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Being wise about teaching portfolios: Exploring the barriers to their development and maintenance

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Abstract: *The literature on teaching portfolios contains many comprehensive statements about their roles and uses, (for example, Seldin, 1997). The teaching portfolio is claimed to be an effective mechanism for encouraging reflective practice, as such it is recommended as a key element in tertiary teaching courses. It is also recommended as a mechanism for demonstrating effective teaching and as such is often required for quality assurance processes and for promotion and teaching awards. The rhetoric of academe thus presents the teaching portfolio as a multipurpose tool, but what is the associated reality?*

The purpose of this research was to investigate this reality. In particular we were interested in knowing what lecturers considered a teaching portfolio to be; whether they had developed a teaching portfolio and if they had a portfolio, how, when and why they maintained it.

This paper reports the confusion staff had about portfolios, describes four different kinds of portfolios identified by staff, and raises some important issues about the different benefits of writing a teaching portfolio within a mentoring relationship and as an isolated activity in response to demands of accountability. It also juxtaposes the experience of writing an initial portfolio with that of updating an existing one. These findings provide insights that could inform policy and be used to develop appropriate support for lecturers in developing and maintaining their own teaching portfolio.

Keywords: *Teaching portfolios; judging university teachers; reflective practice; academic staff development.*

Introduction

Increasingly universities are expecting academic staff to maintain a teaching portfolio. A search of most university web sites will find guidelines for staff on developing a teaching portfolio¹. With the increase in demand there has been an increase in literature, including literature for specific disciplines, such as Marketing Education: Babin (2002); Geography Teaching: Bullard and McLean (2000); Music Education: Campbell and Brummett (2002) and Teacher Education: Klenowski (2000).

This literature has a common theme which can be traced back to Peter Seldin (1997), who argues that the teaching portfolio can be used to judge a teacher's performance and compares the portfolio to the artist's portfolio "in which they display their best work" (p1). He goes on to explain that "a teaching portfolio would enable faculty members to display teaching accomplishments for the record" (p.1). According to Seldin (1997), a teaching portfolio is a

“factual description of a professor’s strengths and accomplishments” and includes “materials which collectively suggest the scope and quality of a professor’s teaching performance” (p2). He also goes on to claim that the teaching portfolio is a “vital tool for faculty; it provides tangible evidence of classroom instruction and can be used to improve teaching or personnel decision” (p.15).

From a management perspective, Seldin’s perspective, teaching portfolios seem to be the answer to a series of questions relating to improving teaching, quality processes and professional development. However from the perspective of the lecturer, a single portfolio cannot address such incompatible criteria. Indeed a high number of requests for clarification and help with developing a portfolio along with extended discussions following a recent presentation on the topic indicate a high level of concern about these issues amongst academics.

As in many other universities, at Edith Cowan there is a paucity of data on ways in which lecturers are actually responding to these multiple pressures. It is not clear what motivates lecturers to develop and maintain their own portfolio nor are the barriers that discourage staff from developing and maintaining their own portfolio apparent. Indeed it is unclear as to whether we even have a shared meaning of the term.

The purpose of this research was to investigate these issues further. In particular we were interested in knowing what lecturers considered a teaching portfolio to be; whether they had developed a teaching portfolio and if they had a portfolio, how, when and why they maintained it. We believe these findings can inform policy and be used to develop appropriate support for lecturers in developing and maintaining their own teaching portfolio.

Method

Sample

Our sample was deliberately selective and opportunistic: we targeted staff most likely to have a teaching portfolio. We identified three groups of staff to invite to participate in the focus groups. We invited lecturers who are members of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia: an organisation that aims to serve the needs of lecturers and higher education researchers. Invitations also went to lecturers who had recently been promoted as the university requires evidence of teaching for promotion decisions. The third group of staff who received invitations were staff who have self-identified as belonging to a teaching and learning community of practice through voluntary attendance at lunch-time discussions on teaching and learning. These staff have become recognised by the institution as those with an interest in teaching, their views are considered significant and the group includes many informal leaders in teaching and learning.

Data collection

Because we wanted to explore the various attitudes and practices, the main method of data collection was through focus groups. Focus groups allow the exploration of emerging ideas and, through the discussion, encourage deeper and more meaningful insights than might emerge in questionnaires or interviews with individual participants (Morgan, 1988, cited in Punch, 1998, p. 177). We organised three focus groups: one on each of the University’s metropolitan sites. A total of eleven staff participated in the focus groups. Each group was scheduled for an hour and participants were asked about their perceptions of teaching portfolios, and the development and maintenance of such portfolios.

There exists a considerable amount of rhetoric about teaching portfolios in the higher education context. We were concerned to minimise the likelihood of receiving rhetoric back in the focus group and increase the likelihood of meaningful discussion about portfolios, so we semi-structured the discussion using questions to explore what was really happening with regard to portfolios. In the focus groups we used individual questionnaires as a stimulus to thinking about teaching portfolios prior to the facilitated group discussion. The questionnaires also gave us individual data, providing useful additional information. To help clarify participants' thinking about the issue, the session commenced with general discussion of what a teaching portfolio is. The participants were then asked to complete a short open-ended questionnaire about their portfolio if they had one, and if they didn't have one, why not. Group discussion followed and the researchers took it in turns to take notes while the other facilitated the discussion. To encourage participation and open discussion, the focus groups were not taped. Key concepts and barriers were noted down and read back to participants for their confirmation. The second part of the interview focused on the barriers and processes for developing and maintaining teaching portfolios, again through a short questionnaire followed by group discussion. The focus group questions and questionnaires are attached in Appendix 1.

The researchers are well received by the lecturers in the focus groups as committed practitioners of teaching and learning and considered as peers by the people interviewed. There were no formal or obvious power relationships between the participants and the researchers. There was considerable openness in the dialogue and the participants appeared to be engaged in a frank and honest manner.

The focus groups can be summed as up as conversations with expert teaching staff about the:

- 1) Functions, definitions and contents of teaching portfolios and
- 2) The issues and challenges for these staff in developing a teaching portfolio.

As well as gathering information about the knowledge, experience, opinions and thinking on this increasingly important topic from teaching staff, the process was a learning opportunity for the participants, in some cases encouraging reflection on a taken-for granted process, and in others allowing clarification of definitions, function and contents of portfolios.

In addition to the focus groups, the researchers had many informal and *ad hoc* conversations with colleagues about teaching portfolios, which added to the rich data collected.

Data analysis

The focus group notes and questionnaires were analysed for recurring themes that were noted and coded. The researchers coded the data separately and then shared their findings. There followed a number of meetings where the data and emerging patterns were discussed, hypotheses developed and tested against the data and through this cyclical process the following findings emerged.

Findings

In the focus groups, there was clearly considerable variation in and confusion about what constitutes a teaching portfolio. In fact many had come to the focus groups to clarify their own ideas about teaching portfolios. Lecturers talked about the different requirements of different audiences, and incompatibility between these. They talked about the value of developing a "warts and all" document for self development, but would not want to use this

for management purposes, yet they felt the alternative, a “glossy” self-marketing document, was a superficial approach to a serious issue and would take time away from teaching improvement.

Four different conceptions of a teaching portfolio are described in this study

1. **The emergent portfolio:** a collection of artefacts relating to teaching that may or may not contain reflections; the audience is private.
2. **The virtual portfolio:** a document that is embedded in and an integral part of an application for tenure, promotion or an award that contains selected artefacts; the audience is public.
3. **The practitioner portfolio:** a summarizing, reflective piece work about self as teacher providing evidence of teaching philosophy in action and critical analysis of this; the audience for this is private and by invitation, for example a mentor or peer.
4. **The mythical portfolio:** something ‘other’, no-one in the study had one. This portfolio would be multipurpose and demonstrate one’s effectiveness as a teacher for a range of situations. The audience for this portfolio is public.

The emergent portfolio

This portfolio is a collection of artifacts: essentially “it is collected bits and pieces which may prove useful when called upon to account” (FG1³). The collection may be selective or comprehensive, depending largely on individual idiosyncrasies – the squirrels keep it all!

This portfolio was described by eight of the lecturers in the study. One referred to it as teaching portfolio, five thought it might be, but had some doubts whether it really was a teaching portfolio, and two did not consider these collections a teaching portfolio. This portfolio represents what the teacher has done, is viewed as a historical record of a teaching career and the audience is private. It is limited to items that are automatically or easily documented.

The function of the emergent portfolio is as a source of documents that could be used in the future to illustrate any claims in the future about teaching. When or if the teacher is called to account, she can draw on this collection to write her teaching ‘story’, providing justifications and evidence. Similarly, if she decides to promote her career in some way, she can ‘market’ herself by drawing selectively on this collection to provide evidence of claims about teaching against preset criteria.

The value of this emergent teaching portfolio is as source material for writing. If it is comprehensive, covers a range of teaching-related activities and is up-to-date, evidence can be extracted from it; otherwise its value is limited. There was also a sense that it needs to be comprehensive to cover for all future eventualities. Making this collection was not a natural activity for some staff who needed an external trigger to prompt them to start. Others needed help keeping the collection comprehensive and current. They suggested that a list of the things to collect, labeled files for them to collect the various artifacts in, and ‘reminders’ at intervals in time would be useful.

The collection of artefacts was also useful simply as a personal record of a lecturer’s teaching: “I use it as a basis for considering what I have done in my career” (P8³); “very useful as a

historical record” (P5). It is noteworthy that no-one included personal reflective writing in their collection of documents. Some staff contrasted what they did have with a reflective component, for example, whilst the collection of artefacts “provides some evidence of my teaching, it lacks a structure or a reflective component” (P2). Another commented that there were “no written reflections in my repository” (FG1).

The virtual portfolio

Most applications for career progression or awards address a list of criteria relating to expertise in teaching. The virtual portfolio is embedded and integrated within these applications. One lecturer felt her application was analogous to a teaching portfolio. She believed the claims made against the selection criteria and the evidence found to support these claims could be “cut and pasted” from this application and stitched together in a different way for other applications or to make a more general teaching portfolio should one be needed in the future. In this sense the portfolio is always embedded in another document, it exists as an abstraction rather than a reality. The audience for the embedded portfolio is external and public.

This virtual portfolio is used in competitive situations and therefore only that evidence that indicated effectiveness is included. The value of the virtual teaching portfolio, like the emergent portfolio, was as source material for writing a teaching portfolio or other applications, and its usefulness depended on how recent the application was and the nature of the application.

The practitioner portfolio

This sort of portfolio is developmental: it is a review of current teaching practice with a view to improving practice. It is necessarily reflective. It is most commonly used in learning situations, most typically by lecturers undertaking formal study in tertiary teaching. It is developed through a series of meetings with a mentor with a view to ‘discovering’ something about one’s self as a teacher. The audience here is private: self, mentor and others by invitation.

The one lecturer with this sort of portfolio described it as;

a reflective document of my teaching and learning for Semester 1, including my observations, research, student feedback, unit guides and outcomes, attendance and an interpretation of these. (P9).

Staff noted that this sort of portfolio could be useful to get an overview of one’s teaching:

The process would be valuable – as [it] is a structured process; can focus on different components of the teaching situation, getting a holistic view might be supported by a teaching portfolio– i.e. would give a reason to do this. (FG1).

The lecturer who had completed a teaching portfolio for a tertiary training course found it a very valuable activity, noting that it was:

... the beginning of my reflective teaching, planning and integration of professional development. (P9).

The practitioner and virtual portfolios identified by the participants have very different purposes: self-development and career progression, respectively. Our participants did not consider these to be compatible. The ‘warts and all’ approach required for honest self-

appraisal was considered far too risky to put up for a career enhancement decision. Yet this next portfolio was supposed to do just that.

The mythical portfolio

Many of the staff referred to their collections of artefacts as “teaching portfolios”, whilst simultaneously indicating that these artefacts could be used to develop a “teaching portfolio”. We named this to-be-developed portfolio the “mythical portfolio” because, whilst described in our sample, it did not exist.

The mythical portfolio is more than a collection of documents that could be used as evidence and is actively maintained; it has a structure and a reflective element. It is a document that somehow not only helps lecturers to reflect on their teaching but can be used as evidence of their effectiveness. In this mythical portfolio there is no tension between the ‘warts and all’ approach necessary for the meaningful reflection and the ‘self-marketing’ approach needed for accountability and career progression.

Staff were able to imagine some value in this mythical portfolio:

If I had one, the process would be useful as it would provide an opportunity to think in a more focussed way about my teaching, I am not sure that actually producing the formal, portfolio as a product would be important. It is the process that would be beneficial. (P2)

[It] is an extended process which can be very useful. (FG1)

[You] could look at your development over consecutive years – especially as it is hard to notice at the time. (FG2)

[It] would be useful as a planning tool. (P1)

It is important to establish a personal reason to reflect and up date [the portfolio], rather than using the portfolio as a tool for promotion and job applications. (FG3)

No one else knows what I’ve done – would be useful for me/others. (FG1)

However, none of the lecturers had this sort of portfolio; they all felt they needed an external reason to develop it. Some regarded creating the portfolio as not important: it was inauthentic work that took away from the important work of being a good teacher:

A teaching portfolio would be a better organizer and demonstrator of what I do, but documentation is too laborious and not on task i.e. teaching. (FG1)

One staff member said she would keep it up to date if she thought she was doing a good job with it or saw the relevance of it. (FG2)

When time is limited, developing a teaching portfolio is not seen as a high priority:

Oh God! More paper work. (FG2)

Everyone indicated that unless they had to develop a portfolio, they would use their limited time elsewhere. That staff who highly valued teaching did not place a high priority on developing a portfolio indicates that its perceived value is limited.

Summary

The eleven staff in our research have all been identified as being committed to improving their teaching, and nearly half held positions of leadership in teaching and learning. The most frequent portfolio described by participants in this study, the emergent portfolio, is a collection of documents and data, which can be drawn upon for various purposes such as supporting claims made in job award and promotion applications about teaching. Clearly not the teaching portfolio conceptualised by Seldin.

Moreover, these staff did not develop a teaching portfolio unless they had to, for example when it was a requirement for a formal course of study or for promotion. It is reasonable to assume that these staff are not unusual, and *ad hoc* conversations with other university lecturers strongly support these findings.

The practice of regularly updating a reflective portfolio was acknowledged as an ideal, but in practice updating occurred only in response to an external trigger such as an application for a job. When time is limited, most of the participants viewed developing and maintaining a portfolio as an extra chore on top of a heavy workload. They preferred to spend their time reflecting on and improving their teaching.

Discussion

The higher education literature and practice about teaching portfolios draws strongly on the writing of Seldin, a professor of management. Seldin (2000) describes the portfolio as:

... a collection of materials that document teaching performance. It brings together in one place information about a professor's most significant teaching strengths and accomplishments. The portfolio is to teaching what lists of publications, grants and honors are to research and scholarship. *It is flexible enough* [italics added] to be used for tenure and promotion decisions or to provide stimulus and structure for self-reflection about teaching areas in need of improvement" (p1).

Seldin (1997) argues that the value of developing the portfolio may be secondary to the reflection that it necessarily promotes.

This view is reflected, for example, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Over the past five years, the teaching portfolio has gained national attention as a reflective, developmental, and evaluative tool for teachers. Its use is becoming more widespread at UNL as well - in annual evaluations and peer review of teaching, as a basis for selecting recipients of teaching excellence awards, and as a means to prompt individual reflection about what it means to teach well. (The Teaching Portfolio, nd)

Similarly, at the University of Stanford:

[The teaching portfolio's] purpose is not only to offer a body of information for assessment but to serve as a means of reflection on one's development as a teacher" (*Speaking of Teaching*, 1996, p. 1)

In Australian universities, the teaching portfolio is usually described as a summary of major accomplishments and strengths in teaching. For example, at Adelaide University, "It is a document that records your achievements, allows you to reflect on your teaching and supports

your applications for tenure and promotion” (p20) and “it is usually written as a scholarly reflection of your teaching” (*Developing your teaching portfolio*, 2002, p. 2)

In addition to the literature on portfolios in higher education, there is another body of literature, which relates to the use of teaching portfolios in teacher education programmes. In this literature, in contrast to the Higher Education literature, there is a clear distinction between a teaching portfolio for formative assessment and a portfolio developed for summative assessment. For example, Campbell and Brummett (2002) talk about three different types of portfolios rather than one portfolio for all. They distinguish between process portfolios “where the overall purpose is to illustrate growth and development in thinking” over time, from product portfolios which are summative and “show the teacher at his or her best” (p. 3); and the hybrid process/product portfolios which show not only achievements and success but also ongoing areas for improvement. This hybrid is developed from the other two.

A similar distinction is made by Forster and Master (1996) who suggest there are many portfolios. They identify three types: Working Portfolios, Documentary Portfolios and Show Portfolios. Working Portfolios are the largest and most complete. They are “the equivalent of the artist’s studio: the sketches, the notes, the bits of stimulus, the half finished drafts and the completed works” (p9); they reflect the processes of the teacher. Their purpose is for engaging in dialogue with a mentor or teacher. They are not developed for assessment, “elaborate collaboration between teacher and students lies at the heart of the working portfolio” (p9). They are for reflection. The Documentary Portfolio is for summative assessment of both a product and a process. It would include the student outcomes and details of the teaching processes, including evidence of the processes. It is “a selection of the best examples of an artist’s work accompanied by evidence of the processes used in their development” (p23). The third portfolio, the Show Portfolio displays the best of a teacher’s work and is also used for summative assessment. Clearly each portfolio is assembled in a different way. Each portfolio is progressively selective and can be developed from the previous one.

In this study, staff viewed the teaching portfolio process as one of providing evidence for quality assurance mechanisms and career enhancement, that is, the portfolio as a summative assessment piece. This is not surprising: within the Higher Education sector demands for accountability are increasing and with these demands there is an increased focus on the quality of teaching (Gosling, 2001). In spite of little evidence to indicate that teaching portfolios are a better way to judge effective teachers than, for example, using student ratings of teachers (Centra, 1994), staff are increasingly called upon to demonstrate effective teaching through a teaching portfolio. However, they are confused about what this document is. This confusion reflects the lack of clarity in the higher education literature, which does not differentiate between portfolios for formative reflection and feedback and those for summative assessment.

If portfolios are to be used for summative assessment of teaching expertise, then clarification is needed about whether a documentary or show portfolio is required. Seldin’s assertion that “no recipe exists for preparing a portfolio” (p2) is not helpful. If no recipe exists for preparing the portfolio: how will staff know how to develop one and how will one be judged? Explicit criteria are needed to increase the validity and reliability of the assessment of teaching portfolios; these criteria will also help staff to develop their teaching portfolio. Furthermore, managers will to learn how to use the criteria to assess teaching portfolios.

Whilst judging portfolios may provide institutions with a way of assessing the quality of teaching, developing the portfolios will not necessarily make better teachers. Staff are wary of the performance management process, and as Ramsden (cited in Guest and Duhs, 2003, p. 48) asserts “educational excellence cannot be bought by the threats and promises of performance appraisal” and “while there is no evidence that increasing extrinsic incentives and sanctions may make staff teach better, there is distinct evidence that it may make them teach worse”. If the reason for having teachers develop portfolios is to develop them as teachers, then staff need mentoring using Forster and Master’s working portfolio as a tool to focus the conversation.

It seems therefore that much of the literature and many of the associated practices surrounding tertiary teaching portfolios conflate summative and formative assessment and are disconnected from good practice in assessment. This study suggests staff are confused by this double agenda and therefore it is not surprising that many lecturers view the whole process with scepticism and suspicion and engage with it only when forced to do so by external imperatives.

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Notes

¹ See for example <http://www.ecu.edu.au/LDS/pd/uso/tlp2.html>, <http://www.csd.uwa.edu.au/portfolio.html>, <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/ltdu/staff/staffdev/portfolios.html>, <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/service/qa/portfolio.html> <http://www.unl.edu/gradstud/GSAP/teachport.html>).

² FG = Focus Group; data from one of three groups.

³ P = Participant; data from one of eleven participants.

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