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Understand Portfolio-based Learning

John Pitts

Portfolios have been much discussed in recent years both as a learning and assessment tool. The use of educational portfolios and learning journals in medical education is growing. From initial application by the Armed Forces and later within the arts, the use of portfolios as a record for the purposes of both learning and assessment has grown. Embraced particularly in professions supplementary to medicine and nursing, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, various interpretations have evolved ranging from a logbook resembling a curriculum vitae, through case logs to deeply personal reflective accounts. It can be argued that, to fit the accepted definition, a portfolio must contain evidence of reflective processes.

In general practice, portfolios have been used in both vocational training with GP registrars and continuing education with GP principals. They have become established as a medium for the annual appraisal process in the UK in both primary and secondary care, and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada uses an electronic learning portfolio in its recertification processes

Why?

Disillusionment with conventional medical education and criticism from bodies such as the General Medical Council had led to the development of learner-centred approaches that accord with current theories of adult learning. Educational programmes most likely to be effective include interactivity, reflection and relate to personal professional experiences. Through this, learners are given more autonomy and responsibility for their learning. Portfolios are an ideal vehicle for capturing such learning experiences through the recording of reflective purposes and can contain a wide range of materials and media.

Reflective practice

First referred to by Dewey in 1933, and achieving expansion in the 1980s with authors such as Schon, reflective practice has been defined as: the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed concept perspective. Practical experience is at the centre of professional learning, and it is has been suggested that educational programmes should include reflective processes based on personal experiences. For established professionals, much continuing education is of necessity part time – reflective practice (and its recording) attenuates problems of fragmentation, lack of cohesion and coherence, and discontinuity of contract that are characteristic of modular approaches.

How?

The greatest strength attributed to the portfolio approach is individuality. The content will vary according to its purpose; if a course, then the course objectives; if a career log, individual achievements. Reflections on curriculum vitae so far, and career intentions and reasons seem to be a good starting point. In reflecting on uncertainties encountered as work progresses, a guiding framework might be:

1. **Phrase the uncertainty as a question.**

This might be in terms of “How do I . . .?”, “What does this mean?”, “Why did I find this difficult?”, or, more specifically, “Why don’t registrars read more?” – or even “Why don’t I read more?”.

2. **Relate it to a topic.**

In what area does it lie? This could be teaching, learning assessment etc.

3. **What was the stimulus to its identification?**

What made you identify this problem or question?
This may be as a result of a difficulty you have come across, or just something triggered by curiosity that you wished to explore further.

4. **What resources did you use to address this?**

These could include reading, discussions, practice, seeking feedback, or literature searching.

5. **What is the outcome?**

What are your conclusions, how tentative are they at this stage, what have you learned, how will this learning change your future actions and thoughts?

6. **What new insights have you developed when looking back at this work?**

How have you changed your opinions or approaches.

Use in assessment

The greatest value of a portfolio is as a tool for personal development, and formal assessment approaches are poorly developed and researched, and do not relate well to the prevailing predominance of standardised tests. Areas of difficulty, for example, stem from individuality in the portfolios, and variation in the ‘starting points’ of each individual.

Another source of difficulty is that material included within portfolios is not always referred to in discussion – some writers appear to be ‘squirrels’ who merely file documentation without apparent further thought or connection, while others more clearly use and cross-refer to papers and other literature within their reflections.

Agreement between assessors is often poor, reflecting their individuality too. This makes summative judgements unreliable, although reliability can be enhanced when pairs of assessors discuss their marking decisions.

It is likely, therefore, that make an ‘external’ judgement, a new philosophy of measurement that accepts a non-standardised approach will need to be developed.

“The greatest value of a portfolio is as a tool for personal development . . .”

Further Information

Pitts J. (2007) *Portfolios, personal development and reflective practice*. In the Understanding medical education series, Association for the Study of Medical Education, Edinburgh.

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Hughes, J. (2010). “*But it's not just developing like a learner, it's developing as a person.*” Reflections on e-portfolio based learning. R. Sharpe, H. Beetham, and D. de Freitas (Eds). *Rethinking learning for a digital age*. New York: Routledge Taylor Francis.

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