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Creating Spaces for Voices: the Portfolio as a Framework to Support Inquiry Into Third Level Learning and Teaching

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**Creating spaces for voices: the portfolio as a framework to support inquiry into
third level learning and teaching**

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Abstract

This paper will discuss qualitative research that was conducted in our professional practice in supporting academic staff in third level learning and teaching in a higher education institution in the Republic of Ireland. The goal was to understand more fully the process of compiling a teaching portfolio through supporting the academic staff in their development of an authentic voice. A further concern of the study was to examine the extent to which the portfolio process promoted the development of skills such as reflection and self-evaluation and provided a structure for documenting and reflecting on learning and teaching for academic staff in higher education. Klenowski (2002) contends that “in the promotion of the portfolio for assessment and learning purposes there is the possibility that too much will be promised and that in practice a lot less will be achieved.” Our concern was to understand what in practice was being achieved by the teachers developing the portfolio.

Key Terms

Teaching portfolio, third level learning and teaching, scholarship of teaching, reflection on practice, collaboration.

Introduction

The scholarship of teaching and reflective practice has been of growing interest to the institution from which this Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching Course is delivered. This reflects a worldwide focus. Badley's research on HEFCE (2002) "*what is required is for all teaching to be animated by scholarship and for scholarship in turn to be informed by research.*" Boyer (1990) in the USA has completed significant work on developing a broader conception of scholarship. His work has identified four scholarships: the scholarship of discovery (or basic research), the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application and the scholarship of teaching. This has also found favour in Australia, where Andresen (2000) notes that an "*increasing number of institutions in Australia are today comfortably embracing the Boyerian stance and attempting to implement it in their policies.*" Internationally, there is no doubt that the contexts and purposes for portfolio use are expanding and increasingly are being used to support the continual professional development for teachers at third level.

Research Objectives

At the beginning of this research process, there were a number of objectives. The portfolio was to be a vehicle for documenting and reflecting on the academic staffs' teaching and learning to inform or improve their practice. The process they underwent was to chronicle their growth as learners and add to their understanding about their practice. Providing opportunities to form a learning community and collaborate with peers was considered important by all involved. Included in this was the setting up of supportive relationships and encouraging dialogue, so that learning took place from and with peers to create a culture of collaboration, connectedness and commitment to community. Procedures were designed for preparing portfolios and the portfolio framework was outlined. The portfolio contents included core and optional items as well as written tasks and reflective entries on teaching improvements.

Community must become a central concept in ways we teach and learn. Palmer (2000) believes that the root fallacy in the pedagogy of most of our institutions is that the individual is the agent of knowing and therefore the focus for teaching and learning.

Knowing and learning are communal acts. They require many eyes and ears, many observations and experiences. They require a continual cycle of discussion, disagreement, and consensus over what has been seen and what it all means.

Methods Used

To reflect the qualitative enquiry of the Portfolio, a series of Focus Group were held with 28 participants, with between 6 and 8 in each group. Three action gains were kept in mind: the improvement of practice, the improvement of understanding (individually and collaboratively), and the improvement of the situation in which the action takes place. As advocated by Morgan and Krueger (1998), the give-and-take of the group discussion produced some very useful insights into what matters most to the participants for support for the portfolio. The analysis of the interview data indicated that the use of portfolios appeared to have a positive impact on the teachers' adopting innovative approaches to third level learning and teaching.

A number of goals were set for this session:

- to listen and learn from the participants by exploring the topics of interest to this study;
- obtain in-depth knowledge as the participants shared and compared their experiences, feelings and opinions;
- pursue any interpretive questions about “how and why”.

Supporting academic staff in their attempts to connect with their professional practice through the development of a teaching portfolio took place in a number of ways. First, it was important to enable them to reflect on and develop their teaching practice. Second, to support them to commit to the intensive and oftentimes demanding process of developing a teaching portfolio of that practice. Third, to enable them to benefit from collaborating with likeminded colleagues also undergoing the same concentrated development process.

Throughout, it was aimed to give a measure of validity:

- Are the focus group questions clearly formulated so that the answers will provide data to illuminate the research question(s)?
- Are the procedures clear so that all stages of the investigation can be evaluated in context?
- Have steps to reduce bias and help reliability been taken?
- Can the claims that are made be 'legitimately' derived from the questions, the action plan, and the evidence which was gathered?

As the core of this study involved working with other people, it was important to concentrate on developing interpersonal skills, listening skills, management skills, and collaborative skills. As a general rule, focus groups are an appropriate research vehicle when the goal of the investigation is to gain an understanding of the “why” behind an attitude or behaviour (Greenbaum, 2000). They are a form of evaluation in which groups of people are assembled to discuss potential changes or shared impressions (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). After reading around this form of data collection, there appeared to be a number of key elements integral to the technique: the authority of the moderator, the ability to use both verbal and nonverbal inputs as part of the learning process, the group dynamics in the room, the concentrated attention of the participants, the ability of the participants to be directly involved in the research process, controls over security and the dynamic nature of the process.

Framework

Studies and research on teaching and learning have been strongly influenced by the constructivist approach to cognition. One of the facets of this approach which held true for this study is that individuals actively construct their knowledge on the basis of their existing conceptions, which in turn can be modified during the construction process.

Teachers are people who actively construe (and re-construe) new ways of thinking, planning and conducting instructional interventions on the basis of practical knowledge and beliefs elaborated in their professional experience. Therefore, teachers should be considered as professionals and supported in their attempts to reflect critically on their

educational practice, as well as encouraged to adopt new and more effective conceptions of teaching and learning.

This perspective does not imply an individualistic approach to teaching. Instead, the process by which a teacher gives a meaning to his/her own professional experience always occurs in a social and cultural context. Thus, it is important to favour communication between these members of the community of practice; by so communicating, they have the possibility to re-construe the language, knowledge and beliefs which emerge in their interactions, and to share the meaning of the most frequently experienced situations and practices. It is also important to create opportunities for conversation between members of different communities, for example science and arts teachers, postgraduate and apprenticeship teachers, teachers from different institutions. These conversations allow the members to analyse and interpret instructional practices in the perspectives of the different communities, and thus to enrich them through reciprocal comparison.

The teacher education programme is also situated in real activities and practical contexts. Through analysis of classroom situations, episodes and experiences in a microteaching group, where the teachers can discuss their own and other participants' educational practices; by collaboratively experimenting with instructional strategies and materials aimed at collecting information on different aspects of classroom activity, and fruitfully interpreting this information from a professional point of view.

Reflection

Cowan (1998) asserts that for reflection to have an impact, the process is continuous; actions should follow discussions and reflections, not solitary reflection but 'reflection-for-action'. Analytical reflection concentrates on particular experiences and also to the generalisations which can be drawn from similar experiences, much of the written reflections in reflective journals start from the analytical reflective position. For reflection to be described as critical as an activity the analysis needs to be complemented by a further stage of evaluation. The evaluative part of the cycle of reflection is often best

carried out in collaboration with others (Biggs, 1999) and it is this process which contributes to the development of metacognition. Critical reflection helps the learner to describe experiences, to analyse what they have learnt from those experiences and to offer a process of judgement by which they might frame current or future experiences. Shulman's Table of Learning (Shulman, 2002) provides a very interesting model for the portfolio reflection process: engagement, understanding, practice, judgment and commitment.

With a view to supporting participants to engage in reflection on learning and practice they were introduced to important thinkers on reflective practice and encouraged to interact with the literature and to consider strategies for reflection (Brookfield, 1995). This was supported by guided reflective activity using a schema developed by Jenny Moon (2000) and the following questions were used to start participants on the process of reflection on practice.

- What teaching strategies do you currently employ?
- What is it that you have learned on this course to date that relates to current practice?
- What are the general implications of the new knowledge / skills for your teaching?
- How might you use the new learning to improve your professional practice?

Thus the challenge of engaging the lecturers in reflection was undertaken through the dual process of teaching about reflection and providing for guided reflective activity related to learning and teaching in higher education. The portfolio entries provided the framework for participants to reflect on teaching and learning in higher education and on their own practice and to learn from the experience and reach a greater understanding of their own pedagogy. The construction of the portfolios engaged the lecturers in a process that pushed them 'to revisit their own knowledge and express it in personally meaningful ways' (Lyons, 1998, p.51).

The Portfolio and its Evidence

There is a broad menu of possible portfolio entries. All evidence and reflections in the portfolio are categorised into specific learning and teaching areas. Reflection on practice is an overview of the entire portfolio. It needs to be holistic in nature and not episodic to reflect the overarching theme that is chosen for the work.

A standard area for inclusion is the 'Personal Learning and Teaching Development' of the participant. Essentially this is a statement of the participant's own philosophy on learning and teaching. The philosophy should mirror the way in which the participant tries to apply their underlying personal teaching philosophy through the development, implementation and subsequent modification of their teaching practice and how they have reflected on this process. The portfolio needs to show their own teaching philosophy, practice, effectiveness, goals and development. They should reflect on the portfolio being a personal statement of their growth in understanding of teaching and learning based on analyses of their teaching performance and of any actions they take for improvement.

To complete the participant's learning and teaching development, there are four linked sections required. Firstly, a summary of prior learning reveals the participant's route to the course and it includes details of learning in a variety of contexts (academic, work-place). Secondly, an individualised learning plan for the module in which the Portfolio will be developed. This is a personal account of the participant's hopes and expectations for learning in the module. Thirdly, a summary and self-assessment of what was learned by the end of the module and finally, an action plan for further professional development in the future.

Teaching Demonstrations

This section includes selected lesson plans, materials and reviews made in relation to micro-teaching tutorials. The Microteaching Tutorials provided the participants with the opportunity to demonstrate the appropriate application of some of the following learning and teaching strategies appropriate to their current teaching:

- Making presentations can take the form of a lecture, a tutorial or a demonstration.
- Facilitating group learning includes a choice from seminars and discussion groups.
- Facilitating active learning methods can utilize a case study, or a role play.
- Facilitating practical or laboratory classes.
- Effective use of one appropriate technology for teaching and learning within their own subject area (of the media and technologies used in the course).

There are three microteaching sessions held in the module. The participants can choose to include a video of their teaching practice from microteaching sessions, and, they also have the option of videotaping their own authentic classroom-based teaching practice, and including that video in their portfolio.

To complement the teaching demonstrations, participants are required to organize two peer and one tutor observation of their classroom teaching practice, and this further provides a further basis for reflection both individually and in collaboration with colleagues and tutors. Our experience of this process is that it provides the opportunity for teachers from diverse disciplines to engage in a dialogue around generic issues of learning and teaching within higher education. It brings to the fore, the richness of the different perspectives and allows important conversations to continue outside of the module.

A second main focus of the Portfolio is inclusion of an account of any efforts made to improve teaching practice. Included here are reflections on teaching improvement efforts through a summary of reflective entries, which address a number of important issues. Firstly, it is important for the participant to reflect on how they have applied their knowledge of learning theories and teaching strategies by actually using a wider variety of teaching strategies in their microteaching and in their classroom practice.

Secondly, the participant needs to show how they have learned from observing the teaching of others, and from the self-observations, peer-observations and tutor observations of their own teaching practice. This is complemented by an analysis of the

participant's own teaching experiences through research about learning in their courses and through peer, tutor, and student feedback.

Thirdly, the participant is encouraged to show how they have gained an understanding of individual student needs and perspectives, and how new teaching methods have been used to meet those needs (including equity issues and social inclusion). They can include how they have used formative evaluations to provide students with on-going feedback about their learning.

Finally, ongoing reflection is needed on the role of the lecturer within their institution; this can include a consideration of leadership, management, research, administrative roles in addition to the learning and teaching role.

Scholarship of Learning and Teaching

This section of the portfolio is designed to increase awareness and understanding of key issues in higher education. Awareness of equity issues at third level includes evidence and reflection of how this has been integrated into the participant's professional practice.

A book review or an annotated bibliography is included to apply the principle of "deep" learning by providing learners with the opportunity to select books of interest on topics related to the module. This annotated bibliography can add depth to the topics, and can encourage self-directed learning.

A Thematic Research Paper provides the opportunity for a search of the literature, including a web search, on a topic of interest to the individual participant which is directly related to the Portfolio theme chosen.

Within the reflections in this section, the participant is expected to address in some depth the current relationship that exists between their teaching and research practice. By considering if interest in their subject keeps them actively exploring more effective ways to teach and vice versa. Ultimately, it is useful for them to contemplate if researching

their subject discipline in any depth has helped them develop more effective ways of communicating knowledge to their students.

Assessment Issues

It was considered very important to capture the learning and the personal meaning that each of the participating lecturers attributed to the experiences and the portfolio was seen as a means of achieving this and providing an authentic assessment for the module. The completed portfolio would contain selected documents and materials which would display appropriate evidence of the individual's learning and accomplishments over the module. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the contents of the portfolio.

Insert Figure 1 here.

MacIsaac and Jackson (1992) map out three broad sets of assessment functions that portfolios can serve:

- portfolios for self-assessment or reflection on personal growth;
- portfolios that facilitate progress assessment within an educational programme for adults;
- portfolios that enhance self-presentation to external sources.

The portfolio process that the lecturers undertake serves a dual purpose in that it allows for self assessment and reflection on personal growth and it also serves as a mechanism for summative assessment of the module.

According to Baume and Yorke (2002), it is essential that explicitness regarding the expectations placed on the participants and the need to ensure that all who are party to the assessment practice share an awareness of what is expected. In this regard, from the outset the assessment criteria were presented to participants, and discussed at key intervals throughout the module. By providing this level of support, it was hoped to ensure the reliability of the overall portfolio assessment process.

Data Analysis

In the focus group, a number of questions were asked to the participants (see Table 1) and all were asked to participate and tell of their learning experience in terms of the teaching portfolio and to share any evidence of this. Question 1 yielded a common outcome:

“Yes I think it did, for me it is the start of the recording of the learning process and it is now there to be continued. I can say a lot in my portfolio will change but it is a start, where as before you might have had a C.V. which might contain some reference documents and your qualifications it would not have documented reflections.”

“It raised the question how I am teaching. It became very evident that I was teaching but not as well or how I should be teaching. “

Question 2 asked the participants to highlight the most important part of the portfolio for themselves:

“I tried different things and found the whole reflection aspect brilliant; I, tried the brainstorming but found it a bit of a disaster. By sitting down and listing things, the more things I thought of, and how to do things differently next time; with the micro teaching session it all tied together. When I did the brainstorming for a second time with the same class and same environment it worked quite well. It has helped my teaching and now that I’m in the mode for writing down and thinking of teaching in a certain way, I will continue to do that.”

“The peer and tutor observations were the best aspect of my portfolio experience. Having tutors and peers coming into my class was great and having the opportunity to observe theirs and seeing how they teach I found very good because, I went to technical classes and the teaching was completely different fro my own area. It was just seeing something done differently gave you ideas on how to try out something newt. I also found when I told students I was doing this course and that I would have peers coming in I got more constructive feedback from them because they knew I was taking this course and looking at my teaching practice in a serious way and wanted genuine feedback. It helped the dynamic in teaching with my students.”

Question 3 produced several perspectives ranging from providing alternative forms of teaching, helping with teaching delivery and encouraging one to try different things in practice.

“The group I was in reflected on the learning ourselves and made it fun, so having this atmosphere made us relax and brought the group closer together. To be honest at the start I could not identify where we were going with this portfolio but it became an individual task, it was mine and had to be done myself, so I took responsibility for it myself.”

Question 4 was concerned with reflection within the portfolio process:

“The reflection element was the most important and valuable thing learned out of all. We can all take the tool and use it.”

“It was brilliant to be able to write down your core values and your philosophy of education - things that are embedded in you but you never articulate and put them on paper.”

“The portfolio quantified for me in a qualitative way what I was practicing. It made me think about what I was doing and implanting it with reflection. Reflection is a powerful tool.”

Question 5 looked at the notion of change:

“The educational change that occurred depends on what I as the teacher did and thought. For me, it is as simple and complex as that. It is not what anyone else thinks – it is what I think in my classroom, and that is what the portfolio does - it unearths the values I hold as a teacher.”

Question 6 explored the community of learning set up to support the portfolio process:

“Yes, without a doubt, the set up of the small groups were excellent and getting the feedback immediately was very important; I only wish where I worked could be as inductive to learning as it is here.”

“It does force you to reflect and discuss it with your colleagues. Teaching is an isolated profession so you do not have your peers around. But by doing the portfolio you are forced to get feedback from them. So it is making one’s environment more friendly in which to work.”

Question 7 asked about the portfolio guidelines that were provided at the start of the course:

“I found the portfolio personally a tough study exercise and if I did not have the formalised questions to do it I would not have got through it.”

For Question 8, all 28 participants replied positively that they had seen improvement in their teaching practice. Further evaluative research is currently being conducted to qualify this.

Conclusion

This paper set out to consider how the teaching portfolio process could be best supported to be a vehicle for documenting and reflecting on the academic staffs' teaching and learning to inform or improve their practice. The findings identified specific issues in relation to support for teachers undertaking a portfolio and they also highlighted the learning and skills development of the teachers. It can be concluded that the process of generating a portfolio was an empowering if at times painful experience for the teachers. It helped them to manage their learning, to find their voice and to develop vital skills for success in teaching. Arguably a significant contribution to the portfolio process that we as academic staff developers can make is by maintaining a community of shared practices through campus-wide and inter-institutional conversation focused on forward-looking learning and teaching. This is to be achieved by providing quality support for all teachers from beginning instructors to experienced, highly regarded academic staff.

One of the primary roles of academic development is to expand teachers' awareness of their learning and teaching situations. Specific principles that underpin this are:

- Teachers need to become aware of the way they conceive of learning and teaching within the subjects they are teaching;
- Teachers need to examine carefully the context in which they are teaching and to become aware of how that context relates to or affects the way they teach;
- Teachers need to be aware of and seek to understand the way their students perceive the learning and teaching situation;
- Teachers need to be continually revising, adjusting and developing their teaching in the light of this developing awareness (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999).

Through the portfolio process, the lecturers were able to expand their awareness of learning and teaching in higher education and to revise, adjust and develop their teaching

in the light of this developing awareness. Learning to teach well is a lifelong pursuit and the portfolio process had placed these participants on an exploratory journey where reflection and collaboration would be used to inform their teaching.

This research is ongoing and future work using Glassick's evaluative framework designed to help assess scholarship is planned for the next academic year (Badley, 2003).

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Table 1

Focus Group Questions

| Main Questions | Probe Questions |
|--|---|
| 1. Do you feel that completing the teaching portfolio promoted the development of your reflection and self-evaluation skills? | There are now portfolios in teaching and education that are used to try and promote reflection. We want to see if it made you think any more about the future or was that a process that would happen any way? |
| 2. Do you think it provided you with a structure for documenting and reflecting on learning and teaching? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you think it was well enough structured? [as you all know teaching is a very complicated job and very had to capture all the complexities that we do] so, - do you think that structure that was provided for you in module one was adequate, or - did you find yourself concentrating more on one aspect of the portfolio than another? |
| 3. What in practice was achieved by you as a teacher developing the portfolio? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For example, did you find yourself more open in trying out new things in your practice? - Do you think the portfolio process brings on more responsibility for yourself now that you are more aware of specific issues? - Does it bring to the fore your responsibility to your students' learning? |
| 4. Would you regard the teaching portfolio as a vehicle for documenting and reflecting on your teaching and learning to inform or improve your practice? | |
| 5. Did it help chronicle your growth and change as learners and add to your understanding about your practice? | Has it made you different as an educator? |
| 6. Did it provide opportunities to form a learning community and collaborate with peers? Do you think this is important? | |
| 7. Did you find useful the procedures designed for preparing your portfolio including the portfolio framework outlined? | |
| 8. One final question to sum up: did the teaching portfolio process improve your practice? | Did it improve your understanding (individually and collaboratively) of third level learning and teaching? |

Figure 1
The Portfolio Structure

