Personalising learning through portfolios

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Abstract

This article presents the portfolio use from a pedagogical perspective and it underlines the opportunity for reflection on learning offered by this instrument. It also suggests some steps that can be followed in order to help students become more effective learners.

Key words: learning, reflection, self-assessment, autonomy

Resumen

Este artículo presenta la utilización del portafolio desde una perspectiva pedagógica, subrayando la oportunidad de reflexionar sobre el aprendizaje que ofrece esta herramienta. Además sugiere algunos pasos que se pueden seguir para ayudar a los estudiantes a llegar a ser aprendices mas eficaces.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje, reflexión, auto-evaluación, autonomía

1. Introduction

The idea of portfolios is not a new one. Portfolios have been used in different fields, mainly as a showcase of the best works in art, photography, modelling and so on. In addition, the main definition taken from the dictionary is clear: "The Portfolio is a set of items that represent someone's work, especially an artist's drawing or paintings, and which they use when entering competitions or applying for work". Portfolios have been used in education as well, as a different way for assessing competences with the perspective of supporting individual learners in their learning processes.

Nevertheless, the first widespread contact with the portfolio concept in education in Europe took place with the implementation of the European Language Portfolio, developed by the Council of Europe from 1998. As far as the ELP implementation is concerned, the experiences that took place at European level are varied: in some countries the portfolio is commonly used while in other countries it is still in the try-out phase or it has been adopted only in particular contexts. In some cases it has been perceived as an "imposition", something compulsory, whilst in other contexts it has been used as a file containing information to be collected at relevant moments in the learning process.

The perception of the potentiality of this tool has been interpreted in different ways. It has even been seen as an extra activity to be done on top of daily work and therefore considered too time consuming to be introduced in everyday teaching and learning. The portfolio concept however, offers many opportunities for reflection and it is worth trying to understand it deeply, especially when considering the level of flexibility

and adaptability of this tool.

2. The functions of the portfolio

In education, portfolios have a double function that may be complementary (Mariani et alt, 2004):

- a reporting function: it refers mainly to an administrative use – the portfolio may be used as an instrument for implementing alternative forms of assessment. This can co-exist with more traditional forms of assessment or can even replace them;

- a pedagogical function: this refers to the classroom uses of portfolios. These "learning portfolios" are not necessarily linked with formal, institutional assessment – rather, they are a collection of items which document how each individual student goes through the process of achieving certain competences.

The European Language Portfolio, promoted by the Council of Europe covers both functions. It is organized in three parts:

1. Language Passport, which shows at a glance the level of competences reached in different languages and also provides a summary of the most significant language learning and intercultural experiences;

2. Language Biography, which is an updatable record of how, why and where languages have been learnt. It contains one's personal language learning history made visible through self-assessment checklists, description of language learning and intercultural experiences, questionnaires on learning styles and strategies, plans for future learning, etc;

3. Dossier, a collection of documents selected as evidence of personal competences. This evidence can be anything, from examples of written work to audio or video cassettes, projects on CD-Rom, reports on tasks, observation cards, reports on films and books, projects learners have carried out, letters students have written or received, etc.

3. Portfolios: so what?

But beyond this apparently "rigid" structure of the ELP, there are several possibilities which can be explored and exploited by teachers for creating "personalized" portfolios in which the teachers' teaching styles can find a place together with students' learning styles. In some of the portfolios developed in the last years, there is space for analysing and documenting the processes, which means that the concept of the portfolio has also been understood in terms of insights into personal learning experiences and processes, which is exactly the pedagogical function of the portfolio.

From the teachers' point of view the pedagogical function of the portfolio is the most interesting one, a way for supporting learners in the learning process giving them the tools for learning about themselves. The collection and the organisation of materials is just evidence of the process underneath. Being aware of one's personal learning profile is essential for setting up learning goals. From the teachers' perspective, the most suitable approach for the use of the portfolio is aimed at enabling learners to become more successful by offering them the tools and the strategies for learning more effectively.

Despite the existence of different ways to "understand" the meaning and the function of the portfolio, all of them are related to the planning and evaluation processes. The most important aspect is the role of the portfolio as a tool to create a positive mindset towards the learning process, making students' potentiality and

improvements evident.

From this perspective, the portfolio notion is more related to a philosophical concept than to a concrete product. The portfolio "shape" is not important as portfolios can be folders, boxes, bags, exercise-books and they can be made of a collection of different materials such as students' work, checklists, self-assessment grids, audiotapes and videotapes, photographs, learning logs, etc. Therefore the appearance and the way of organising a portfolio is not the key issue, the real value of this tool lies in the mindset it instils in students and teachers (Valencia, 1990). "Portfolio activities" then, can be all the reflective activities that guide the students towards active participation in the learning process. This means, in fact, having in mind the idea of the learners that co-build knowledge and competences through active participation in the formative process in which they should be involved. The personalization of the learning processes is not a simple educational trend, it is also a social requirement in a moment in which schools have to deal with different groups of learners with different needs and in which traditional assessment procedures cannot always "measure" acquired competences making reference only to common standards (A. Antonietti, 2005).

As a matter of fact, most of the teachers already adopt some procedures in classroom activities that could be included in a portfolio. For example, we teach students how to study, concentrating more on strategies than on content; we invite them to fill in self-evaluation grids available in the text books; we organize group and peer activities to facilitate some task completion; we stop at and think about a particular point in a particular lesson in order to reflect on its processes. Therefore, some portfolio procedures are not completely new, what is new is the suggestion of finding a kind of "red thread" (common denominator) among all the activities that can be carried out in order to settle the portfolio philosophy.

According to Antonietti, three are the variables that characterize the different portfolio typologies:

1. Based on processes: the portfolio can document the generative process of a product, from the planning to the final result, and it can include only the final product or document all the phases.

2. Based on reflexivity: the portfolio can foster reflexivity at different levels: from the selection of the product to the reconstruction of the project and self- evaluation to learning diaries.

3. Based on perspectives: the portfolio can include different perspectives: only one, comparison between two points of view (student and teacher), multiperspectives (parents, friends...).

From this perspective, the portfolio aims are to document the competences acquired, to be aware of the competences in progress (and how to acquire them!) and also to be conscious of future learning targets. In this perspective, the portfolio requires on the one hand, the active participation of the learner who is the main actor of his/her learning process; on the other hand, the same degree of participation of teachers who, besides thinking on their own teaching styles, ought to provide opportunities for their learners' reflection and display a variety of learning techniques. As mentioned by Costantino and De Lorenzo (2002): "The portfolio offers authentic proof of the teacher's work and represents a tool for fostering the reflection on the teaching theory and the practice"

From the teachers' viewpoint, what really matters is to perceive the portfolio in the correct perspective, as pointed out by Mariani (www.learningpaths.org):

"The problem for teachers is how to gradually introduce a portfolio into their own teaching practice and how to provide support to the students, especially in the early phases. One of the dangers here is to fall into the trap of thinking that working for a portfolio means doing extra things in addition to what is already being done. Such a project would be doomed to failure from the start if teachers and students were to do things for the sake of the portfolio. In fact, it is the other way round: we do things and then select those things that lend themselves well to being included in the portfolio."

4. What can we do as teachers?

At shop floor, what are the key questions we have to ask students, in order to help them become conscious learners? Which are the key questions we have to ask ourselves as teachers in order to support students' reflective process?

One of the main duties of the teacher is to guide pupils towards autonomy and make pupils aware of the relationship between learning goals, learning strategies and learning outcomes that is the main aim of the portfolio methodology. The first step towards self-awareness takes place when, in everyday teaching practice, we as teachers ask ourselves:

- How is it possible to foster learners' awareness of their learning processes?
- How can learners be helped to learn?
- How can learners become aware of their strengths and weaknesses?

The portfolio can be approached in different ways but we ought to bear in mind that it is not only a set of working sheets or grids to be filled in, it is mainly the way in which we work with those materials. For this purpose we can create or adapt a variety of tools such as:

- Questionnaires for pupils' perception of themselves
- Learning styles checklists
- Learning strategies activities
- Grids for recording progresses
- Instruments for reflecting on classroom interaction
- Qualitative evaluation questionnaires.

5. Portfolio step by step: helpful questions for guiding the reflective process

When students are trained students to use the portfolio as a reflective tool, some questions to focus their attention on targets and processes can be provided. Some of these questions could be the following (adapted from Antonietti, 2005):

What are my targets?

They can be expressed in terms of objectives, expected results, personal aims. At this stage it is important to clarify which are the aims or directly involve students in the stage of setting the objectives. As children easily get involved in the activities and take part in them, especially if the activities are genuine, it should not be taken for granted that they have the activities' aims in mind in terms of learning and language learning objectives. Teachers could create some suitable materials or use grids available in textbooks or just have a few lines reflection at the end of the activities they want to focus on.

How do I plan to get to the target?

For facilitating this stage, pupils could prepare a "to do list", planning small steps to be undertaken and dividing the action plan into smaller stages. Minor goals should be established with the help of the teacher or family or peers. Constant feedback on the part of the teacher is extremely helpful as is comparison work among peers.

What can I do?

This question involves the development of self-perception related to capability and potentiality. It may be supported by self assessment grids, checklists, comparisons with peers, self correction exercises. Furthermore, being aware of the teacher's assessment criteria plays an important role for the development of students' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, something very useful to be aware of when developing strategies for accomplishing a task. "I can do" statements are helpful for the self-monitoring of the competences in progress and for being aware of the competences acquired.

How did I get to the target?

This is the kind of reflection that may accompany the selection of a learning product and it is related to processes undertaken to carry out a concrete activity. Reconstructing the successful contexts of learning is not an easy task but it can be guided using a variety of reflective tools.

6. Conclusion

Portfolios are not new but the ELP differs in a very concrete way from the traditional idea of portfolio: its pedagogical function. Portfolios form can be anything, from a simple note book to a file decorated by the learners themselves. Of course it can take the shape of the official documents passed by the different educational authorities in every European country. The literature about the ELP is increasing every day: portfolio typologies, what to use it for, how to use it, when to use it, etc. Nevertheless, it is its pedagogical function that should be enhanced, the one which, in our view, can strongly contribute to making learners aware of the learning process and lead them towards the road to autonomy.

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