Assessment by portfolio: an encounter with contradictory discourses

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Abstract

In the light of many changes taking place in higher education, it is often problematic to align the theoretical pronouncements with their application on the ground. This article is based on a study that tracked steps taken by educators to introduce portfolio assessment in an institution of higher learning. A phenomenographic research method was used to capture data from the documents the educators had produced over a two year period. The focus of the research was on the manner in which three factors revealed the experiences of the research participants, namely the past of the participants and the institutional culture, the educational beliefs of the participants, and their educational understanding of portfolio assessment. Analysis of documents on programme design, implementation and evaluation revealed how the participants struggled to implement the use of a portfolio for assessment. After persistence and reflection, they improved on their practical interpretation of the theory.

‘Portfolios are messy to construct, cumbersome to store, difficult to score, and vulnerable to misrepresentation. However, in ways no other assessment can, portfolios prove a connection to the contexts and personal histories that characterize real teaching and make it possible to document the unfolding of both teaching and learning over time’ (Shulman in Wellman 1999, 3).

INTRODUCTION

Assessment by portfolio involves throwing two highly contentious educational concepts together. Assessment is a process that continuously challenges educationists as they try to implement scientifically sound assessment methods (Delandshere 2002, 1461). Such attempts are made under the shadow of an increasing disillusionment that can best be summed up in Knight’s argument (2002) that there is great confusion about summative assessment practices. As Shulman suggests in the quotation above, portfolios are difficult and complex constructs, especially when used as assessment tools. Yet he admits that they have the potential to link meaningfully the teaching and learning processes. They can therefore be useful means of assessment.

The use of portfolios for teaching and learning has generally been prevalent
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among practitioners in performing and visual arts. The adoption of portfolios for a variety of purposes in higher education is a recent development. The last decade of the twentieth century saw an unprecedented growth in literature on the use of portfolios in higher education (Seldin 1991, 1993; Williams 1997; Wilkinson and Buchner 1998). This can be attributed to developments that are taking teaching more seriously (Seldin 1993). New thinking around the scholarship of teaching (Boyer 1990) has resulted in an exploration of ways of improving teaching and assessing learning. Portfolios have emerged as one of the alternative methods for improving teaching and learning. In particular, there has been growing interest in assessment through the promotion of reflective practice and the provision of evidence (Wilkinson and Buchner 1998).

Recent developments in institutions of higher learning show an increasing adoption of assessment by portfolio, especially in the programmes designed for the accreditation of academics as educators in tertiary institutes and universities. The Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILT) and the Staff Development Association (SEDA), both British higher education agencies, adopted portfolio assessment in their programmes. The Higher Education Academy (HEA), founded in the United Kingdom in 2004, has continued with the debates and discussions on portfolios for assessment. This practice has spread to South Africa where, since the beginning of this millennium, a majority of providers who offer the South African Post-Graduate Certificate in Higher Education and Training (PGCHET) or its equivalents, have been using the portfolio as a key method of assessment.

The excitement about portfolios as an alternative assessment technique should not preclude an awareness of weaknesses and pitfalls related to this approach. General concerns about portfolios are that they can be empty of substance. They can also be accompanied by a trivialisation through inept selection of data. Wolf’s (1995) warning about new assessment methods is applicable to portfolio assessment. He observes that many claims made by assessors extol the efficacy of the new methods of assessment. Such methods require further investigation before such claims can be made. Knight also warns that, ‘the greater range of assessment techniques [which have] come into currency . . . introduced substantial practical and theoretical problems’ (2002, 278).

Implementation of the portfolio assessment method in higher education tends to focus on the technicalities of designing portfolios and the plotting of implementation steps. At times, such practices are contradictory to the theoretical claims that are made in literature about good assessment practices. Such limited approaches threaten to entrench the very weaknesses in assessment methods that have to be rectified. Moreover, sound scientific approaches have to be rigorously applied in the training of future educators.

Assessors using portfolios as assessment tools need to have a greater awareness of the contradictions that creep in between theory and practice in this method. As in any scientific approach, claims about the efficacy of this technique have to be
rigorously tested by practitioners. The differences and similarities that seriously compromise the quality of teaching and learning of this method have to be identified and rectified.

In this article, an examination of practices and an analysis of current discourse on portfolio assessment are undertaken. The research method followed is phenomenographic. This is a qualitative research method that was adopted to investigate the practice and theory that underpins the implementation of an assessment by portfolio approach in an institution of higher learning in South Africa. The study covers a series of steps of design, implementation and review taken by educators between 2003 and 2004 as they battled to change from traditional methods of assessment to a more innovative approach.

In this article, an attempt is made to highlight the contradictions that are sometimes found within theoretical claims, as well as those that exist between theory and practice.

**CHANGING VIEWS ABOUT ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

New thinking about assessment in higher education has largely come about in response to an increasing questioning of the conventional assessment methods traditionally used in higher education (Delandshere 2002; Knight 2002). Ramsden comments about the ‘thick bureaucratic mystique designed to form an effective barrier against the inquisitive’ (2003, 176). Concerns about a lack of validity of traditional examinations emanate from increasing doubts as to whether these techniques are effective. Changing views in educational circles of the nature of assessment have brought about further changes in assessment in higher education. Higher education practitioners have become increasingly aware that assessment is central to the promotion of quality teaching and learning, and that it is a key to the transformation of higher education. Shay (2003, 1) links quality and reform: ‘Over the past two decades assessment has come to be perceived by governments and other authorities as a powerful technology for both education reform and quality control’. Moreover, Harvey and Knight (1996, 136) emphasise the fact that transformation of higher education needs ‘transformed and transforming assessment’.

In South Africa, higher education has been undergoing radical changes. With a new emphasis on quality and equity, South African higher education institutions and educators have adopted a variety of strategies to help realise the new developments. The professional development of academics is one such strategy (Department of Education 1998). In 2002 the introduction and implementation of a teaching qualification that would be assessed through a portfolio at what was then known as the Cape Technikon in South Africa, was taken in view of those developments. The PGCHET posed a special challenge to the educators who were to present the programme. One of the programme stipulations was that students who were registered for the programme would be assessed through a portfolio. The
design of the programme itself was in accordance with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) format and followed an outcomes-based approach.

It is in this context that assessment by portfolio has become a challenging area of research for educators in higher education. This method entails making use of a portfolio that was developed by a learner over some time as evidence of his/her competence as measured against a set of assessment criteria.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

Strong arguments have been presented by educationists on the manner in which portfolio assessment is amenable to the application of new thinking on education, especially in assessment (Lumina 2005). One of these is the contention that preparing a portfolio forces learners to reflect on their teaching and that the whole process launches education on a developmental trajectory (Seldin 1993; Yorke 2003). The method of assessing by portfolio places the learner at the centre. It therefore engages learners over some time, which results in the improvement of learning. This consequently adds meaning to the process of assessment itself. Such an approach to assessment promotes self-assessment. In this instance, students are not subjected to a process that they have to undergo, as is the case in conventional methods. Instead, they participate in a process in which they feel valued (Brown and Knight 1994; MacIsaac and Jackson 1994).

Further argument for portfolio assessment is framed within social constructivist theories (Delandshere 2002). Claims made in this vein are that through assessment by portfolio, space is provided to accommodate diversity among learners. There is scope for individual learners to bring in their learning styles as well as to weave in their life experiences into the learning process. Learners have an opportunity to produce evidence gleaned from their own experiences in order to prove acquisition of competence. Assessment portfolios also have a flexibility that accommodates discipline specificities.

DISCONCERTING CONTRADICTIONS REGARDING PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

A close analysis of the literature on the use of portfolios in higher education reveals certain contradictions between theoretical claims and implementation processes. New ideas – and even new language – are sometimes applied in old contexts. In some of the literature on portfolios, both the old and the new discourses are discernible in the same text. For example, claims are made by educationists about the learner-centred approach of portfolio assessment that entails focusing on the learner’s practical experience (Cooper 1996). However, such claims are compromised by the fact that the use of portfolios for assessment is
commonly for summative assessment. Under such circumstances, the possibility of the educator remaining at the centre and continuing to wield her/his authority to judge remains high.

It is argued that self-assessment can give a student greater control and a voice in the process of assessment. This is what Lumina (2005, 485) describes as ‘an independent mode of learning where the teacher assumes the role of a resource and the focus is on self-directed learning’. This may be the case. However, moderation usually takes place through a system that the assessor has set up. Moreover, there is little opportunity for the learners to give feedback to the educator about the assessment process. While the language of innovative assessment techniques extol learner emancipation, it is possible for educators to continue exercising the power they have enjoyed under the discredited approach (Delandshere 2002).

Innovation through the portfolio assessment method may further be compromised by being implanted upon institutional or departmental practices that are firmly entrenched in conventional modes of assessment. Equally, an educator’s progressive thinking can easily be subverted by a departmental context. Fellow academics and, at times students themselves, are often cautious of an approach that is open to being described disparagingly as a lowering of standards.

Certain contradictory instructions regarding the construction of a portfolio can sometimes cause confusion. MacIsaacson and Jackson (1994) support the idea of flexibility, while on the other hand fixed lists appear in books on portfolio construction (Seldin 1993; Caris in Seldin 1993). The idea of a selective approach on what items to include, based on themes and philosophical principles, is often contradicted by endless lists on what to include in a portfolio, which are thrown in by the same writers (Seldin 1993). Such lists tend to confuse students, compromise their initiative and undermine their creativity. Using portfolios for enriching teaching and learning in higher education can easily degenerate into ‘how to’ lists, and questions about the length of the portfolio. On the latter issue, Seldin’s contention that there is no right answer does not address the heart of the problem. In fact, he specifically suggests that a portfolio should be 5–7 pages long (1991).

Instead of lists there ought to be adequate discussions by both educators and portfolio constructors on why particular documents should be included. Depending on the purpose of the portfolio, there can be important points like accessibility and readability that can be fore-grounded, if the portfolio is to be read by assessors or evaluators. It should be the underlying principles and themes that should inform the practitioner, as a portfolio is being constructed, what is to be included or left out.

**METHOD**

As mentioned previously, the research method used in the study on which this article is based is phenomenography. Marton, who developed the phenomenographic research method together with his colleagues, defines it as ‘the empirical
study of the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in and aspects of, the world around us are experienced, conceptualised, understood and apprehended’ (Marton in Tight 2003, 197). Qualitative data was used to track differences and similarities in the research participants’ understanding of phenomena and the manner they experienced them. The context of the experience was around the introduction, implementation and evaluation of the assessment by portfolio method as practised in a lecturers’ professional development programme. The author of this article, who was one of the three research participants, kept track of the developments related to assessment by portfolio, which formed the basis of the experiences that produced the data for the research.

Factors influencing the context of the experience included, among others, the experience of the research participants as assessors, and the institutional culture or tradition. The participants and their world were not dealt with separately. Educational beliefs of participants, specifically on assessment, were identified as important factors influencing the participants’ understanding of phenomena in the world of portfolio assessment. Participants’ educational knowledge of portfolio assessment was a crucial factor around which the analysis of the experiences of participants as they worked in the programme could be undertaken. All the participants had become familiarised with the new thinking about assessment through wide reading. Of particular importance is that they had been co-designers of the qualification at the time it was put together as a national qualification. They had thus been privy to the discussions about what assessment method would be best suited for the new qualification. They were well acquainted with the theory on assessment by portfolio.

Participants

The three research participants in the study were the educators who had designed, implemented and evaluated the curriculum of the PGCHET with special reference to the section about assessment by portfolio.

Data collection

Data for the study came mainly from documents that had been produced over the two years during which the research was undertaken. These documents included minutes of meetings, student handouts, student reports, research reports and correspondence with management. Data from these texts provided a ‘second order’ perspective as it was derived from records describing how the participants had perceived their experiences (Eklund-Myrskog 1996).

RESULTS

The results discussed below are an interpretation of data gleaned from documents
already referred to above. The analysis is based on the three factors that the researcher identified as key categories for classifying the research participants’ experiences. These were experiences gathered in the process of implementing portfolio assessment in the PGCHET.

**Participants’ past and institutional tradition**

The participants’ experiences of assessment included an average of 15 years in higher education assessment. This was mainly through conventional modes of end of the year examinations. Through supervising theses at post-graduate level, however, they had a broader and different experience of working in an assessment mode that was akin to assessment by portfolio. The culture of the institution on assessment was somewhat similar. Assessment in the institution was run in accordance with the traditional end of the year summative examinations. The staff, students and management were accustomed to the conventional examinations.

Information about the experiences of the participants in the first year of implementation was gleaned from their planning meeting notes, minutes of staff meetings, student feedback and handouts for the candidates. The minutes of staff meetings provided evidence that the participants had limited success in convincing the candidates of the PGCHET about what was expected of them in an assessment by portfolio approach. The students were sceptical about the proposed method of assessment and repeatedly enquired about the format of examinations at the end of the programme. The students seemingly perceived themselves as being consumers of knowledge as opposed to being creators of knowledge. Portfolio construction was compelling them to interpret their own actions rather than be dependent on existing information. There was a certain disbelief in whether the proposed method was genuinely an academic exercise. Consequently, there was a lack of commitment in the continuous collection of evidence expected of students who were to build a portfolio. Research participants had to contend with a situation where the candidates were not enthusiastic to submit tasks that were also meant to be material for the building of a portfolio.

Students’ progress reports to the deans were used as a medium to bring the senior academic staff on board. In a study conducted in 2004 by Tisani, it had emerged that some deans of faculties were ambivalent about the value and relevance of the programme under discussion. This was also discernible in the manner the students had to carry on with their studies under heavy workloads.

Through certain practices and traditions, there was a serious contradiction between the institutional discourse on the programme and its innovative approach. The institution had actually identified the programme to be a condition for confirmation of tenure for new academics. Some academic managers claimed to be excited at the prospect of having new staff members who had been exposed to a programme that would equip them with competences to deliver quality work in
their departments. Some deans and heads of department went out of their way to provide support structures for the new lecturers in the form of mentors and reduced workloads.

There were inconsistencies between views of research participants on portfolio assessment as expounded in their write-ups and some of their actions. For example, preparation of candidates for producing a portfolio included running a two-hour workshop on ‘A Teaching Portfolio’ The focus was mainly on the theoretical input on what a portfolio is, what it is for and a discussion on the contents of a portfolio. Students were further instructed in a flyer how they were to identify documents that they would include in their portfolios as they worked on their own. This verbal instruction was repeated several times whenever the opportunity arose. The approach was contrary to the tenets of experiential learning that advocate experience through action.

Evaluation of the programme at the end of the year indicated that one of the least successful aspects of the programme was related to the construction of a portfolio for assessment. This was largely elicited from candidates’ feedback and the research participants’ self-evaluation.

During the succeeding year, another pool of novice lecturers registered for the PGCHET. By then the research participants had a new awareness of the contradictions under which they had operated during the previous year. In their planning, there were deliberate efforts to close the gaps. Innovations that were decided on and introduced in the programme included practical sessions on portfolio construction. This would involve both the research participants and the PGCHET candidates. Both Shulman and Annis in Seldin (1991) advocate the provision of a mentor and supporting system that is similar to that given to students working on theses. There was thus a hands-on approach to portfolio building. Moreover, the PGCHET students were encouraged to form working groups that would support each other in producing portfolios. Seldin (1991) supports this approach and advises that a portfolio is best prepared in consultation with others.

Engagement by facilitators in the building of portfolios gave them an opportunity to provide continuous feedback to the students on their progress on portfolio building. The process itself became a learning opportunity for students who were compelled to reflect on their actions and understanding.

The institution and its academic managers remained distant from the nitty-gritty procedures of the PGCHET, which, in reality, was one of many programmes. Therefore, hurdles emanating from their tradition were still there even during the second year cycle.

**Participants’ educational beliefs and their experiences**

The research participants held certain educational beliefs that they expressed verbally and that even informed some of the documents they produced. One of these related to the debate about atomistic and holistic approaches to learning
(Ramsden 2003). The issue had been discussed at length by the Standards Generating Body (SGB) during the design of the SAQA-registered PGCHET qualification. The resultant design had been based on a holistic approach. This view, to which the participants subscribed, perceived the introduction of unit standards in higher education as a serious threat to the quality of learning.

From an analysis of the documents, it emerged that during the first year of implementation of the PGCHET at the Cape Technikon, assessment criteria were in accordance with exit level outcomes of the qualification. What that meant was that assessment would be itemised outcome by outcome. This was the atomism to which the participants had shown opposition. The unending revision of assessment criteria and the confusion on the part of the students were enough signs that a serious re-look at the assessment criteria was needed.

A new document was produced on assessment criteria in the subsequent year. An integrated assessment approach was adopted (SAQA 2001). The participants had been searching for a model that would take them to a holistic assessment approach. The Williams (1997) Reflective Heart Model was adopted. This model breaks up the assessment criteria into three major questions: Who is the student? How does he/she teach? How do other people experience her/his teaching? With Williams’ model, a portfolio could be broken into three easily identifiable sections that would be more amenable to holistic assessment.

**Participants’ educational knowledge on portfolio assessment**

When it came to educational knowledge, with special reference to assessment by portfolio, once again gaps were noticeable between the participants’ articulated understanding, referred to by Brockbank and McGill (1998) as propositional knowledge, and actions by the participants. For example, there is an argument in the literature that is strongly for the adoption of criterion referencing (Biggs 1999) instead of norm referencing. The latter approach is perceived as measuring students against their peers instead of against what they can do. What sometimes challenges assessors using the criterion-referencing approach is the grading.

The participants embraced the new thinking on criterion referencing and perceived it as best suited for portfolio assessment. Student handouts indicated that the research participants had decided on pursuing criterion referencing. The criteria would be on a sliding scale of highly competent, competent and not yet competent. Participants’ knowledge about this approach was based on their familiarity with literature on the topic. To a limited extent, they also had had exposure to the implementation of criterion referencing in the assessment process for the recognition of prior learning.

However, in the actual process of assessing portfolio according to identified criteria, the research participants kept on vacillating between what literature says
on criterion referencing and what they knew from their experience in norm referencing. In practice, the research participants, as assessors, were treading the middle path, following aspects from both approaches.

Even during the second year cycle, no clarity was reached on this matter. The decision taken was that assessors would adhere to the criteria set. These criteria had been amplified and were much clearer in guiding both the candidates and the assessors. In addition, the assessors decided that they would allocate a mark. What could be seen as the old order was juxtaposed to the new thinking, namely the insistence on the provision of grading students. It was not merely a matter of judging whether they were competent or not yet competent, but a mark would be allocated as well. The latter had been a cornerstone of traditional assessment and it was a struggle for the participants to conceive things differently.

**DISCUSSION**

The research reported in this article indicates important processes that take place in contexts of change and educational innovation. Three factors were identified to provide the context of activities of the research participants. These factors in turn give a slice of the totality of the experience of the research participants’ two years of designing and re-designing, implementing and re-implementing, evaluating and re-evaluating portfolio assessment in the South African Post-Graduate Certificate in Higher Education and Training (PGCHET).

The experiences of the participants highlight certain points worth mentioning. One of these had to do with the wider environment where action took place. Though the participant and the context should not be separated, at times the two elements did show divisions and differences in understanding. This was demonstrated in the manner in which institutional tradition lagged behind in the re-designing processes that were necessary to reduce the contradictions and weaknesses that beset the programme.

The results also highlight ‘the incompatibility between new theories and methods . . . used in assessment’ (Delandshere 2002, 1480). However, in the study there is evidence to show that ‘reflection-in-action’ (Brockbank and McGill 1998:74) by the research participants did facilitate shifts in the thinking and practice of the participants and that it succeeded in reducing contradictions and confusion that were prevalent in the programme.

It is important to note that some inconsistencies remained in the discourse and actions of the participants. This was either through an inability to change or from sheer force of tradition.

**CONCLUSION**

This article reports phenomenographic research on the experiences of educators who had to overcome constraints created by old practices and understandings to
bring to effect innovation through new ideas about assessment. The context of the research was the introduction of a new assessment method in an institution of higher learning. The portfolio assessment technique called for a major shift in thinking among key players in the learning process. These included the institutional management, students and educators facilitating in the new programme.

The complexities involved in the introduction of new ideas in a learning situation are highlighted. The findings bring to the fore the inconsistencies that sometimes exist between theoretical assertions about changes and the practicalities of implementing such new ideas. Through an analysis of records accumulated over a two-year period of programme implementation, a picture emerges of the various processes that accompany changes in learning.

The research findings have a special significance for the broader transformation processes taking place in higher education. The theorising, which is the foundation of the changes, is incomplete if the propounded theories have not been applied in real situations. At the Cape Technikon, where the introduction of assessment by portfolio was beset by a number of difficulties, through reflection-in-action, the staff and learners were able to tackle the contradictions that threatened to de-rail the process of bringing about innovation to teaching and learning.

REFERENCES


