
Portfolios for learning and assessment

David Baume

Summary

Portfolios are a very effective method for stimulating, supporting, integrating and assessing student work. In producing a portfolio, the student assembles smaller pieces of work into a large whole; makes connections among the items of work they have done; and gives a critical overview of their work and learning. In marking a portfolio, the lecturer sees a coherent and reflective picture of the student's work and development.

Biography

David Baume MA FSEDA is Director of Teaching Development in the Centre for Higher Education Practice at the Open University. He was founding Chair of the UK Staff and Educational Development Association and is founding co-editor of the International Journal for Academic Development. A staff and educational developer for some ten years, David previously taught underwater engineering and tutored on a large independent study programme.

Keywords

Validity, reliability, fairness, economy of effort, strategic approach

Four primary virtues for assessment

What makes an assessment method, any method, good? Here are my top four qualities for an assessment method. Please add to it, from your own experience and for your own subject, institution, courses.

A good assessment method is, at minimum;

- Valid
- Reliable
- Fair
- Economical

What other primary virtues should an assessment method have?

And four more...

Beyond these, I also believe that good assessment:

- Stimulates students to produce work which they value
- Safely stretches and challenges students
- Leads to the students doing things which lead directly to learning

- Helps students to know the extent and the limits of what they know

I shall return at the end to how, and how far, assessment by portfolio can achieve the first set of qualities. But my enthusiasm for portfolios springs from the ways they can deliver the second set.

How do portfolios stimulate students to produce work which they value?

A portfolio is uniquely the student's. The student has decided what to put into the portfolio, and what to omit. Further, a good portfolio is more than a collection, more even than an edited collection. It also includes analysis; critical reflection on the evidence; drawing out and making explicit, and then synthesising, what has been learned.

Students, as they come to understand all this, learn to produce good work, work which they value, for themselves as much as for you. If they are sometimes slow to do this, remember that they have spent many years doing and producing mostly work specified by others. And suggest to them that their portfolio can serve as a very effective presentation at an interview, for a job or for their next course .

How can portfolios safely stretch and challenge students?

Many students take a strategic approach to managing their time and effort, allocating time and effort where they anticipate the highest return. Some of their efforts are directed at working out what standards you will apply to your assessment of their work. We probably hope that students will develop, over time, their own standards.

We want students to take risks, because we know that safety does not always produce valuable learning. But students don't want to take risks when they perceive that risky work can gain low marks. How can portfolios resolve this?

Taking an original approach to a small piece of work can be less dangerous as the work only attracts a small maximum mark. If we award marks for the student's' critical review of their work as well as for the work itself, we can further reduce the risk to the student, as well as developing their skills of critique and review. If a student then assembles smaller pieces of work into a larger portfolio, they can produce a synopsis and a critical overview for large parts of their work. The student can thus show and review their overall progression and learning.

How can portfolios lead to students doing things which lead directly to learning?

We can:

- Tell students what kinds of learning we value on the course;
- Help students to make their own sense of the kinds of learning which the course is intended to achieve;
- Specify particular pieces of student work in terms of the learning to which the work is intended to lead;
- Ask students to discuss and test their understanding of the kinds of learning which the course values;
- Ask them to assess how far they feel they have moved towards that learning.

All of these virtues can be accomplished with individual small pieces of student work. What does the portfolio add to this? Small learning activities may lead to small and isolated pieces of learning, and the course probably has bigger ambitions than this. A portfolio invites a student to take a long step back from their individual pieces of work. It can invite them to plan their individual items of work in terms of the larger goals of the course. It can ask them to explore how the particular pieces of learning in the individual pieces of work add up to something bigger; hopefully to the larger goals you and they have; for their learning, for the course, or even the for entire programme, as Chris Rust persuasively suggests.

Students tend to describe their course in terms of subjects ("I'm studying X") or in terms of work to be done ("I'm writing an essay on Y.") As they develop a portfolio they can come to talk naturally about their learning and their achievements - ("You can see how I've really learned how to Z...").

How can portfolios help students to know the extent and the limits of what they know?

This has been explicit throughout this piece, and needs little more comment here. The portfolio as a simple assembly of existing pieces of work adds little. These things can add a lot:

- Synopsis;
- Reflection;
- Study of progression.

Explicit accounts of learning, whether this learning was or was not achieved, is still aspired to, or has been abandoned as a goal that is no longer relevant or that no longer seems attainable. The portfolio can help students to place what they have learned in a wider personal and academic context.

Yes, but can portfolio assessment also be valid, reliable, fair and economical?

Valid

At the end of a course, we need to know if and how far the student has achieved what the course was intended to help him or her to achieve. The portfolio is a fine vehicle for doing this. It can contain a range of their work done during the course. It can allow a coherent overview of this. It can allow the student to give their own account of what they have learned. It can further enable them to show the learning of any general skills which the course values, as well as the subject-specific knowledge and skills.

Your assessment task is valid if, in order to accomplish it, a student has to achieve one or more of the intended outcomes of the course. Your assessment process is valid if you make your assessment judgement against these intended outcomes. Portfolios and their assessment can lead to valid assessment in both these respects. Better, the use of portfolios can reduce the fragmentation which can characterise some assessment methods, and allow the student to show larger outcomes achieved.

Reliable

There are limits to how reliable any non-trivial assessment process can be. Portfolios are certainly non-trivial, and these reliability limits apply to portfolios as to other assessment methods. These limits vary from subject to subject. For example, it is generally easier to develop a reliable assessment process in a numerically-based than in a textually- or visually-based subject.

Many factors increase the reliability of portfolio assessment: The clarity of the task the students are attempting (whether this task is specified by the lecturer or negotiated and agreed between lecturer and student); the clarity of the assessment criteria and marking scheme, expressed both through guidance notes and through examples; the briefing of the assessors; arrangements for assessors to compare their judgements and reasons for judgements.

It may well be that a 6 point degree classification scheme (1st, 2(i), 2(ii), 3rd, Pass, Fail) represents a tacit cross-subject consensus on how much meaningful precision in degree assessment is possible. Marking a portfolio to 1% is usually an act of delusion.

Fair

Students may consider portfolios fairer than some other assessment methods. Portfolios involve work done over a period of time; they may allow students to revise and then to comment on work they have done; they represent work the student cares about; they show you a single overall view of the student, their learning and their attainment. But fairness is still a subjective quality. Talk to your students about fairness.

Economical

At the moment of sitting down to mark a large portfolio, you may not feel that you have chosen a particularly economical method of assessment. But if the portfolio includes many pieces of work that would have been assessed separately, then it can be economical. If it allows you to make a single overall judgement on the development and attainment of a student, it can be economical. If you have asked the student to assess their own attainment of the course outcomes, and you use what they have written and what they have provided as evidence as a basis for checking their view of what they have achieved, then it can be economical. As with any assessment method, we determine the costs and the time taken to assess when we plan the assessment method, though we don't always do this explicitly.

Your experiences

Do your experiences of using portfolios match up to these high hopes? What would you like to say to colleagues about using portfolios? Email your responses either to the ILT general discussion group at ilt-general@jiscmail.ac.uk or to me at the address below.

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