

LEARNING PORTFOLIOS TO ENHANCE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AMONG TEACHER EDUCATORS

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INTRODUCTION

A learning portfolio is an organized collection of past and current accomplishments of students, and can be a valuable tool for assessing student capabilities. It is a rich, flexible document that engages students in continuous, thoughtful analysis of their learning. The learning portfolio stresses the interplay among the three vital elements of reflection, evidence, and collaboration or mentoring. Sustaining the process of developing and revising the portfolio is the power of writing as an outcome of thinking and learning, as well as a creative and facilitative activity for recording, assessing, improving and evaluating learning (Zubizarreta, 2004). Portfolio development has become a favourite tool to encourage reflective practice in teacher education programmes (Feraro, 2000). As defined by Schon in 1996, reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering one's own experiences in applying knowledge into practice, while being coached by professionals in the discipline. Thus, integration of learning portfolio development in professional development programmes for educators would provide them with an opportunity to engage in reflective practice.

Compilation of a learning portfolio is introduced as a compulsory course in the Master of Arts in Teacher Education (MATE) Programmes offered by the Faculty of Education of The Open University of Sri Lanka. The MATE programme was initially started in the year 2000 and up to now seven batches of students has followed the programme. The curriculum for the first five batches comprised two parts namely Part I and Part II and included Professional Courses, Support Courses, Continuing Education Courses and Discipline Based Courses. In the programme evaluation study conducted by the Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education (STE) in collaboration with Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in 2004, it was revealed that the Discipline Based Courses and some of the Support Courses were not fulfilling the objectives of the programme and needed significant modification. Therefore two new courses were introduced to the programme under professional courses titled Contemporary Issues in Education and the Learning Portfolio.

Learning portfolio is relatively a new approach in Sri Lanka used by educational institutions to develop higher order cognitive skills among the learners. The Department of STE is conducting three day schools for the course on learning portfolio, to facilitate students to understand the aim of compiling a learning portfolio, key components of a learning portfolio and how it should be organized and developed. There are four continuous assignments to which academics are expected to give immediate feedback and explain the changes and modifications need to be carried out in future development of portfolio. The final portfolio submitted is considered for the final assessment.

The main aim of introducing a course on learning portfolio was to encourage students to critically reflect on the achievement of intended learning outcomes of each course in the MATE study programme. Completion of a Learning Portfolio promotes reflective learning of students.

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Its goal is to build and nurture a culture of critical reflection on the work that teacher educators do on a regular basis, in order to be able to learn from challenges met, successes achieved and mistakes made (Lekamge & Karunanayaka, 2007). It has been revealed that the introduction of learning portfolio component to the professional development programme for teacher educators has made a great impact on their learning as well as their professional activities (Lekamge & Karunanayaka, 2007).

The proposed study aims at examining how reflective practice could be enhanced among teacher educators through compiling learning portfolios. The outcomes of this study will help the Faculty of Education to further improve the learning portfolio component and to provide necessary guidelines for students to improve their reflective thinking and writing skills, facilitating them to become reflective practitioners.

The objectives of the study are to:

1. identify to what extent the learning portfolio development process had contributed in developing reflective skills among teacher educators
2. identify factors that facilitate / hinder development of reflective skills among teacher educators in the portfolio development process
3. To make suggestions to improve the learning portfolio development as a reflective practice process for teacher educators

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was used in this study within a framework of an evaluation research design. The learning portfolios which have been compiled and submitted by the students of Master of Arts in Teacher Education programme (MATE) in 2010/2011 were selected to analyse the reflective skills of the students. From among the sixty eight students (68) who have submitted their learning portfolios, forty students were randomly selected as the sample for this study. Content analysis of the 40 learning portfolios of the sample was done using a checklist developed under six main criteria - planning the learning portfolio, appearance of evidence for effective learning, practices of reflective writing, self evaluation processes, skill development and links present knowledge and experiences with future activities. Under these six main criteria, forty four (44) items were developed, based on the expected outcomes of the course on learning portfolio. These forty four items were studied in the portfolios, and these data were analyzed qualitatively using codes and categories supplemented with elementary quantitative techniques such as percentages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The key aim of compiling a learning portfolio is that students are expected to develop their higher order cognitive skills such as critical thinking, reflective thinking, self evaluation, and decision making and transferring the present knowledge and skills for future development of them and their students. However, analysis of the portfolios revealed that this key aim of learning portfolio has not been achieved by a majority of the students. Even though a majority (67%) of the students have planned and presented their learning portfolios systematically and in an organized manner, only forty seven percent (47%) of the students have shown a real understanding of the key principles of the learning portfolio.

During the content analysis of the reflections written by students, three main types of reflections were identified: Describing (A), Explaining (B), and Analysing (C). Examples for each type are indicated below:

- A. "..... Today, the lecturer taught us a lesson on adult learning. He explained the differences between child learning and adult learning. He explained the characteristics of the adult learners. I understood the theory of adult learners which is explained by Malcom Knowles. It is good for me..."

- B. "...To understand the adult, Malcom Knowle's theory of adult learning is very important. To apply theoretical knowledge about andragogy in teaching-learning situations, the lesson "Adult Learning" is very important. As we are working with adult learners this theory is very important for us..."
- C. "...I realized that the lecturer facilitated our learning by creating situations for us to find our own solutions. Further reading of handout explained that psychology does contribute to make us understand educational problems relating to the learner...At the end of the session I realized that this will assist me to make professional relationships with students and colleagues..."

It was evident that a majority of students tend just to provide descriptions or explanations on what they have done or learned, instead of critically analysing their learning experiences. Even though all students have written reflections on each of the learning outcomes of the each course as required, majority have not critically analysed, evaluated or reflected on their learning experiences, and impact of the activity on them. Critical reflection on assessment activities, tutor feedback on assignments, peer feedback and plans on future changes were also very low. It was thus obvious that the teacher educators were mainly involved in developing lower order cognitive skills such as describing, explaining and understanding, whereas very little focus was observed on higher order skills such as analysing, evaluating and creating, in their learning process.

Skill development is one of the main objectives of the learning portfolio development process. It was observed that a majority of the students (67%) have developed their organizing skills in a satisfactory manner. Yet, only 40 % of the students have demonstrated developing their critical thinking, analytical skills, self evaluation, creativity, self regulated learning practices and skills in using new technology. Limitations in creativity and analytical skills have hindered the MATE students to write their reflections in a meaningful manner.

Compiling appropriate and meaningful evidence to emphasize and demonstrate their effective learning was a requirement for students, which was another important strategy to identify their reflective practices. However, when analysing the evidence included by the students it was observed that only forty three percent (43%) could be considered appropriate. Majority have included copies of their assignments, copies of cover pages of books they have read, printouts of slides of presentations they have made, and photographs of day schools as evidence. Only sixteen percent (16%) of the students have incorporated a variety of evidence of reflective practice such as photographs of field experiences and extension work, creative displays, student work and critical essays...etc. Evidence for peer discussions and social interactions were very limited, which indicated that reflective practicing with peer groups and the social agencies were insufficient. This could be due to lack of time for such activities as they have to carry out their learning activities together with other family and professional responsibilities, which would hinder their peer and social interactions.

Critical evaluation is a very important procedure for students' future development. The observed portfolios indicated that the students' critical evaluations on their self development, achievement of the learning outcomes and impact of the programme, were not stated in a satisfactory manner. Only forty percent (40%) of the students demonstrated critical evaluation and an indication of their self responsibility on their own learning. Thus, it was clearly shown that even though adult learners, majority of the students have not thought about their self responsibility of their learning. Critical evaluations on learning activities, assessment procedures, learning approach and learning resources and strength and weakness of the courses were also very low.

Through the development of the learning portfolio students are also encouraged to think and

plan their future development, based on their reflections. It was observed that 51% of the students have reflected on their future plans like transferring knowledge/skills, career plans and preparation for changing current practices. Yet only 20% of the students have linked these with the activities of the MATE programme.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Even though learning portfolio development is considered as an effective strategy to encourage reflective practice among educators, this study revealed that the reflective skills of teacher educators were not at a satisfactory level as expected. Several factors such as lack of understanding of basic principles, less focus on higher order cognitive skills, and time limitations can hinder development of reflective skills, while critical self evaluation, application of theoretical knowledge and creativity can facilitate it.

It can be suggested that the academics need to make available clear guidelines on portfolio development and continuous guidance and support for learners by providing constructive feedback on their learning portfolios. Further, strategies should be taken to encourage students to be responsible for their self learning and motivate them to be concerned about the following aspects;

1. Using different strategies to emphasise the important facts.
2. Collecting appropriate and adequate evidences, and incorporate them in the right place.
3. Collecting a variety of evidence.
4. Presenting evidence on peer discussion and social interactions
5. Writing reflections on assessment activities, tutor feedback and peer feedback.
6. Critically evaluating the benefits of the learning activities, assessment procedures, learning approach, learning resources and strengths and weaknesses of the courses.
7. Developing higher order cognitive skills such as critical thinking, analytical skills and self regulated learning practices.
8. Encouraging giving effective feedback for programme development.

Overall, it can be concluded that it is the responsibility of the academics to support students to minimize the effects of hindering factors and to maximise use of facilitative factors to develop their reflective skills. Close supervision and monitoring, providing constructive feedback and appreciating their efforts would motivate the educators to engage in their learning portfolio construction in a more meaningful manner, resulting in enhancement of their reflective practice.

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