

The dilemma of engagement and ownership in a portfolio for sustainability

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Portfolio assessment is an approach that holds promise for sustainability. Recent research has investigated whether portfolios can do ‘double duty’ as tools for formative and summative assessment and for ongoing professional development. This paper proposes that the focus of research could more usefully be on how portfolio assessment can be designed to ensure sustainability. Data is drawn from a four-year action research study of the use of a portfolio in a postgraduate professional development program for special education resource teachers. It provides an illustration of how the dilemma of engagement and ownership in a summative portfolio plays out, and supports a problem-solving approach to the improvement of portfolio assessment for sustainability.

Keywords: ownership; portfolios; student engagement; sustainability.

Introduction

Portfolios have been used in assessment in higher education – especially in professional education programs – for about 30 years, since first proposed by Shulman (1988) and others in the late 1980s. One of the important claims in favour of portfolio assessment is that it alters the relationship of learners to assessment by increasing their ownership of the process. Early advocates Paulson, Paulson and Meyer (1991) suggest that, “If carefully assembled, portfolios become an intersection of instruction and assessment” (p. 61), providing a process by which the learner “is a participant in, rather than an object of, assessment” (p. 63). This process of “authoring one’s own learning” (Lyons, 1998, p. 3) or claim-making (Knight & Yorke, 2003), involving selecting evidence and reflecting on that evidence, is crucial to learner responsibility (Davies & LeMahieu, 2003). This feature of portfolios imbues them with the potential to contribute to sustainable assessment (Boud, 2000) by “contributing in some way to [learners’] prospective learning” (Boud & Falchikov, 2006, p. 400), while fulfilling summative assessment requirements and providing learners with feedback on their current performance. Through active engagement in the process of deciding what will stand as evidence of their learning, portfolio compilers are developing skills of self-assessment that should persist beyond the course. Moreover, in the case of professional practice portfolios such as the one used in this study, selection and annotation of authentic evidence from practice should promote the compiler’s understanding of the relationship of learning on the course to professional practice both at the time of the compiling portfolio and into their professional future.

Portfolio assessment attracts considerable research attention. However, the interpretation of the portfolio concept has become so broad that it is difficult to assess the effectiveness or validity of portfolios as an assessment method (Meeus, Petegem, & Looy, 2006; Smith & Tillema, 2003) or to use the research findings to improve assessment practice. As Meeus et al. (2006) point out, the term is used in the same general way as the term ‘assignment’, and it is not possible to generalise about assignments. The kind of product that is required will significantly affect the processes undertaken by the compiler, and it is these processes that have the potential to develop the ongoing skills, attitudes and knowledge likely to contribute to “learning for the longer term” (Boud & Falchikov, 2006, p. 408). Klenowski (2002) cites Dewey’s (1916) notion of “freeing activity” in her discussion of the portfolio-compiling process, and quotes his assertion that: “The doing with the thing, not the thing in isolation, is [the] end. The object is but a phase of the active end – continuing the activity successfully” (Dewey, 1916, cited in Klenowski, 2002, p. 4).

One aspect of recent research has been the investigation of the relationship of the purpose(s) of portfolios to their impact on the compiler, such as learning, professional development and reflection (see, for example, Berrill & Addison, 2010; Chetcuti, Murphy, & Grima, 2006; Smith & Tillema, 2001; Wray, 2007). A major challenge to the potential for sustainability, as outlined above, is that portfolios are often used in higher education in programs that

have traditionally used conventional assessment approaches, have positivist approaches to teaching and grading and have academic staff and students whose prior experience has been of such approaches (Dysthe & Engelsen, 2004; Johnston, 2004). A number of studies have been concerned with determining whether portfolios can effectively do 'double duty' (Boud, 2000) as tools for both learning and professional growth, and for summative purposes such as credentialing. However, rather than asking whether a portfolio *can* act as both a learning and a summative assessment tool, it is more useful to question how one can design a portfolio and the teaching program that supports it so that it *does* perform this double duty. There is a need to persist with innovative methods both for their benefits to student learning and for their relevance to employment and lifelong learning (Williams, 2008). Such research questioning will assist in this pursuit and improve the contribution of portfolio assessment to sustainability.

The study reported in this paper aimed to identify the features of a portfolio for summative assessment and the teaching program that supported it leading to both learning within the program and enhanced professional practice. While the data demonstrated that the portfolio, as it evolved during four years of action research, did promote learning in the program and enhance professional practice, this paper will focus on the dilemma that arose in the development of the portfolio as a tool for sustainability. The portfolio was designed with a number of features intended to promote ownership and encourage learners to make autonomous judgments about their own learning. However, current and ongoing learning can only occur if learners engage fully in the portfolio-compiling process. In order to ensure such engagement, modification to some of these features was required, reducing the level of choice and imposing more structure.

Context of study

As part of New Zealand's special education policy Special Education 2000, approximately 750 positions were established for Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLBs), who support teachers and schools to educate children with moderate learning and behavioural needs. RTLBs are required to complete a postgraduate professional development program designed to enable them to achieve the following seven learning objectives.

According to the course outline (School of Education Studies, 2000), an RTLB will:

- 1 Work to a high professional and ethical standard
- 2 Improve the learning and behavioural outcomes of Māori¹ students
- 3 Work to ensure equitable educational opportunity for all learners
- 4 Follow an educational model
- 5 Work to a collaborative consultation model
- 6 Be a skilled practitioner and promoter of effective teaching skills
- 7 Be a reflective practitioner.

The professional development program consists of four postgraduate courses undertaken part time over two years concurrently with the RTLBs' casework as resource teachers. The fourth course, undertaken throughout the second year, requires the compilation of a professional practice portfolio. A portfolio was selected by the program developers on the basis that it was constructively aligned (Biggs, 2003) with the professional goals of the program and would promote quality learning – in particular, the transfer of learning from coursework to practice, reflective practice and a deep understanding of the relationship of theory to practice.

RTLBs attend eight workshops throughout the year to ensure that they understand the requirements of the portfolio, and to provide them with explanations, models and opportunities to practise the processes of selection, annotation and reflection on evidence from their practice and to practise the skills of peer coaching and critical friendship to support one another throughout the process (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Showers & Joyce, 1996).

¹ The indigenous people of New Zealand.

The paper-based portfolio requires RTLBs to demonstrate, with evidence from their casework, their achievement of the learning objectives of the professional development program. (A paper-based portfolio was used rather than an e-portfolio because, when the program began, the computer literacy levels of the RTLBs were diverse: for many even having to attach an assignment to an email caused stress.) The RTLBs are required to present *sets* of evidence, which are defined in the instructions as “a collection of several pieces of evidence that are assembled in a coherent manner” (School of Education Studies, 2000). These sets are to be constructed from authentic evidence of practice, annotated to explain how each piece of evidence demonstrates the learning objectives, and including support from theoretical and research literature. Each portfolio must also include a statement of the compiler’s personal theory (Handal & Lauvas, 1987), articulating the beliefs, values and theories on which their practice is based. Reflective statements then accompany each set of evidence, including reflection on three foci: technical/practical (for example, practice in relation to the outcomes of the casework), dialectical/contextual (for example, the consistency of practice with the compiler’s personal theory) and critical (for example, sociopolitical issues such as cultural appropriateness and power relationships) (LaBoskey, 1993; van Manen, 1977).

The study

The aims of the study, which involved four cycles of research during the first four years of implementation of the portfolio, were twofold: to provide a detailed analysis of the relationship between the design and teaching of the portfolio and the learning and professional practice of the RTLBs; and to identify to what extent the implementation of a portfolio as an assessment tool could address the challenges of assessment for quality learning in higher education.

The study comprised proactive action research (Schmuck, 1997). The starting point for this research was the situation in which the decision had been made to use a portfolio as the final assessment tool for the program. The data sources outlined below enabled both ongoing monitoring and evaluation at the completion of each year. The information gathered was used to make adjustments to the teaching program throughout the year and, at the end of each year, to make changes to the portfolio requirements for the following year.

Participants were drawn from two groups: the first four cohorts of RTLBs enrolled in the portfolio-based course at Victoria University of Wellington during the first four years of the course (n = 168), and the program team responsible for the planning and implementation of the portfolio course (n = 4). The researcher was a member of this team. All members of the program team provided supervision, marked completed portfolios and participated in regular meetings to evaluate and make changes to the portfolio requirements and the teaching program.

Data sources were of two types: those designed specifically for the study, including pre- and post-portfolio questionnaires (168 RTLBs) and focus group and individual interviews (57 RTLBs and the 4 program team members); and those generated in the natural course of events, including student evaluations, portfolio documentation, finished portfolios and records of planning and evaluation meetings. An inductive approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used for coding qualitative data from questionnaires and interviews. Completed portfolios provided evidence of casework practice, articulated personal theory and reflection on practice.

The data from the four years supported the proposition that a portfolio can promote quality learning. A major theme that emerged from the data was that compiling a portfolio contributed to enhanced professionalism for the RTLBs (Jones, 2010). There were four main aspects to this: greater clarity and confidence about the RTLB role; improved professional practice; promotion of an evolving theory of practice; and deeper and more critical reflection on practice. Thus the portfolio contributed to sustainability by supporting RTLB learning within the course as well as ongoing learning in the context of practice beyond the course. While the study did not follow up the RTLBs to determine whether they continued to assess their own practice, set goals and work to achieve them as a result of the knowledge and skills developed in the portfolio-compiling process, these four aspects of enhanced professionalism appear fundamental to the ongoing development of a professional. However, there were also challenges that had the potential to undermine the achievement of these positive outcomes, as outlined below.

The dilemma of engagement and ownership

As has frequently been reported in the literature (see, for example, Darling, 2001; Krause, 1996; Loughran & Corrigan, 1995; van Tartwijk, van Rijswijk, Tuithof, & Driessen, 2008), successful outcomes are dependent on early and fulsome engagement in the portfolio-compiling process. The data in the first year was particularly concerning in this regard. The most frequently mentioned theme in course evaluation comments was that it took too long to understand the portfolio requirements. One reason for this was that for most of the RTLBs, portfolio assessment was a new experience. In the first two years of the study, only 3 per cent of the research sample had prior experience of portfolios as a tool either for demonstrating their own practice or for assessing student learning, and throughout the four years only 9 per cent had prior portfolio experience. As the program team recognised this lack of experience, the eight workshops were designed to provide a gradual introduction to the portfolio-compiling process throughout the year. However, it became clear from block evaluations, observations and discussions with the RTLBs that there was a high level of anxiety and confusion. One RTLB described their experience:

The simplest way I can put it was that it was just so very vague, it was this thing we had to do and ... I felt like I had a veil over my face, it was very small and I had to lift it and ... once it had been lifted I thought well why couldn't that have been taken away in the beginning – and I know that's obviously the process of developing a portfolio ... but to me I found that really difficult.

In the second year a number of changes to the teaching program and the portfolio requirements were made to aid engagement. We ensured that introduction of the key aspects of evidence, annotation and personal theory were covered in the first two days. We also arranged visits from RTLBs who had completed the portfolio in the previous year to discuss their experiences and share samples of their portfolios. As the importance of 'critical friends' and peer support groups in assisting the RTLBs to engage in portfolio development was a strong theme in the post-portfolio data, the session on peer support was also brought forward from later in the course to the first afternoon.

The most important contribution to improved understanding and more timely engagement of RTLBs was the requirement to present a set of evidence (Part 1 of the portfolio project) for feedback early in the year. There was considerable debate among the program team members about whether this should be graded. It was eventually decided that a grade would be necessary to ensure that all RTLBs completed the set with the necessary commitment to achieve the purpose of the exercise. In the end it was agreed that a set of evidence for learning objective 5, 'Work to a collaborative consultation model', would be presented after six weeks and would be worth 10 per cent of the final grade. This learning objective was chosen as the focus because the team agreed that a collaborative problem-solving approach was fundamental to the role of the RTLB, and because this was one of the learning objectives that had been less well presented in the portfolios in the first year.

Part 1 fulfilled some of the complex purposes of assessment as outlined by Ramsden (2003). It enabled the academic staff to diagnose RTBL misunderstandings about the portfolio requirements (especially the purpose and clear writing of annotations). It also provided an opportunity to give feedback on the selection and quality of evidence of collaborative consultation, thus aiding the RTLBs' understanding of the learning objective as a conceptual artefact (Bereiter, 2002) and as a key competency of their practice. Very importantly, it provided academic staff with feedback that informed further teaching in the course, both about portfolio requirements and about learning objective 5. As had been predicted, the grade attached to the early submission supported completion. All RTLBs submitted Part 1 and were very attentive to the feedback when discussing it in class and in supervision. This was in contrast to the option of submitting the personal theory statement early in the course for feedback, an activity in which very few participated. The influence of grading on ensuring completion exemplifies the sway of positivist assessment practices (Johnston, 2004) and the tension created by the summative nature of the task.

In an attempt to enhance the formative potential of the portfolio, the first year of the program included the setting of personal goals towards which the RTLBs would work in order to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for producing evidence from their practice in their portfolio. While this process was intended to encourage learner autonomy, at the conclusion of the first year the program team reviewed the goal setting and agreed that the time taken during the program for the RTLBs to set personal professional goals would be better spent in engaging in the portfolio-compiling process. Until the RTLBs became engaged in this process they were often unable to identify the aspects of their practice that needed addressing. The goal-setting activity added complexity, not clarity, and was

therefore not included in the program the following year. Nevertheless, it became apparent over the next three years that when the RTLBs engaged with the process of selecting cases and pieces of evidence for their portfolios, they identified areas of their practice that they considered needed improvement and, in an effort to present the best-quality evidence, strove to improve their practice:

It's made me a lot clearer about the process of getting a referral and the problem-solving process and the kind of the whole consultative process right through a case, because I've been mindful every time when I've decided ... that I'm probably going to use this case for this [learning objective] ... I've followed it through a lot more systematically than I did previously.

Well I followed the processes more, the TIESII [ecological assessment tool] components – I really only started understanding TIESII more as I was developing the portfolio, and so with the new cases I picked up. I made sure I had all the data that was necessary for the case, not all that irrelevant data that I had collected previously ... it honed [sic] me in, made me focus on the important part that I needed to collect.

In this way the portfolio can be seen to contribute to the development of a “wanting structure” (Smeby, 2007, p. 208), in which the RTLBs were able to identify any lack of knowledge or skill in their current practice and were encouraged to search for new knowledge and skills.

After the second year, the data indicated that understanding of the portfolio requirements was being gained more quickly. However, decision making about how to construct the sets of evidence was hindering engagement. There were three ways in which sets could be constructed. A set could be drawn from one case and annotated to link *either* to several different learning objectives *or* to one learning objective only. The third option was to assemble pieces of evidence drawn from a range of cases and annotate them in terms of one learning objective. After submitting Part 1, the RTLBs were often undecided about which approach to take for their final portfolio. The program team therefore decided to specify the format of sets. RTLBs were to select a case or project on which to base a set of evidence for each of the learning objectives 2 to 6. Learning objectives 1 and 7 would be assessed by the marker from the quality of the evidence, annotation and reflection in each of the case-based sets.

This issue is another example of the tension between engagement and ownership. Choice in construction of the sets was intended to foster RTLB ownership of the portfolio-compiling process and to avoid too great a level of prescription. However, this flexibility was reduced partly in response to a perceived need by the program team to reduce confusion and stress for the RTLBs. This decision was consistent with the findings of others (for example, Smith & Tillema, 2003) that professionals prefer quite specific guidelines for portfolio construction. Their finding that trust in the process is improved when guidelines are explicit was supported in this study by the improving evaluations received for the course.

There were other reasons for the program team's decision to specify the format of sets, which relate to the validity of the portfolio for effective and sustainable assessment of practice. When sets were annotated in terms of several different learning objectives, it was difficult for both the RTLB and the marker to ensure that there was sufficient evidence for each learning objective. When sets were assembled from evidence from a range of casework, the quality of RTLB practice was difficult to assess. This threatened validity, as parts of the target domain may not have been assessed (or presented for assessment) (Crooks, Kane, & Cohen, 1996). Once the RTLBs were required to present evidence based on cases or projects, they were encouraged and facilitated to demonstrate that their casework followed a logical process of problem solving and, importantly, that their work resulted in positive change. For example, most sets of evidence in the third-year portfolios included pre- and post-intervention data that demonstrated such change. The feedback from RTLBs after the choice was removed suggested that there was still scope for some level of personal ‘control’. This was also a theme of the positive feedback received about the portfolio project in subsequent years:

I feel the portfolio shows the ‘essence’ of the RTLB – your own theory rather than the espoused theory of the course.

I like that process ... because it allowed somewhat of an ownership – this is my choice, and it's a reflection of my practice up to now.

The program team's awareness of the need to encourage the presentation of cohesive and integrated evidence of practice can be also seen in the change of requirements in relation to the two generic competencies (learning objective 1, 'Work to a high professional and ethical standard', and learning objective 7, 'Be a reflective practitioner'). Evidence of these competencies was integrated with evidence of the other competencies.

The design of the program in the first year included an aspect that was intended to enhance the RTLBs' and academic staff's shared understanding of competency in relation to each of the learning objectives. The first cohort of RTLBs was engaged in developing a list of descriptors of the skills, knowledge, behaviours and attitudes for each of the learning objectives, which was then collated and distributed by the program team to all RTLBs. This list was also distributed to the second cohort. However, at the conclusion of the second year the program team recognised that this method of making the learning objectives explicit was problematic. While it was intended to clarify understanding, its actual impact was quite different. Although the document that listed the descriptors began with specific advice not to use them as a checklist against which to match evidence, it appeared that many RTLBs viewed the descriptors as a list of fragmented tasks. In the focus groups, RTLBs explained that the descriptors played an important role in selecting evidence:

I think I was quite reliant on the descriptors and I did use them because I can remember thinking, oh my gosh, I'm ... saying the same thing using those descriptors. I need to vary ... them, well I haven't talked about that one so I will use that. I think because it was a whole new process, it was ... like learning to cook – it's that recipe book.

Such use of descriptors resulted in trivial evidence. For example, for learning objective 3, 'Work to ensure equitable educational opportunity for all learners', a descriptor was that an RTLB would "prioritise professional time to ensure the greatest benefit to students and their teachers". One RTLB included photocopies of pages of her diary showing how she had allocated her time during the week. This evidence did not enable the marker to make any judgment about the quality of work undertaken during the week. In contrast, an RTLB who approached learning objective 3 in a holistic way identified that she had maximised her professional time because, by supporting the teacher to implement the inclusive teaching strategy of class-wide peer tutoring, she had supported improved learning outcomes for most students in the class.

In addition, the descriptors were used as a form of assertion in annotations. The following annotation for a piece of evidence, 'Summary of a meeting', illustrates this practice (words in italics are direct quotes from the descriptors for learning objective 1).

This is evidence of [learning objective] 1 because it shows that I work to a high professional standard *by keeping records and undertaking practices that have a valid theoretical base.*

While many RTLBs were quite reliant on the descriptors, several made comments about them that reflected the program team's concerns. Two commented as follows:

I found the descriptors in some ways a constraint. While they were helpful and I used them as a guide, in some ways they were a barrier to the flow of my work.

Descriptors are a 2-edged sword – they are helpful but also become prescriptive and a bit formulaic (especially in annotations).

Discontinuation of distribution of the descriptors to the third cohort required the RTLBs to achieve a greater level of autonomy in their understanding of competency in relation to the learning objectives. Rather than engaging in a matching exercise, in which pieces of evidence are linked to discrete descriptors, RTLBs need to be able to make more meaningful judgments about their own performance (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). This requires academic staff to make criteria explicit. A series of workshops were thus developed in which lectures were presented and group activities undertaken, to revise the content of previous courses relating to each of the learning objectives and discuss their implications for RTLB practice.

Perhaps the most insidious challenge to engagement for the four cohorts of RTLBs completing the portfolio-based course was lack of confidence. This contributed to reluctance towards bringing work samples to class and supervision, and procrastination. As two RTLBs explained, the portfolio required them to present their own practice for critique:

I still felt very nervous about parading my work ... yeah, I was very unwilling to bring my work ... just unsure that I was doing it right.

The assignment work wasn't quite so personal ... this [the portfolio] is actually me and this is what I do, and I felt that if it came back with a bad mark that I would be quite devastated because ... it is about what you do out in the field.

However, engagement often contributed to an increase in confidence, especially when feedback from colleagues (group discussions of evidence in workshops) and from supervisors (individual or group discussions) was encouraging about the quality of evidence presented and the practice from which it was derived. For example:

And I find, once we got over that fear, I think once I'd started actually bringing the stuff I didn't feel shy ... any more ... that things really got going then.

The summative nature of the portfolio worked as both a facilitator of and a barrier to engagement. Despite the increased prescription introduced over the first two years, there continued to be requests by some RTLBs for even more prescription and guidance, arising from an understandable desire to pass the course. However, this desire to pass also encouraged careful attention to the learning objectives and to the requirements of good practice. One RTLB described how the requirements of the summative assessment process had interacted with her practice and enhanced it:

I think what is in the portfolio is ideal, and I have produced the ideal in an effort to pass the course, so throughout the whole training process I was trying to see, 'What do you want to see in my portfolio?' So I wasn't particularly conscious about whether I agreed with it, but it is trying to get a handle on, 'What do you want to see – [is this] what I have to give you in order to pass?' But in doing that and looking at what the ideal is, it has made me look at my practice and think 'OK, well that is the ideal I need to deal with.' It has made me look at my practice in terms of the ideal and change what I am doing.

Conclusion

Our experience with the portfolio course over the four years illustrates the "paradox" identified by Schön (1987, p. 93):

The paradox of learning a really new competence is that a student cannot at first understand what he needs to learn, can learn it only by educating himself, and can educate himself only by beginning to do what he does not yet understand.

While lack of prior experience, understanding and confidence combined to inhibit RTLB engagement, the summative nature of the task itself was both a source of stress and a motivator to improve practice. In order to increase engagement it was necessary to increase prescription and simplify requirements. Doing this had the potential to reduce RTLB ownership in the process. However, through careful consideration of the data each year, we negotiated a way through this dilemma and, in so doing, increased engagement and enabled the RTLBs to gain a better understanding of what they needed to do to present evidence of competent practice.

In reviewing the evolution of the teaching program, a change of emphasis can be traced from the first two cohorts, where our emphasis was on helping the RTLBs to understand the requirements of the portfolio, to the third and fourth cohorts, where greater emphasis was placed on helping the RTLBs to clarify the requirements of competent practice so that this could be demonstrated in their portfolio. This process of clarification resulted in enhanced professionalism, in that the RTLBs were not simply undertaking a matching exercise but instead were engaging in critical analysis of their practice in relation to the broad generic, and job-specific, abilities expressed in the learning objectives.

Our experience serves as an illustration of the need to treat portfolio assessment as a problem-solving process in which the responses of learners contribute to the development of "a wanting structure" (Smeby, 2007, p. 208) not only for the learners themselves as outlined above but also for academic staff, who can use this information to highlight the new skills and knowledge they need to ensure that the assessment contributes to sustainability.

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