

The Professional Development Portfolio: An Alternative Mode of Assessment in Teacher Education in Malta

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Abstract

In the Maltese educational system, assessment in secondary and post-secondary classrooms, has traditionally taken the form of quantitative measures of student learning in terms of marks and/or grades given as a result of tests, examinations and work carried out by the students for summative purposes. The new national curriculum (1999) proposed a shift to formative modes of assessment that gave greater emphasis on students as individual learners, on self-assessment and other modes of monitoring progress during the learning process and on means of celebrating individual success. With this shift in assessment practices in schools, the need was felt for a concurrent shift in assessment practices in pre-service teacher education. The need was also felt to develop an assessment tool that would be more authentic and holistic and give student teachers the opportunity to reflect and critically evaluate their progress and growth as professionals. The aim of this paper is to trace the introduction and implementation of the Professional Development Portfolio within the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta.

Introduction

The paper describes the development and implementation of the *Professional Development Portfolio* at the Faculty of Education, University of Malta. It explores the experiences of student teachers using this tool, and discusses the constraints and difficulties encountered in the development of this innovative practice.

Traditionally in secondary as well as in post-secondary classrooms assessment has taken the form of quantitative measures of student learning. These measures describe what students have learnt in terms of marks and/or grades given as a result of tests; examinations and work carried out by the students. Usually, the purpose of these marks or grades has been to provide a summative picture of the achievement of students. Most students therefore are accustomed to working towards this final product or grade. As Torrance (1997) explains, alternative modes of assessment assess skills, understanding and processes during the course of study rather than at the end and use a variety of methods and evidence. The use of portfolios provides one way of achieving this goal. Klenowski (2002, p. 2) argues that “portfolio use for assessment aligns with current assessment and learning theory and offers the opportunity to redress the imbalance caused by testing and mechanistic and technical conceptualisations of curriculum and assessment”.

Portfolios in Teacher Education

Portfolios have been used successfully in a number of teacher education programmes in different countries, such as in the UK (University of London), the US (the University of Southern Maine; University of Idaho, Boise Center) and Australia (Monash University). In teacher education especially, portfolios help students acquire the necessary knowledge about assessment practices and the skills to carry out reflection, self-evaluation and critical analysis. Wolf (1996) describes a teacher's portfolio as a collection of information about a teacher's practice. It can include a variety of information such as lesson plans, student assignments, teacher's written descriptions of their instruction and formal evaluations by supervisors. However, the portfolio is also more than simply a collection of artefacts. What distinguishes it from a mere scrapbook or album of events is the thought and reflection that goes into the development of a portfolio.

The portfolio serves a dual role: it is formative in that it shows the process of growth and development of student teachers who use it as a tool of reflection on their practice with the aim of improving it. At the same time, it can also be used as a summative presentation document for employment. This dual role is common in the literature. In fact, Pollard (2000, p.1) suggests that "the appeal of a portfolio system is that it plays a dual role— one of assessment and one of showcasing new teachers"

The benefits of including portfolios in teacher education relate to the following: (1) a reflection tool; (2) a model for good assessment practices; (3) collaboration between students and lecturers. Klenowski's (2000) work has shown that the use of portfolios leads to the development of skills such as independent learning, self-evaluation, reflective practice, organization and meta-cognition. Moreover, she argues that a prime way to understand the value of an educational model of assessment and to develop the ability to implement assessment strategies that align with this model is to engage with such practice at pre-service level. When student teachers understand the new emphasis on learning rather than teaching and the need for learners to adopt an active role in their learning they can better translate these new views on assessment in their own classrooms. Klenowski (2000) further argues that portfolios are of benefit to teacher education lecturers who need time to meet with colleagues to clarify their understanding and to exchange ideas about the process and to share portfolio examples in order to develop an understanding of standards.

The Professional Development Portfolio in Malta

Pre-service teachers within the Faculty of Education are mainly assessed through written assignments and examinations as well as through observations during their teaching practice. At the end of their four-year course, students are presented with a transcript of their grades for the different units taken and a pass or fail for their teaching practice component.

The introduction of a new National Minimum Curriculum (Ministry of Education, Malta, 1999) proposed a shift in assessment philosophies and practices, from a summative mode of assessment focusing on end-products to one that gives credit to formative modes of assessment which in turn means greater emphasis on students as individual learners, on self-assessment and other modes of monitoring progress during the learning process and also to celebrating individual success. The National Minimum Curriculum states that:

- (i) the primary aim of assessment will be to feed back into our teaching and learning strategies and methods;
- (ii) we look out for what the learners are able to do rather than segregate and exclude them for what they don't know;
- (iii) The learners participate in self-assessment as they come to make more and more choices and decisions in their learning (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 10).

One way in which the National Minimum Curriculum (1999, p. 78) proposes that these aims can be achieved is that the "formative and summative assessments together with examples of children's work will be kept in a portfolio".

The need was felt for a concurrent shift in assessment practices within the Faculty of Education in its pre-service teacher education courses. The introduction of the Professional Development Portfolio within the Faculty of Education was viewed as an alternative mode of assessment which gives a richer picture of the professional development of student teachers and allows them to reflect and critically evaluate the development of their philosophy of teaching and learning (Chetcuti et al, 2001). The main aim of the Professional Development Portfolio is to provide a cumulative record of the student teachers' accomplishments and provide a comprehensive picture of their development and growth throughout the course.

The members of the Faculty of Education expressed three major concerns regarding the introduction of portfolios among student teachers. The first issue related to authenticity of the students' work; the second related to the actual contents of the portfolio and the need for a set of guidelines for student teachers and the third regarded the assessment of the portfolio.

The student teachers that participated in the pilot project were positive about the use of the portfolios. The main reason given was that they felt that the portfolio helped them to reflect on their work, as evidenced in the citations below:

Even though it is time consuming it made me reflect on my initial experiences as a teacher. Moreover it gives an indication to Heads on my commitment as a teacher. It is something to be treasured especially after graduating...

It helped me to reflect on my teaching practice and it will surely be helpful in the future when we will have to face interviewers...

Based on this initial positive feedback, the Faculty Board decided that portfolios should be introduced as an integral part of the teacher education programme. Various members of the Faculty of Education felt that guidelines were necessary so that both students and tutors would understand what a portfolio was and how it could be developed. An Assessment Committee was set up and was given the brief to develop such a guidebook and see to its implementation within the Faculty of Education. The first step involved deciding on the skills which student teachers were expected to have acquired once they had finished a four-year B.Ed. (Hons.) programme. Several sources such as the standards published by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (U.S.); the standards for the award of qualified teacher status (U.K.) and the teaching portfolios developed by the University of Western Australia were used during the discussions. The seven areas below were identified as being important aspects for the professional development of any student teacher. These are:

- Professional knowledge.
- The teaching and learning process.
- Management skills.
- Information and communications technology.
- Monitoring pupil learning.
- Other professional qualities and community involvement.
- Professional development.

The resources to be included to show that that students had acquired particular skills can be classified into two: artefacts and supporting documentation. Each section of the portfolio includes a checklist of the documentation that needs to be included, a short description of the artefacts and reflective writing sheets. Students are also asked to have references or official documentation signed or stamped in order to ensure authenticity. While students are encouraged to include any kind of documentation in their portfolio, the suggested contents of the portfolio are as follows:

Professional Knowledge:

- Introducing oneself as a teacher, outlining the philosophy of teaching and professional goals.
- Final transcript of results.
- An example of a submitted written task together with the evaluation sheet.
- Evidence of participation in seminars, local conferences, in service courses.
- Abstract of dissertation.

The Teaching and Learning process:

- Tutors' reports of all teaching practices.
- A pack which includes a scheme of work (for a particular subject and year level); a lesson plan developed from the scheme of work presented; the individualised lesson plan for students with learning difficulties (only where

applicable); any resources such as handouts used during the lesson; the self evaluation of the lesson. You can for example include a lesson which was observed by a tutor, in such a case the tutor's report can be included as part of the pack.

- Feedback from co-operating teachers and Heads of School.
- Feedback from pupils and parents.
- Samples of pupil work.

Management Skills:

- Photographs of the class during specific activities (e.g. during group work).
- Photographs or written evidence of resources used to support multi-level teaching.
- Floor plans of classrooms, laboratories, space used for teaching and learning.
- A written description of how a class was organised to carry out a particular activity (e.g. role-play) and a reflective evaluation of the effectiveness of the management skills.
- An anecdotal record of how you dealt with one or two specific discipline problems.
- Excerpts from tutors' reports regarding management skills.

Information and Communications Technology:

- A short description of the various forms of media used in instruction with a reflective evaluation on the advantages and disadvantages of each resource.
- Examples of how information technology was incorporated in the classroom (e.g. a list of Internet Resources and the use of email to communicate with colleagues).
- Examples of any learning aids produced such as handouts, flashcards, games, computer programs.

Monitoring Student Learning:

- An assessment plan for a particular topic or subject to show how multiple forms of assessment have been used.
- An example of an assessment given and an example of the feedback given to pupils.
- An example of progressive feedback given to pupils (to show feedback given and how this was followed through).
- An example of an assessment record sheet.
- A pupil or class profile.

Other Professional Qualities and Community Involvement:

- Evidence of involvement in school activities and extracurricular activities.
- Letters of reference indicating involvement in community activities.
- Letters indicating involvement in organising activities in and out of school.

Professional Development:

- Final reflections on growth and development throughout the course.

- Final reflection on the development of the portfolio.
- Professional development plan.

Reflection was considered to be an important aspect of the portfolio since “it is a dynamic process which is central to the professional development of a teacher” (Chetcuti et al, 2001, p. 7). This is the reason why the decision was taken to include reflective writing tasks that would help the student teachers to reflect on their work. This would ensure that the portfolio moves beyond being simply a teaching practice file or a scrapbook, to a document that clearly reflects growth and professional development. As stated in the Professional Development Portfolio (Chetcuti et al, 2001, p. 7) the aim of each reflective task is to help the students:

- analyse and reason through dilemmas;
- develop an awareness of the links between theory and practice;
- link understanding with classroom practice;
- grow and develop their own philosophy of teaching and learning

The Professional Development Portfolio was launched in the Faculty of Education in October 2001. Initially, it was to be carried out on a voluntary basis: student teachers told about the portfolio, its purpose was explained, and the help of tutors made available to them. However, very few student teachers took on the initiative of developing their own portfolio. Moreover, a number of members of the Faculty of Education were still not convinced of the usefulness of the portfolios and a number of concerns were raised relating to the following issues: (1) the balance between the formative / summative functions of the portfolio; (2) the teaching aspect of the course as the main focus; (3) how to assess the portfolio.

At this point in time, the Assessment Committee of the Faculty of Education decided to review its position on the Portfolio. It was decided that it would become a compulsory component of the teacher education programme. Students would in turn be helped to develop their Professional Development Portfolio through a series of tutorial sessions over the second, third and fourth year of the B.Ed. (Hons.) course. They would actually start to develop the portfolio and reflect on examples of their work within these tutorial groups.

The Professional Development Portfolio is now an integral part of the B.Ed.(Hons.) programme, and all student teachers are expected to complete it. The Assessment Committee has recently developed a guidebook for tutors and student teachers. This publication is seen to help both tutors and student teachers understand the objectives, contents and tasks to be covered in each tutorial session. Assessment criteria have also been developed to facilitate the assessment of students. The criteria are organized in such a way that students are able to engage in self-assessment in conjunction with comments from tutors. The guidebook, which has a focus on the process of growth, is currently being evaluated by the student teachers and tutors during its first cycle in operation.

It is hoped that the emphasis will continue to be on the process of growth and improvement of the student-teachers, and that the Professional Development Portfolio will be(come) a tool that helps students reflect on their ideals and practices which they fine-tune and can then make profitable use of in their professional practices.

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