Using Student Learning Portfolios: Intended Outcomes and Additional Benefits

Susanna Wai Ching LAI-YEUNG, The Open University of Hong Kong

Author's Contact Information

Susanna Wai Ching LAI-YEUNG, Assistant Professor,
The Open University of Hong Kong,
A0423 School of Education and Languages
30 Good Shepherd Street,
Homantin, Kowloon, HONG KONG
Tel: 852-2768 5811
email: swclai@ouhk.edu.hk

Abstract:

This paper is a reflection of the use of student learning portfolios in an educational psychology course. It begins with an outline of the types and purposes of portfolios, and then describes how student learning portfolios were used in an educational psychology course. Students' reflections in the portfolios showed how they had benefitted in the educational psychology course and what they valued in their learning journey. The author ends with discussions of the intended outcomes and the extra benefits gained in using student learning portfolios.

Key Words:

Student learning portfolios, educational psychology, reflections, learning journey.

Introduction

A portfolio is a purposeful and meaningful collection of student work which shows the student's learning progress over time. Its major purpose is to encourage the student to document and reflect on his educational experience (Bansal, 2011). It should evolve over time. Its main characteristics are concisely explained by Arter & Spandel's (1992) definition:

> … a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of the student's efforts, progress or achievement in (a) given area(s). This collection must include student participation in selection of portfolio content; the guidelines for selection; the criteria for judging merit; and evidence of student self-reflection (p.36).

Portfolios have been used widely for various purposes; some examples include:

- Accountability - to evaluate the effectiveness of a program or a curriculum
- Assessment for learning - to assess students' learning and diagnose students' needs which in turn can inform instructional planning

- Assessment of learning - to ascertain student achievement and learning outcomes
- Professional development - to encourage reflective practice and professional development
- Student self-assessment – to encourage students to self-assess and develop in learning.
  (Klenowski, 2002; Smyth, 2009; Zubizarreta, 2009)

There are different types of portfolio to match the various purposes. To name a few, there are:

- A process or developmental portfolio empowers students to self-direct their learning. It shows the growth and development of the learner.
- A showcase portfolio is a collection of the best achievements.
- An assessment portfolio shows the accomplishments over time.
- A reflective portfolio helps the student write down thoughts and emotions in the learning process which can later be used as tools for reflective practice.
- A working portfolio demonstrates ongoing work in learning.
  (Bansal, 2011; Smyth, 2009; Stiggins, 1994)

The present paper is a reflection of the use of student learning portfolios for the purposes of promoting student learning and assessment in an educational psychology course. To be specific, I intended to use the portfolio as a tool for three purposes: assessment for student learning, assessment of student learning, as well as encouraging student self-assessment.

The Course: Educational Psychology (Part One)

This was a compulsory core course for an undergraduate English Language Studies program. Among the students taking this course, about half were enrolled as double-degree students in a pre-service teacher education programme. The other half of the class took this course as an elective. This was a year-long course. Part One of the course was offered in the first semester and covered basic research methodology and theories and issues in child and adolescent development. Part Two of the course was offered in the second semester and covered theories and strategies related to teaching and learning.

To encourage continuous student efforts, I adopted an ongoing, formative mode of assessment in this course. There were several components in the course assessment and a student learning portfolio (accounting for 8% of the course grade) was one of them. The student learning portfolio consisted of (i) a collection of student-selected in-class exercises, self-tests, reflection exercises, readings, etc. that students did throughout Part One of this course which could document their own learning progress and (ii) a brief self-reflection of 350 – 400 words on their learning journey in this course.

Promoting the Use of the Student Learning Portfolio

It was anticipated that students in this course would find the idea of a student learning portfolio new to them. To prepare students for the task, I distributed a handout

informing students of the requirements of the student learning portfolio. They were told that the various exercises and activities in the lectures would form part of the portfolio. As one major purpose of the student learning portfolio was intended to enhance learning, students were advised to attend, prepare for and actively participate in the lectures and start building up the portfolio early. I also explained the purposes and characteristics of the student learning portfolio at the beginning of the course. Guidelines and questions were given to students to assist their self-reflection. The following are examples of the guiding questions:

- What have I learned in this course that interests me most? Why?
- How have I benefited from the exercises, activities or short quizzes in the lectures?
- Have my attitudes, skills and knowledge about learning or educational psychology changed after taking this course? Why or why not?
- How can I sustain my learning?

It was emphasized that the portfolios would be assessed in terms of the authenticity, originality and depth of reflection. Superficial and insincere self-reflections were strongly discouraged. In addition, students were told that the portfolios would be marked by an external marker who did not know the students to ensure objectivity in grading.

4. Students' Learning Shown in the Portfolios

Among the twenty-seven portfolios being analyzed, fourteen students (51.9%) mentioned a change in attitude or misconception, such as changes in their prior conception of educational psychology or in their views towards certain theoretical concepts. One student wrote:

> When the educational psychology course just started, I asked myself whether I could handle it since some previous students that I asked told me that the course was rather tough. I would have swapped to an easier course like Hong Kong Literature. But honestly, the atmosphere during lectures was engaging and I found the topics interesting. The exercises and activities done in class were also helpful for understanding or preparing students for the topic.

All except two students (92.6%) wrote about the application value that they saw in taking the course. They could see that topics covered could be applied in life or in their future career, or to help themselves or others in some ways. The following is one example:

> In the last eight weeks, I have been learning how to analyze events that have framed my life through psychological perspectives. Studying educational psychology was a unique experience that I can comfortably look back at and an experience that cannot be traded for anything. Educational psychology has fascinated me in many ways. All the theories that were taught allow me to view things from a wider point of view. It has enabled me to understand things that I did in the past. Furthermore, it made me appreciate many aspects of life that did not appeal to me previously. I always thought that I was among the less able students because my mathematical abilities were underprivileged. However, after

studying educational psychology, my view of intelligence being restricted to a particular intelligence has changed….

Twenty-four students (88.9%) wrote about some specific aspects of theories learned in this part of the course that impressed them. For example, they discussed some new theoretical concepts or ideas that inspired them. Some wrote about topics that they saw as relevant, important or interesting.

Additional Benefits

It was rewarding to find from students' portfolios that they had a good grasp of the theories and issues covered in this part of the educational psychology course. It showed that they had achieved the intended learning outcomes. Selecting materials to be included in the portfolios and doing the reflections had facilitated and enhanced students' learning. Moreover, I could see additional benefits that students had gained in this course.

White (2004) reported that students learned research and library skills, and peer collaboration skills. Among my students, all except one (96.3%) said that taking the course had changed their study habits, helped them acquire better learning strategies, or provided them with project collaboration and management skills. These students also discussed in great details how much they appreciated the teacher and the innovative strategies adopted in this course. Students used many positive emotion words to describe the course and their learning journeys. Commonly used words included love, like, fascinated, fun, impressed, enjoy, and appreciate. These reflections were very gratifying to read. They served as feedback to inform and improve practice, and could motivate the teacher to sustain the hard work invested in teaching this course.

Reflections and Concluding Remarks

Zubizarreta (2009) found in his students' portfolios that he was "always surprised at how individual the responses are, how every student identifies a unique area of growth." (p.79) I had somewhat similar feelings. As I read through the portfolios, though I could find several common themes in the reflections, I also found each portfolio to be unique, individual and personal. Every student's learning journey took different routes and turns. This affirmed my conviction to know the students and teach the students, not a set curriculum.

Previous research had found that students often questioned the value of educational psychology courses (Woolfolk, 1996; Snowman, 1997). Woolfolk (1996) commented: "I believe that my students come to understand and value educational psychology, but not without great effort on my part and theirs" (p.42). I cannot agree more.

It was very difficult for students to see the value of Part One of this course as it did not yet go into theories or issues directly related to teaching and learning. I had to work very hard to create engaging activities to involve students, expound concepts with experiential exercises and games, and connect theories with students' experiences and backgrounds so as to let them see the relevance. Nonetheless, reading students' reflections cheer me up; tell me to move head on. Unexpectedly, I also become one of

the benefactors from using the portfolios. These are additional benefits not intended or planned initially. What pleasant surprises!

Acknowledgements

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