TELLING STORIES IN THE USE OF PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: SOME IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

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Abstract: Evidence has shown that the results of traditional standardized tests characterized by pencil and paper formats, multiple-choice responses and time-restricted completion are not sufficient in telling how pupils engage in the learning process and their progress in learning. In addition, these tests tend to emphasize on the assessment of basic skills but fail to measure higher level thinking and problem solving skills. This inadequacy can be addressed by incorporating authentic assessment approaches such as performance tasks, portfolios, and grading for team effort. This paper aims to tell stories from an action learning research group whose members have used ‘portfolio’ as an alternative assessment strategy in higher education.

TRENDS IN ASSESSMENT

The term assessment usually refers to the full range of information gathered and compiled by teachers about their students and sometimes their classrooms (Freeman & Lewis, 1998). Information on students and learning are formally collected through tests, examinations and continuous assessment; and informally through observation and verbal exchange. On the other hand, information about the classroom and teaching obtained from informal student feedback and formal course evaluation can also form part of the assessment.

Since early 1990’s, a number of educators have focused their assessment and evaluation efforts on lessening the misuses of standard tests, improving existing tests, and most importantly, developing alternative means of assessment including portfolio. The focus of assessment has shifted from the measurement approach to an evidential one (Freeman & Lewis, 1998). While the measurement approach stems from psychology and science, the evidential approach is rooted in sociological and legal models. The evidential approach does not claim absolute objectivity, but seeks to draw justifiable conclusions from evidence drawn from a range of different sources. The student often plays a key role in deciding what should be offered as evidence. Portfolios are usually the means for presenting the evidence, and can even be used as a reporting device.’

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT: CONCEPT AND CHARACTERISTICS

Portfolio’ embodies a number of key features including:

- Students are directly involved in assessment, working proactively including provision of
evidence.

- Teachers are no longer the sole marker or assessor. Self and peer evaluation form part of the assessment process. The role of teachers becomes multifaceted.
- Assessment moves from mainly summative and norm-referenced to continuous and criterion-referenced.
- Assessment arrangements are more flexible, for example, in time, method and location.
- Reporting of assessment results is more complex, employing methods like profile and portfolio.

Portfolio assessment is closely related to performance and authentic assessment. Instead of having students respond to paper-and-pencil tests, performance assessment whose emphasis is on procedural knowledge acquisition, requires students to demonstrate that they can perform particular tasks. However, authentic assessment takes this a step further by stipulating that a real-life setting in these demonstrations.

Portfolio assessment involves students gathering evidence on an on-going basis from multiple indicators of progress to demonstrate achievements over time that meet course goals. In this sense, portfolios are both descriptive and evaluative in nature as they provide tangible products in the form of a folder, a notebook, or a box that document students’ effort and intangibly an insight into students’ learning process and their ability to perform particular tasks. Portfolio assessment therefore includes both process and product. The process involves students and teachers working collaboratively to create a portfolio that will be both multidimensional and dynamic. Through both process and product, students’ learning and growth can be assessed.

The process of portfolio development includes four distinctive aspects: reflection, negotiated portfolio planning, conferences, assessment and evaluation.

Reflection, a key element of portfolio assessment, requires students to make judgements about the adequacy and effectiveness of their own knowledge, performance, beliefs, or effects for the purpose of self-improvement. Reflective processes help us conceptualize and formulate our rules and principles based on which we build our knowledge, personal theories and judgement. Through thinking and re-thinking systematically, experiences become more valuable. However, students need to understand reflectivity, see its value, and learn how to reflect logically and methodologically aspects of their experience (King & Kitchener, 1994; McLaughlin, 1995).

Negotiated portfolio planning can be seen as part of the process of curriculum enactment, which can be viewed as the educational experiences jointly, shaped by student and teacher. Underlying this perspective, knowledge is individualized. It is also a personal developmental process, both for the student and the teacher. From my personal experience, active student involvement in the planning stage significantly increases the sense of responsibility and ownership. Students feel that they can perform reasonably well as expectations are clear and the portfolios truly represent their effort and demonstrate their ability.

The success of the portfolio process relies largely on the mutual understanding between the student and the tutor developed through formal and informal conferences. We argue strongly that time spent on actively interact, negotiate meaning, and clarify terminology with students is time well spent and should be invested wisely. Thus conferences should focus on examining aspects of the portfolio process that are of particular concern to the student, exploring the development of certain pieces of evidence, or assuring possible anxiety.
Implicit in the use of portfolios is the assumption that each student’s work is highly personalized and idiosyncratic. Because of these inherent differences among students, evaluation can be extremely challenging. Evaluation is distinguished form of assessment. Evaluation embraces the judgement and decisions, and can be either conducted by self or peer or both. Portfolio assessment is formative and criterion-referenced. The courses of action including planning, writing rational statements and objectives, gathering evidence, sharing and presenting are integral parts of the assessment and evaluation process.

Rubrics or descriptors of performance are used to facilitate the alignment of portfolios with the reporting process. They are the scoring criteria and represent a continuum of performance, and they give a common ground for discussing the portfolio development process and the product.

**SOME ISSUES ON IMPLEMENTATION**

The concept and characteristics of “portfolio assessment” puts forward two main arguments for its adoption – it is a student-centered approach, and it has positive implications for teaching and learning (Clemmons et al, 1993; Kemp & Toperoff, 1998; Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991).

**The teacher/school perspective** However, it is anticipated that the road toward “portfolio assessment” will not be a smooth one. The use of “portfolio” will create “additional demands on teachers and students as well as on school resources.” (Sweet, 1993) A major concern involves finding time for the regular student-teacher meetings and to effectively assess student portfolios, particularly when the class size is large (Farr & Tone, 1994). Furthermore, the lack of resources, such as a room for meeting; a place to store student portfolios; and the availability of audio-visual equipment to collect evidence, could seriously dampen any enthusiasm to implement portfolio assessment.

In the development stage, there is a need to (1) identify competencies to be assessed in student portfolios that matches the learning objectives of the module; (2) select the learning activities that will work well together; and (3) make some decisions on possible portfolio evidence and assessment mechanisms.

It is understandable that not every teacher will embrace the concept of “portfolio assessment” with equal zest. Teachers need to familiarize themselves with the concept and be convinced of its value before they are willing make a commitment toward its implementation.

Teachers involved in using portfolio need to periodically meet and share their experience on using this concept among themselves. Nationally and internationally, they should continue to learn more about “portfolio assessment” by attending relevant seminars, workshops, and conferences on the use of portfolios. Likewise, students need instruction on how to carry out work that is required in assembling a portfolio.

**The student perspective** In this aspect, four major areas of concern in implementation deserve special attention: student anxiety in conducting reflection and self-analysis; student workload; student-tutor relationship; and effectiveness of portfolio conversations.

Student anxiety in conducting reflection and self-analysis is understandable because of their inexperience and inadequacy in recalling and expressing their thoughts. To improve on this situation, it is for students to learn about thinking skills and practise how to reflect systematically.
One of the pitfalls in portfolio development is the underestimation of student workload both by the tutors and students themselves. Overloading resulted from time under-allocation and over-involvement cannot be ignored. A related problem is the individual variation in the time spent on portfolio development. It varies significantly from the enthusiastic and committed students to those who “put a few things together” for submission. Tutors should provide appropriate guidance in helping students to manage time realistically and appropriately and techniques such as scheduling will assist students in completing identified tasks promptly.

One key asset of portfolios is that they provide a vehicle for student and tutor collaboration particularly on assessment. During the process of portfolio development and assessment, the tutor and students need to negotiate between themselves on who decides on what goes into the portfolio; how the materials will be analyzed; when it will be analyzed; and how information will be shared.

Since portfolio assessment deviates significantly from common practices when assessment is something done to student rather than done with students, effective two-way communication is the key to success in the tutor-student relationship. Take the ongoing setting of goals based on the students’ reflections of their past efforts as an example, both tutors and students have expressed mutual doubts on the efficiency and effectiveness of portfolio conferences or dialogues. These dialogues are considered as time-consuming and unproductive. Thus it is apparent that effective skills in facilitating portfolio conferences have to be learned. In this connection, meeting management strategies such as having an agenda; reading materials before meetings; keeping the sessions on tasks and on time; reviewing and recording decisions made; and setting tasks for the next session will be useful.

Our Own Reflective Learning on the Use of Portfolio Through Dialogue

Assessment is a core element of causing quality in higher education if it stresses on improvement. While the general trend in assessment can be seen as taking shift from the measurement approach to evidential approach (Freeman & Lewis, 1998), there is also suggestion that learning in higher education should move from the institutional controlled model to a learner development model. Students in higher education should be given the responsibility of their own learning and the related assessment.

“Since we are using ’portfolio assessment’ for the first time, the teachers involved in this endeavor need to periodically meet and share their experience on using this concept among themselves. Feedback collected from asking each other critical questions of our own practice will help us to grow professionally.”

“I was also learning more about them as learners and as people – that being bonus.”

“Over the last 5 years this strategy has helped me bring about a change in student learning related to their attitudes toward learning making them more reflective, more empowered and at the same time improving their English communication skills as they are native Chinese speaking students.”

“My task is to focus on how I used it in my classes to change the way the students began to think about themselves and their learning and as a result how I began to learn more about them as learners and as individuals … as they began to learn more, much more …”

“I found that students have developed a greater understanding of their specific learning style when they self-evaluate and reflect on the evidence they have selected for inclusion in the portfolio … they have learned to use a wider variety of learning styles …”
“… I feel that my students are doing what the research on portfolio says they will do: they can think more reflectively about themselves and their learning; they think about continuously improving their skills; they feel in charge of their own learning; they like working in teams; and they write better in English.”

“Nonetheless, we have to explore and try out a different kind of relationship with our students, and I discover that a strong sense of trust is required.”

CONCLUSION

From the above extract of dialogue, professional understanding and insights were gained in the conceptualization and implementation of portfolio assessment in higher education settings. Four key aspects emerged from this learning experience. First, the belief that portfolio assessment could enhance teaching and learning was confirmed. Second, using an alternative assessment strategy was innovative requiring re-conceptualization of the nature of learning and changes in beliefs, attitude and practice. Third, we learned to face the constraints and difficulties encountered during implementation. Fourth, based on our first-hand knowledge, we are able to suggest a number of measures to overcome these problems, and they were considered applicable to wider contexts.

A more comprehensive and systematic professional development strategy has to be carefully conceived and evolved. We would envisage at least five levels of actions. First, positive attitude and committed attitude of individuals is fundamental. Second, self-help groups with specific interest and focus should be encouraged. Administrative support and recognition of workload and achievement are useful for initiating and sustaining such change. Third, departmental groups with identified departmental strategic objectives need to be developed. Fourth, institution policy on systematic staff development on various professional aspects including teaching quality should be carefully planned with a good understanding of practical constraints in implementation. Implementation itself has to be coordinated. Finally, genuine quality culture with continual, self-generated improvement effort can be promoted through institutional collaboration. Through joint institutional activities, innovations in professional development can be disseminated and shared. This also provides basis for community knowledge that will establish wider recognition and prestige.

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