagogical approaches, shifting from traditional, teacher-centred methods to more student-centred and technology-enhanced learning environments (Redecker & Punie, 2017). Among these innovations, e-portfolios have emerged as dynamic platforms that support the documentation, reflection, and assessment of student learning over time. E-portfolios are defined as digital collections of students' work that showcase academic development, critical reflections, and professional skills (Barrett, 2010). They also serve as integrative learning tools, enabling students

to connect disparate learning experiences into a cohesive professional narrative (Batson, Chen, Watson, & Zubizarreta, 2007). Over the past decade, scholarship has highlighted both their successes and the need for continued exploration into their pedagogical potential (Yancey, 2009). In the context of social work education, e-portfolios are widely recognised for fostering critical reflection, ethical awareness, and the integration of theory with practice (Ajandi, Chan, & Daniels, 2019).

They also provide structured frameworks for evaluating both student learning and curriculum effectiveness, ensuring assessment processes capture the breadth of professional competencies (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004). In addition, they serve multiple functions, including demonstrating competency, facilitating feedback, and supporting both formative and summative assessment (Stefani, Mason, & Pegler, 2007). Within competency-based and outcomes-driven education, e-portfolios are particularly valuable as they provide tangible evidence of learning, integrate theoretical knowledge with practical application, and monitor progress across various learning outcomes (Garrett, 2011). Furthermore, they have proven effective in evaluating curriculum design and student learning outcomes, ensuring that programme objectives are met while capturing the complexity of professional development (Fitch, Peet, Glover Reed, & Tolman, 2013). However, their adoption particularly in African higher education contexts is closely linked to broader issues of digital access and inclusivity, with structural inequalities in ICT infrastructure shaping the extent to which students can engage effectively with such tools (Asongu, Orim, & Nting, 2019). This makes e-portfolios an essential tool for disciplines such as social work, where reflective practice, evidence-based learning, and demonstrable competency are central to professional training.

2.3 E- Portfolios in Social Work Education

The integration of digital tools in higher education has significantly transformed pedagogical approaches, driving a shift from traditional, teacher-centred methods to more student-centred and technology-enhanced learning environments (Redecker & Punie, 2017). Among these innovations, e-portfolios have emerged as dynamic platforms for the documentation, reflection, and assessment of student learning over time. Defined as digital collections of students' work that demonstrate academic development, critical reflections, and professional skills (Barrett, 2010), e-portfolios also function as integrative learning tools, enabling students to connect diverse learning experiences into a cohesive professional narrative (Batson, Chen, Watson, & Zubizarreta, 2007). Over the past decade, research has highlighted both the successes of e-portfolio implementation and the need for continued exploration of their full pedagogical potential (Yancey, 2009). In social work education specifically, e-portfolios are recognised for fostering critical reflection, ethical practice, and the integration of theory with field-based learning (Ajandi, Chan, & Daniels, 2019). They have also been used as structured frameworks for evaluating both student learning and programme effectiveness, ensuring that assessment captures the full scope of professional competencies (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004). Beyond these pedagogical benefits, e-portfolios perform multiple functions, including demonstrating competency, facilitating feedback, and supporting both formative and summative assessment (Stefani, Mason, & Pegler, 2007). Within competency-based and outcomes-driven education, they are particularly valuable for providing tangible evidence of learning, linking theoretical knowledge with practical application, and tracking progress across diverse learning outcomes (Garrett, 2011). Furthermore, they have proven effective in evaluating curriculum design and student learning outcomes, ensuring alignment between programme objectives and professional development goals (Fitch, Peet, Glover Reed, & Tolman, 2013). However, their adoption especially within African higher education contexts remains closely tied to broader issues of digital access and inclusivity, with structural inequalities in ICT infrastructure influencing students' ability to fully engage with such tools (Asongu, Orim, & Nting, 2019). Collectively, these qualities make e-portfolios an essential resource in disciplines such as social work, where reflective practice, evidence-based learning, and demonstrable competency are central to professional training.

2.4 Empirical Evidence on the use of E-portfolios Effectiveness

Empirical evidence on the effectiveness of e-portfolios highlights their significant role in enhancing learning outcomes across diverse educational contexts. Studies consistently show that e-portfolios serve as powerful tools for self-reflection, skill development, and career preparation, offering multifaceted benefits to students and professionals alike. In higher education, research conducted at West Visayas State University found that e-portfolios significantly improved students' academic performance, creativity, and self-reflection skills, with no differences observed across gender or grade levels (Siosan, 2023). Similarly, at Ritsumeikan University, e-portfolios were shown to enhance career advising by fostering student independence and proactive engagement, leading to improved career planning strategies (Higuchi & Takekawa, 2011).

In the context of job market preparation, research on IT job seekers revealed that e-portfolios facilitated the hiring process by enabling employers to evaluate candidates more comprehensively than through traditional curriculum vitae, resulting in higher acceptance rates (Tasji & Turani, 2023). Furthermore, in clinical education, a study on practitioner nurses demonstrated that e-portfolios significantly improved clinical competence, with participants in the e-portfolio group achieving higher post-test scores in both knowledge and performance compared to a control group (Najaffard et al., 2024).

These findings complement previous studies in social work education that have shown how e-portfolios support competency-based assessment, facilitate feedback, and encourage integration of theory with practice (Garrett, 2011; McGuire, Lay, & Peters, 2009). Through structured reflection, students develop critical thinking skills and strengthen links between theoretical frameworks and field-based practice, in line with **Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model** and **Schön's (1983) reflective practice approach**.

While the benefits are evident, scholars caution that the effectiveness of e-portfolios is influenced by user engagement, digital literacy, and institutional support. This suggests the need for sustained training, curriculum integration, and alignment with professional standards to maximise their impact and ensure sustainable adoption in higher education contexts.

2.5 Pedagogical Theories Underpinning E-Portfolio Use

The use of e-portfolios in social work education at the University of Fort Hare is grounded in several key pedagogical theories that emphasize active, reflective, and socially situated learning. Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning underlines the importance of learning through experience, where students engage in a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. E-portfolios facilitate this process by allowing students to document and reflect on their fieldwork and classroom learning. Complementing this, Schön's (1983) concept of reflective practice positions students as reflective practitioners who learn by thinking critically about their actions and experiences in real-world contexts. E-portfolios serve as a space for this critical reflection, fostering deeper understanding and professional growth. Additionally, Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practice highlights the value of collaborative learning and identity formation within professional communities. Through peer feedback, shared digital artifacts, and collaborative reflection, e-portfolios help students participate in a learning community, supporting their integration into the professional culture of social work.

3. Theoretical Framework and its Application

This study is anchored in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) and Schön's Reflective Practice Model (1983). These frameworks emphasize the cyclical nature of learning through experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application principles that are foundational in professional education, particularly in social work. Kolb's model supports the development of competencies through active engagement with real-world experiences, while Schön's work emphasises the importance of reflective practice in forming professional identity and integrating theory with practice. The e-portfolio, as both a pedagogical and assessment tool, enables students to document, reflect on, and assess their learning journey in alignment with these theories.

Kolb (1984) conceptualizes learning as a continuous process involving four stages:

- **Concrete experience** through students starting with a practical or real-world experience example: community placement or case study.
- **Reflective observation** involves reflect on what happened, how they felt, what worked, and what did not.
- **Abstract conceptualization** involves linking their reflections to theories, frameworks, or professional knowledge (example social justice theory, ethical guidelines).
- **Active experimentation** is when they use these insights to inform future practice or decision-making.

According to this model, students gain knowledge by engaging in experiences, reflecting on them, forming theoretical insights, and applying those insights in new situations. In the context of social work education, this cycle facilitates the development of professional competencies through active engagement with real-world scenarios such as field placements, service-learning projects, and applied case studies. These experiences form the basis for reflective learning and theoretical synthesis, which are critical for developing practical skills and professional judgment.

Complementing Kolb's framework is Schön's (1983) concept of the **reflective practitioner**, which highlights the importance of reflective thinking in professional learning. Schön distinguishes between **reflection-in-action** (thinking during the activity) and **reflection-on-action** (thinking after the activity), both of which are integral to the formation of professional identity and the capacity to navigate complex, uncertain practice environments. This is especially relevant in social work, where students must continuously analyze their decisions and experiences to align with ethical standards, social justice values, and client-centered approaches.

The integration of e-portfolios into the social work curriculum aligns with these theories by providing a structured space for students to **document their experiences, critically reflect on their learning, and demonstrate their professional growth over time**. As both a pedagogical and assessment tool, the e-portfolio supports experiential and reflective learning, enabling students to make meaningful connections between academic knowledge and field-based practice. Through the iterative process of capturing experiences, articulating insights, and planning for future action, students engage in a cycle of learning that embodies the principles articulated by both Kolb and Schön. In this way, e-portfolios serve as a platform for **praxis**, the synthesis of theory and practice which is foundational to the preparation of competent and reflective social work professionals.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) and Schön's Reflective Practice Model (1983), both of which emphasize the cyclical nature of learning through experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. Data were collected using a structured evaluation form administered to second year social work students who participated in an e-portfolio training session. The instrument included both closed-ended questions (e.g., Likert-scale responses on confidence, usability, and perceived support) and open-ended prompts that encouraged students to articulate their reflections on the training experience, expectations, and learning needs. Quantitative data was analyzed descriptively to identify patterns in digital confidence and usability, while qualitative responses were thematically coded to surface insights into students' engagement with experiential and reflective learning processes. This design allowed the study to examine how students moved through the stages of experiential learning from concrete experience during the training to reflective observation and conceptual understanding and how they began to internalize the reflective practices necessary for professional social work. The alignment of the research design with these pedagogical frameworks ensured that data collection and analysis captured not only cognitive outcomes but also the reflective and affective dimensions critical to competency development and professional identity formation in social work education.

4.2 Sampling

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy to select participants who were directly involved in the e-portfolio training initiative within the Department of Social Work at the University of Fort Hare. Participants included undergraduate social work students who attended the structured training session on e-portfolio usage, as they were best positioned to provide informed feedback on the pedagogical value and practical implementation of e-portfolios in their field work experience. This sampling method ensured that data was gathered from individuals who had firsthand experience with the intervention, aligning with the study's focus on experiential and reflective learning. A total of 98 students completed the evaluation form, offering both quantitative and qualitative data relevant to the research objectives. The purposive nature of the sample supports the study's interpretive approach, which seeks in depth of understanding, particularly in relation to how students engage with digital tools to enhance professional learning and identity development.

4.3 Data Collection

The data collection process was integrated into the conclusion of the e-portfolio training session to ensure high response rates and capture immediate student feedback. Participants were provided with digital versions of the evaluation form to accommodate different levels of digital accessibility. The instrument was developed to align with the study's theoretical framework, particularly emphasizing reflective learning and user engagement with digital tools. Instructions were clearly communicated, and participants were given adequate time to complete the form independently. The collection process also ensured anonymity to encourage candid reflections,

particularly on challenges related to platform use, confidence levels, and expectations for applying e-portfolios in their academic and fieldwork contexts.

4.4 Data Analysis

According to Udah et al. (2024), data analytics entails the systematic examination of large and complex datasets to uncover hidden patterns, correlations, and valuable insights. In this study, students' narratives were subjected to content analysis, focusing on phrases, meaning units, sentences, and keywords. These were color-coded in alignment with the predetermined thematic framework, and the extracted datasets were subsequently categorized into thematic groups.

A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating thematic analysis with descriptive statistics. Quantitative responses from Likert-scale items were analyzed using basic statistical techniques to identify trends in student confidence, usability perceptions, and support needs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These descriptive findings offered a concise overview of students' engagement with the e-portfolio platform following the training.

Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed by looking at recurring phrases and concepts grouped into broader categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process yielded key themes such as digital preparedness, reflective practice, and the integration of theory with practice.

The thematic analysis was grounded in Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory and Schön's (1983) Reflective Practice Model, both of which conceptualize learning as a dynamic, cyclical process involving active participation, reflection, and conceptualization. These frameworks provided a pedagogical lens through which the qualitative findings could be coherently interpreted within the context of social work education.

5. Results

In line with Schon's Reflective Practice Model and Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, descriptive statistics and thematic coding were used to evaluate the data from 98 second-year social work students. This framework gave educators a way to analyze how students developed during and after the e-portfolio training by tracking their progress through the experiential learning cycle.

5.1 Concrete Experience

The training session functioned as the immediate, hands-on learning experience within **Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Model**. Before the session, 83 students (84.7%) reported having no prior exposure to e-portfolios, indicating that the training introduced a completely new learning environment for most of the students. Despite this initial unfamiliarity, post-training results demonstrated a notable improvement in confidence levels, with 59.2% of students stating that they felt *slightly confident*, 35.7% reporting that they were *very confident*, and only 5.1% indicating that they remained *not confident*. In addition, students identified hands-on demonstrations as the most beneficial aspect of the training. Activities such as live submission practice and navigation walkthroughs gave them direct, tangible engagement with the platform. Many responses referenced "submission," "final upload," and "practical steps," reinforcing the value of experiential exposure.

Qualitative feedback from open-ended responses revealed that students found the **practical demonstrations** particularly beneficial. Activities such as *submitting the portfolio*, *completing the final submission process*, and *navigating the platform* were consistently mentioned as the most helpful elements of the session. These findings directly align with the **hands-on engagement** principle central to the *concrete experience* stage of Kolb's learning cycle, where students benefit from direct participation in realistic, practice-based activities.

5.2 Reflective Observation

Within Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle, the reflective observation stage requires students to look back on their experiences and evaluate them critically. When students were asked whether the e-portfolio would assist them in reflecting on their learning journey, 56.1% explicitly responded "Yes," while an additional proportion offered qualified agreement, indicating responses such as "*I think so.*"

Qualitative feedback revealed recurring themes of self-assessment, tracking progress, and identifying strengths and weaknesses. Students expressed that the e-portfolio could help them monitor their academic and professional development in a structured manner. One student articulated this sentiment by stating: "*By looking*

at my challenges and experiences and achievements, I can better understand how I am developing both professionally and personally in the field of social work."

This response reflects a recognition of the e-portfolio's potential as a deliberate and structured tool for reflection-on-action, as conceptualized by Schön (1983). Through this process, students demonstrated an ability to integrate self-awareness into their ongoing professional growth, linking personal experiences to their development as emerging social work practitioners.

5.3 Abstract Conceptualization

In the abstract conceptualization stage of Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle, students move beyond reflection to connect their experiences with theoretical frameworks and structured knowledge. The students' expectations of the e-portfolio revealed evidence of emerging theoretical integration, with many responses highlighting its value in linking theory to practice and in deepening their understanding of social work frameworks.

The analysis also revealed specific areas where students felt they required additional support to effectively use the e-portfolio. The most frequently mentioned needs included uploading and organizing content (36.7%), navigating the platform (24.5%), and linking theory to practice (14.3%). These skill gaps suggest that while students were beginning to make connections between their learning experiences and professional theory, further conceptual scaffolding is necessary to consolidate these insights.

This stage highlights the importance of ongoing academic support to ensure that students are able to situate their practice within recognized professional standards and the broader values of social justice that underpin social work education. Providing targeted guidance in both the technical and conceptual aspects of e-portfolio use will be critical in supporting students to fully integrate their experiential learning with disciplinary theory.

5.4 Active Experimentation

The final stage of Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle, active experimentation, involves applying newly acquired knowledge and skills to future contexts. When students were asked whether they felt ready to work independently on their e-portfolios, 40.8% responded "Yes," 39.8% answered "Maybe," and 19.4% indicated "No." These mixed responses suggest varying levels of readiness to transfer the training experience into independent application, with a strong correlation observed between readiness and reported confidence levels. Students who felt prepared to work independently often outlined clear plans for using the e-portfolio to prepare for field placements, monitor their academic progression, and document professional competencies for future employment or practice requirements.

However, several challenges emerged that may hinder effective active experimentation. Digital literacy gaps and difficulties in platform navigation were notable barriers, with 11.2% of respondents rating the platform as "difficult" to use and 3.1% describing it as "very difficult." These findings indicate that while a proportion of students are ready to independently apply their learning, ongoing technical support and targeted skills training will be necessary to ensure that all students can fully engage with the e-portfolio as a tool for professional development and lifelong learning.

6. Discussion

The findings indicate that the e-portfolio training effectively initiated the stages of **Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle** while incorporating the principles of **Schön's (1983) Reflective Practice Model**. Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive pedagogical foundation for understanding how students engage with, internalize, and apply learning in professional education (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983). In the **concrete experience** stage, most students, without prior exposure to e-portfolios, gained direct, hands-on experience through activities such as submitting assignments and navigating the platform. This aligns with Kolb's assertion that direct engagement forms the basis for deeper learning and subsequent conceptualization.

The **reflective observation** stage was demonstrated in students' recognition of the e-portfolio as a tool for self-assessment, progress monitoring, and identifying strengths and weaknesses. Here, Schön's (1983) concepts of **reflection-on-action** (evaluating after the event) and **reflection-in-action** (thinking during the process) were evident, as students engaged with the tool both retrospectively and in real time to enhance their practice.

During **abstract conceptualization**, students began connecting their reflections to broader professional theories, recognising the e-portfolio as a bridge between academic learning and field practice. Schön's model reinforces this process by highlighting reflection as essential for integrating experiential insights with professional standards and ethical frameworks.

In **active experimentation**, students expressed intentions to apply e-portfolio skills in field placements and professional development. However, readiness varied, with digital literacy gaps and platform navigation challenges impeding some students' capacity for independent use. This aligns with existing literature emphasising the need for sustained technical support and scaffolding in digital learning environments (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Redecker & Punie, 2017). Overall, integrating Kolb's experiential stages with Schön's reflective practice principles created a structured pathway from experience to application. The e-portfolio thus emerged not only as a repository for their field work experience but also as a dynamic tool for ongoing reflection, professional identity formation, and lifelong learning in social work education (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Garrett, 2011).

7. Conclusion

This study explored the integration of e-portfolios in social work education at the University of Fort Hare, framed within **Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle** and **Schön's (1983) Reflective Practice Model**. The findings demonstrate that the e-portfolio training effectively initiated the experiential learning cycle for most students, moving them from first-hand engagement to reflection, conceptualisation, and, in some cases, active application.

The e-portfolio emerged as more than a digital repository but it served as a pedagogical tool that facilitated **self-assessment, the integration of theory and practice, and professional identity formation**. However, the variation in student readiness, alongside identified challenges in digital literacy and platform navigation, shows the importance of sustained support structures. By aligning experiential and reflective learning processes, the e-portfolio holds significant potential to enhance the development of competent, reflective social work practitioners prepared for the complexities of professional practice.

8. Recommendations

Ongoing technical training should be provided to strengthen students' digital literacy, navigation skills, and content management. Structured reflective activities must be embedded in the curriculum to promote **reflection-on-action** and **reflection-in-action** (Schön, 1983). E-portfolios should be integrated across modules to create a continuous record linking theory and practice. Mentorship and peer support systems can enhance collaboration, feedback, and problem-solving. Assessment criteria should align with e-portfolio tasks, and institutional support must address digital literacy gaps while providing staff development. Ongoing research is needed to assess long-term impacts on employability, professional readiness, and lifelong learning.

Ethics Declaration

The author confirms that this study was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical standards and institutional guidelines for research involving human participants. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Inter-Faculty Human Research Ethics Committee: IFHREC-25/08-0299. All participants were fully informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, and their voluntary participation was secured through written informed consent. The privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity of participants have been strictly maintained, and all data were handled in compliance with applicable data protection regulations.

AI Declaration

This paper was prepared with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools, specifically ChatGPT (OpenAI), which was used to enhance language clarity and to support the development and refinement of ideas throughout the writing process. The author retains full responsibility for all critical analysis, content decisions, and the overall structure of the work. The use of AI adhered to relevant ethical and institutional guidelines.

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