

Signifying Authenticity: how valid is a portfolio approach to assessment?

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Abstract

Portfolios are an increasingly common form of assessment, particularly in education (van der Schaaf and Stokking, 2008; Baume and Yorke, 2002; Mclean and Bullard, 2000) but also in professional courses like medicine and law (eg Driessen and van der Vleuten 2000; Driessen et al, 2005). Our experiences of using portfolio assessment in Higher Education are within educational development programmes designed to encourage doctoral students or lecturers to adopt a reflective approach to their professional practice (see, for example, Boud and Walker, 1998). In these programmes, the portfolio approach is intended to allow participants from a range of backgrounds and disciplines, with different levels of experience and expertise, to compile a document which is meaningful to them within their given context. However, there are several challenges associated with portfolio assessment and we would like to explore these more fully in this discussion paper (see, for example, Baume, 2001 or Elton and Johnston, 2002).

We are, in part, concerned with some of the common debates surrounding the reliability and validity of assessment practices more broadly. However, we will argue that these general concerns are often exacerbated in the case of portfolios which are, by their nature, intensely personal documents intended to signal the learning and personal transformation experienced (or not) by our participants (see Baume and Yorke, 2002). The meta-cognitive skills that the portfolio is supposed to represent are difficult to pin down and assessors have to rely heavily on qualitative professional judgement when making assessment decisions (see, for example, Driessen et al, 2005). In terms of portfolios as a valid approach to assessment, issues of authenticity become central – how does one judge whether the portfolio represents an authentic experience, or is simply an effort to play the assessment ‘game’? Are there ‘signifiers of authenticity’ that we might look for to help us to distinguish which participants have *really* developed the reflective insights and

capacities that we aim for in our courses? These are the questions that we hope to address with reference to our own practice as assessors of portfolios.

Keywords: portfolios, assessment, authenticity, validity, reflective practice.

Introduction

In this discussion paper we outline some of the challenges of using portfolio assessment. Portfolios are an increasingly common form of assessment, particularly in education (van der Schaaf and Stokking, 2008; Baume and Yorke, 2002; Mclean and Bullard, 2000) but also in professional courses like medicine and law (eg Driessen and van der Vleuten 2000; Driessen et al, 2005). Our experiences of using portfolio assessment in Higher Education are within educational development programmes designed to encourage doctoral students or lecturers to adopt a reflective and research-informed approach to their professional practice (see, for example, Boud and Walker, 1998). In these programmes, the portfolio approach is intended to allow participants from a range of backgrounds and disciplines, with different levels of experience and expertise, to compile a document which is meaningful to them within their given context. Furthermore, two subsidiary aims – those of helping the participants to develop a vocabulary with which to describe their teaching, and helping to familiarise them with the research literature – were found by Young and Irving (2005) to be two symbols of ‘integrity of practice’. Young and Irving define ‘integrity of practice’ as “a lecturer’s ability to explain and justify professional practice in teaching”. Young and Irving found that, far from being a mere subsidiary to good teaching, the ability to articulate one’s approach to and thinking about teaching in the specialised discourse of the discipline allowed interviewees to “convey greater confidence in their ability to explain and justify their teaching decisions”. In this sense, ‘integrity of practice’ provides teachers with more confidence in their own decisions, making them more resilient when it comes to weathering the storms of change that assault Higher Education. Thus, “there does appear to be a sense in which the lack of a language with which to talk of teaching and learning is correlated with levels of confidence”. Based on Young and Irving’s findings, our emphasis on the written artefact and therefore on the language, rather than the practice, of teaching thus seems a less contentious way of judging teaching quality. Moreover, Young and Irving assert that one of the main roles for those who support lecturers’ professional development ought to be “[s]upporting lecturers in developing integrity of practice” by introducing them to the research and language of teaching in Higher Education. However, there are several

challenges associated with portfolio assessment and we would like to explore these more fully in this paper.

We have taken the opportunity of presenting a discussion paper, rather than the perhaps more traditional conference paper, to experiment with and gain some feedback on a slightly unconventional approach to presentation.. As may be seen below, a significant body of the work presented here takes the form of a series of extracts which are longer than traditional quotations and are presented in the context of the author's own thinking (rather than in the context of our own line of argument as shorter quotations are traditionally used). In order to help the reader to make sense of these large fragments of writing we also offer a framing narrative which highlights the areas which are of particular interest to us and helps the reader to follow the line of argument that we are seeking to develop. We have adopted this experimental approach firstly because it reflects the way in which we try to make sense of questions in our everyday practice – we seek out existing literature, select relevant passages, compare and contrast others' arguments looking for points of agreement or conjecture and attempt to build our own line of argument that makes sense for us. Secondly, such an approach is less about re-inventing the wheel (which Gibbs (1998) explicitly recognises as one feature of teaching in Higher Education where the lack of a research tradition has meant that the results of lecturers' investigations into teaching have not traditionally been written up and disseminated) and more about making sense of existing thinking in our own particular context. The challenge, then, becomes making sense of the different viewpoints rather than simply using others' voices to support our argument – again, this approach is perhaps more consistent with the day-to-day method that we would be likely to take with course participants as we encourage them to engage with the research literature in order to help us to think through a teaching problem.

We are, in part, concerned with some of the common debates surrounding the reliability and validity of assessment practices more broadly. However, we will argue that these general concerns are often exacerbated in the case of portfolios which are, by their nature, intensely personal documents intended to signal the learning and personal transformation

experienced (or not) by our participants (see Baume and Yorke, 2002). The meta-cognitive skills that the portfolio is supposed to represent are difficult to pin down and assessors have to rely heavily on qualitative professional judgement when making assessment decisions (see, for example, Driessen et al, 2005)). In terms of portfolios as a valid approach to assessment, issues of authenticity become central – how does one judge whether the portfolio represents an authentic experience, or is simply an effort to play the assessment ‘game’? Indeed, ‘authenticity’ is often referred to in the literature on portfolios (this became clear as we compiled the excerpts below) but the difficulty associated with detecting differences between those accounts that are genuine and those that are not are often glossed over. To address this issue of authenticity we have, then, drawn on the work of several writers who all, to one degree or another, discuss the difficulties associated with the assessment of reflective portfolios. We have also turned to our own practice and tried to capture the process that we adopt when we are assessing portfolios. In so doing, we attempt to explore whether there are ‘signifiers of authenticity’ that we might look for to help us to distinguish which participants have really developed the reflective insights and capacities that we aim for in our courses.

What is a portfolio and why use them?

We start with an extract from Elton and Johnston (2002) that considers why portfolios have emerged as a preferred approach to assessment in many professional courses.

From Elton and Johnston:

Portfolios are seen as having the potential to:

engage students in tasks which are central to the educational process as perceived by theories of learning

encourage students to take an active role in their own learning in the shape of formative assessment

offer “authentic” assessment which in turn is likely to provide predictive information about how a student will perform after moving beyond the assessment (our emphasis)

allow assessment of a wide range of learning achievements, providing detailed evidence of these which can inform teaching as well as enabling formative assessment

help students develop reflective capacity which will in turn enable them to continue learning after passing beyond the immediate course
encourage students to take an active role in their own assessment in that they may be able to select which work goes in the portfolio
track students' development over time
showcase students' responses to a wide range of assignments (Editorial 1998, p.303; LeMahieu, Gitomer and Eresh 1995, p.11; Murphy 1994, p.179-80).

Various issues have to be unpacked in examining these claims. The reader will note that most claims for the benefits of portfolios relate to the claims made about the learning they can promote. Many of the problems raised about portfolio assessment relate to the consistency and fairness of their assessment.

The context in which we are using portfolios

There are three specific settings where we are using portfolios:

A discipline specific introduction to teaching and learning for graduate students who currently teach at Oxford, and who may wish to teach outside Oxford. It enables them to gain Higher Education Academy (HEA) Associate status. This programme aims to help participants to begin to gain skill and confidence in teaching as well as to begin to appreciate the educational or pedagogic grounds for particular approaches to teaching. By the end of the programme, participants should have an emerging understanding of how to design and plan teaching, understand the effects of particular teaching practices on student learning and have begun to develop a rationale and approach to teaching, based on reading, critical reflection and discussion with peers, colleagues and a mentor. They should also be aware of some of the ways in which their approach may need to be adapted beyond Oxford.

A programme for newly appointed academics, including those new to Oxford and those new to teaching, who wish to engage in structured reflection on teaching and related academic practice. The portfolio is an opportunity to gain HEA Fellow status. This programme aims to alleviate participants' immediate practical concerns and hence deal with initial anxieties when they commence teaching. Drawing on the same rationale

outlined above, it seeks to provide opportunities for participants to learn how student learning might be improved; is intended to contribute to participants' motivation and satisfaction as university teachers, and begins to raise awareness of how university learning and teaching is influenced by contextual factors.

The Postgraduate Diploma in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. This is a year-long course for more experienced teachers who wish to reflect on and develop their skills. Successful completion via portfolio confers HEA Fellow status and an Oxford Postgraduate Diploma qualification. The Diploma builds on and extends the aims of the programme outlined above -it offers participants the opportunity to learn how to evaluate student learning in existing programmes and construct improved curricula; like the programme above it also contributes to participants' motivation and satisfaction but this time, not just as teachers, but as proactive innovators amongst and with university teachers; and it further develops in participants an awareness of how university learning and teaching is influenced by contextual factors.

In all cases portfolios are assessed by at least two examiners. In the case of the Diploma, both assessors are 'educational experts' from either educational development or Oxford University's Department of Education (in addition, the programme has a dedicated external examiner). In the other two programmes one assessor is located in a discipline area allied to that of the portfolio author, and one assessor is an educational developer.

Portfolios for summative assessment: issues of validity and reliability

In the excerpt below, Yorke (2005) focuses his attention on the potentially detrimental effect of summative assessment on the validity of portfolios. Taken to an extreme, his argument suggests that it may actually be impossible to summatively assess portfolios since there is potential for it to have a 'distorting effect' on the writer's 'honesty' (or, in our terms, the authenticity of the account) if students adopt a strategic approach to compilation of the portfolio in order simply to meet assessment requirements. Buckridge (2008) also explores the tensions between summative assessment and the developmental portfolio. She argues that portfolios which are summatively assessed are "likely to be

preoccupied with demonstrating competence, with a focus on success [...] The point of the text is to persuade” and it is therefore more likely to be focussed on meeting the assessment criteria. Furthermore, summative portfolios can quickly lose their developmental potential as “writers learn the game; committees play the game; over time the mechanism loses authenticity”. This tension between summative assessment and the developmental potential of the portfolio is one of our main stumbling blocks since the portfolios submitted for each of Oxford’s Academic and Higher Education teacher-development programmes are assessed summatively in order to allow successful candidates to gain Higher Education Academy accreditation at either ‘Associate Fellow’ or ‘Fellow’ level. While the HEA do specify certain criteria which have to be met by those successfully completing accredited programmes, they offer no formal guidance on how such programmes are to be assessed. In theory, this allows different institutions to employ different assessment strategies depending on what works within a given context. In practice, however, most HEA accredited programmes seem to be assessed via a portfolio. This suggests that similar concerns about the balance between authenticity in representation of a personal development trajectory and strategic compilation for summative assessment exist to some extent throughout universities in the UK (and possibly further afield since a similar portfolio-based approach has been used by one of us in Australia).

Yorke also emphasises the written aspect of the portfolio (i.e. that one has to judge quality of thinking and professional being via a written artefact) and raises the issue that not only does compilation of the portfolio stress writing about rather than practicing teaching, but that it also potentially focuses the attention of the assessor on the written piece. Consequently, it is perhaps necessary for the candidate to write fluently and articulately if s/he is able to convey the authenticity and complexity of his/her experience, and easier for the assessor to focus on the product rather than on the learning and becoming that it is intended to (re)present. However, both Young and Irving, and Buckridge argue that language and writing are perhaps more significant in teacher development than one might assume. As suggested earlier, Young and Irving insist that the ability to speak convincingly and confidently about teaching (as one indicator of

‘integrity of practice’) may well help teachers to deal with the challenges of contemporary Higher Education. Buckridge also argues that, in a developmental portfolio, while,” the act of writing is not the act of teaching,[...] the writing is nonetheless further constructing the teacher’s knowledge base for teaching.” There may, therefore, be less of a disparity between the development of teaching and the representation of that teaching than initially seems to be the case.

Yorke then goes on to outline one potential approach to portfolio assessment while conceding that reliability is more difficult to achieve than is the case with more ‘objective’ forms of assessment. While it may be possible to standardize portfolios in order to make the assessment easier and more reliable, Yorke points out that reducing subjectivity also runs the risk of compromising the authenticity of the voice and experience, consequently reducing the validity of the exercise. Rather, Yorke proposes an alternative approach to assessment which utilises a “constructivist, qualitative methodology” in an effort to find new ways to deal with this less traditional, but increasingly common form of assessment.

From Yorke

The use of portfolios for summative assessment purposes was criticised by Gerrish et al (1997) and McCullan et al (2003). The criticisms of Gerrish et al included the following:

- portfolio construction was time-consuming, and distracted attention from actual practice
- the production of a portfolio involved writing about practice rather than actually practising
- the compiler of a portfolio needed to possess writing ability in addition to the capacity to reflect upon practice
- there was a risk that the compiler would write what they thought that the assessor wanted to read rather than record experience spontaneously.

Harland (2005) noted that there were three key issues relating to the use of portfolios: who owns them; who reads them; and how they should be assessed [...]. Harland found that students took time to acclimatise to the requirements of portfolios; not all engaged as was hoped, some portfolios – despite the expectation that they could be private – being

written more for presentation of the self than as reflective documents. Coleman et al (2002) touch on assessment via portfolio and the associated tension between using the portfolio for personal growth and for assessment purposes. Regarding the latter, they also raise the question of the writer's honesty if the portfolio were used for assessment purposes.

Johnston (2004) and Tigelaar et al (2005) argue that traditional approaches to the assessment of portfolios are inappropriate to unique productions derived from particular contexts, and propose instead an interpretive, hermeneutic approach. Both point towards the kind of constructivist, qualitative methodology associated with Guba and Lincoln (1989). This might be an attractive and fruitful way of approaching the assessment of portfolios, but of course assumes that the portfolio is produced for assessment purposes (and hence is not a document private to the student), with all the inherent threats to its validity.

Towards principles and criteria for assessment

Below, Winter et al. (2000) provide a useful insight into the part that subjectivity is increasingly playing in the construction of knowledge and the ways in which notions of reliability and objectivity in the production of knowledge have recently been challenged. He argues that one conception of 'reliability' could be reliant on an understanding of the particular context and circumstances under which certain knowledge is produced. Indeed, in terms of work-based learning and reflective practice, context is key – work-based and reflective practice is about gaining an insight into one's own context and developing effective and 'reliable' responses which allow one to perform one's role. In terms of the validity of portfolio assessment, subjectivity is arguably one signifier of authenticity since it could be taken as an indication that the candidate has grappled with and come to an understanding of his or her particular context and is able to situate him/herself within it. Indeed, in later extracts, McLean and Bullard (2000) take biographical detail as one potential signifier of authenticity in the portfolios that they analysed. Portfolio authors do not adopt a formulaic approach to 'ticking off' assessment criteria, but rather offer

personal responses - thereby signalling that subjectivity is key to an authentic construction of knowledge in this instance.

From Winter et al:

All research ... is about getting knowledge, and indeed getting better knowledge (see Griffiths, 1998). This is 'better knowledge' in two senses of 'better': knowledge which is reliable and unbiased; and knowledge which can be used wisely, to a good purpose. The current crisis of representation and knowledge has meant that the salient terms here, 'reliable', 'wise' and 'good' are always in question. All three terms are linked through the concept of 'reflexivity'. It is one that is often invoked to resolve issues of reliability and bias in particular. It is, itself, a concept which is both ambiguous and contested. ... However, all [the different versions of 'reflexivity'] share a critical epistemological stance towards the objectivity that science claims for itself. Lennon & Whitford explain [...] that [...]

The objectivist paradigm which these criticisms appeared to undermine was that frequently identified in critical writing as associated with Enlightenment thinking. Within that framework knowledge is referential - it is about something (the object) situated outside the knower. Knowledge is said to mirror an independently existing world, as that world really is. Genuine knowledge does not reflect the subject who produced it.

They explain further that critics of this position argue that, on the contrary, 'Knowledge bears the mark of its producer' (1994, p. 2)

Crucially, the producer is not only an individual subject, but is also constructed and constrained by the politics of perspective; positioned in relation to race, gender, class, disability, nationality, and the rest. Thus, for most critics of the claims of traditional scientific objectivity, their emphasis on the mark of the producer is linked to an emphasis on his or her values, be they personal or perspectival. So questions of value - of what is 'wise' and 'good' - are also approached through reflexivity.

Authenticity:

We have also found Winter's (2002) definition of 'authenticity' (see below) useful in the sense that, as in the previous piece, he argues for an authenticity which is strongly rooted in subjectivity. He emphasizes ownership as a central signifier of authenticity, an idea closely related to his previous suggestion that in order to be 'reliable' one has to give an account which is situated and representative of one's own context. Furthermore, Winter begins to offer some indication of how such 'authenticity' might be identified, since it is related to a 'genuine voice' that offers a convincing account of a world to which it 'really belongs'. Here, then, objectivity is no longer an indication of truth but rather a distancing of the voice from its real environment. It therefore detracts from the authentic representation of a particular context and experience. The notion that authenticity implies speaking from within one's own specific context is also identified by Kinchin et. al (2008), who argue that in order for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning to have any real impact on disciplinary colleagues, "we must aim to increase the pedagogic resonance between the idea of a scholarship of teaching (as held in the specialist literature) and the understanding of this concept by novice (and experienced) teachers in Higher Education". The notion of one's own context is key since, as Kinchin et. al. argue "those active in disciplinary pedagogical research and consulting discipline-specific literature [...] will find reasons for modifying any general model of scholarship of teaching to increase resonance with the conceptual structure of the discipline". Such modification of generic ideas is, Kinchin et. al. suggest, representative of disciplinary colleagues "taking ownership" and "increasing pedagogic resonance" between educational developers and those whose primary focus is the teaching of disciplinary knowledge.

From Winter

The idea for this article originated in an informal discussion concerning the nature of truth criteria in social research narratives, in which a number of participants ... suggested that the 'validity' of research reports (i.e. their value, trustworthiness) resides in their 'authenticity'.

... a research report has 'authenticity' (epistemological validity and cultural authority) insofar as it gives direct expression to the 'genuine voice', which 'really belongs to' those whose life-worlds are being described. In a society where the voices of dominant social groups systematically drown out, encapsulate or silence the voices of groups lacking cultural privilege, one might claim that 'research' has an 'emancipatory' role to play in recalling to audibility the voices of the silenced.

Whitehead (1985) gives an indication of the scope of the term 'authenticity' ... He presents 'authenticity' as a 'criterion' by which an individual 'claim to knowledge' may be judged. (Whitehead, 1985, pp. 58-59).

Negotiating assessment: assessing authenticity via interpretive communities

In seeking to determine whether or not candidates express student-centred conceptions of teaching McLean and Bullard (2000) argue below (like the other writers referred to throughout this paper) that assessment of portfolios is complicated, partly by the need to assess for authenticity. However, McLean and Bullard also draw on Agyris and Schön (1974) in order to point at the potential disjuncture between espoused theories and theories-in-use. They suggest, along with Samuelowicz & Bain (1992), that teachers may hold certain espoused theories (which might relate to an 'ideal' teaching practice) before they are in a position (due to limited experience or constraints arising from the context in which they find themselves) to use these theories in their actual 'working' practice. This is an extremely useful observation which suggests that an apparent disparity between a teacher's thinking about their teaching and their description of their practice does not necessarily signify a strategic (and therefore inauthentic) approach to portfolio creation, but rather a recognition that current context is not conducive to the kind of practice to which one might aspire.

From McLean and Bullard

... both becoming an expert teacher and judging the quality of teaching are complex and situational, evading easy measurements.

One of the purposes of compiling a portfolio is to “to allow new teachers to explore, authentically, their own developing theories about teaching and learning their discipline by critically reflecting on the interconnections between their own personal, informal theories, their practical experience and formal theories found in scholarly literature about pedagogy;” (our emphasis)

... cynics could certainly suggest that, like all students, these new teachers could simply be giving the assessors what they wanted. There are no easy ways of detecting authenticity, but, taken as a whole, the portfolios are not formulaic. For example, Jack’s explanation of how he arrived at a new conception of teaching is convincing in its biographical detail (our emphasis)

Samuelowicz & Bain (1992) make a pertinent observation:

“Some preliminary observations suggest the possibility that academic teachers might have both ‘ideal’ and ‘working’ conceptions of teaching. It seems from the limited data available, that the aims of teaching expressed by academic teachers coincide with the ideal conception of teaching whereas their teaching practices, including assessment, reflect their working conception of teaching.”

There is still a need, as Samuelowicz & Bain (1992) put it, to explore what:

“prevent[s] academic teachers from acting according to their ideal conception of teaching and thus contribute to solving one of the mysteries of higher education – the disjunction between the stated aims (promotion of critical thinking) and educational practice (unimaginative coverage of content and testing of factual recall) so often referred to in the literature”.

Teaching portfolios which are produced in contexts in which critical reflective practice, authenticity, and serious engagement with ideas about the learning/teaching relationship are promoted may have the

potential both to stimulate teachers to articulate and improve their practice and to be a contribution to understanding the nature of the formation of professional university teachers (our emphasis)

Interpretation and the interpretive community

Inasmuch as the expectations of examiners is that participants will energetically seek to understand and authentically represent their professional stance through the artifact of a portfolio, there is an analogous expectation made of examiners by the assessment process. That is, as elaborated in the Elton and Johnston (2002) extract below, assessors can usefully be thought of as members of an ‘interpretive community’, with a responsibility to engage in a ‘process of critical discussion’ involving ‘different interpretations which may shift in light of the discussion’, and to articulate their values and judgements.

From Elton and Johnston:

Reading and writing and assessment in general are viewed as essentially interpretive acts. This ties in with recent poststructuralist conceptions of reading as “a process, a creative interaction between reader and text” (White 1994 p.91). From about the 1930s to the 1950s theories of reading centred around formal criticism which rested on the assumption that meaning existed in the text, independent of the reader or writer. Although poststructuralists such as Bleich, Holland, Fish, Derrida and Barthes take a variety of positions, they all offer one important insight, “opposition to the belief that meaning resides entirely in a text” (White p.93)

Constructivist, interpretivist assessment does not mean that any interpretation is acceptable, that “anything goes”. On the contrary, Moss’s (1994) approach to assessment involves a rational debate among a community of interpreters and collaborative inquiry that “encourages challenges and revisions to initial interpretations” (cited in DeRemer 1998, p.27). Stanley Fish articulates the idea of “the interpretive community”, rather than suggesting “anything goes” in reading. The interpretive community is made up of those who agree how to read/write texts.

“Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around ... This, then, is the explanation both for the stability of interpretation among different readers (they belong to the same community) and for the regularity with which a single reader will employ different interpretive strategies and thus make different texts (he belongs to different communities)” Fish 1980, p.171 cited in White p.99-100).

Various theorists have argued that knowledge is by no means chaotic in that at any one time in any one place there has to be a certain social consensus over what constitutes socially accepted knowledge and extensions thereof (Bakhtin 1986; Bakhtin and Medvedev 1985; Brandt 1992; Feyerabend 1978; Foucault 1980, 1981; Nystrand 1989, 1993).

In the sciences too, Feyerabend has argued that social aspects have a role in deciding what knowledge is valued and accepted at any particular time. In this environment, an “anything goes” scenario is rather unlikely.

Assessors have to try to create an “interpretive community” as described by Fish above. This they can do by discussion of values, agreement on scoring standards, and internalisation of such standards.

Concluding comments – areas for further investigation

We have used the various excerpts above to explore some of the issues related to the assessment of practice-based learning via a reflective portfolio in the context of developing academic practice. We do not claim to have solved the problems associated with portfolio assessment but we have sought to expose some of the tensions associated with seeking to encourage an authentic (and therefore valid) response from candidates

and the ability of the assessor to detect and evaluate such authenticity. We have also sought to illuminate this dilemma with reference to our own practice as assessors of portfolios and tried to show how our thinking about what constitutes an authentic or genuine account has been challenged by those working in this area.

Our discussions about the assessment of portfolios have revealed several concerns which, for us, remain unresolved:

Whether it is possible for a 'bad' teacher (for instance, a teacher-focused, unreflective practitioner) to produce a 'good' portfolio. There are two potential protections against this, but both lie in the problematic area of authenticity. One is that if the person was to give an 'authentic' account of his/her teaching, s/he would not pass, assuming that his/her unreflective, teacher-focused approach was reflected in the portfolio. The other is that, if s/he were to offer an inauthentic account, we would hope to spot it and, again, s/he would not pass.

Whether it is possible for a 'good' teacher (i.e. one who we may have seen in action and judged to be student-focused and thoughtful) to write a 'bad' portfolio. In fact, we know this to be a possibility since we have both seen perfectly competent practitioners struggle to render their practice into words. This raises one of the issues identified above, namely that assessors are supposed to differentiate between the written artifact and the practice that it describes. A teacher who is less able to use the correct terminology or who is less familiar or comfortable with reflective writing should not be penalized on these grounds. However, in practice, a reflective approach is judged via the written account offered and so it is extremely difficult to separate the two.

When does the assessor's subjective knowledge of the candidate become problematic? The nature of the assessment (in that it offers an individual account from within a specific context) renders the notion of an anonymous portfolio problematic. Furthermore, where one potential signifier of authenticity is biographical detail, a candidate who offers an objective account may, in fact, be judged to be less successful than one who demonstrates a keen awareness of his/her specific context and situation. We find that, in reality, we

have often worked closely with those we are assessing and have advised them on early draft work. Such subjectivity may well help us to understand the context in which the candidate is working, but to what extent does it or should it colour our assessment of their work? If we know that a candidate is a good teacher (because we have seen them in practice and had other discussions with them) are we likely to judge their efforts more leniently than we perhaps should? Is it desirable, or even possible, to assess portfolios anonymously?

How much credit should we give to candidates for evidence of 'ground covered' in a portfolio? While some candidates develop a more reflective approach over the duration of the course, others are only just beginning to understand reflective teaching when they come to write the portfolio. We therefore need to ask to what extent we ought to privilege getting all candidates to a similar standard over helping candidates to achieve a major change in approach (even if they seem to be far behind their peers when it comes to completing the portfolio)?

There seem to be no easy answers to these questions. If we wish to preserve the developmental value of the portfolio as a way of helping candidates to reflect on both their learning and their role within their current context examiners will have to continue to grapple with these questions. The extent to which we sacrifice validity in an effort to increase reliability is an issue which has to be explored by all assessors since these two aspects of assessment often seem to be in tension. However, in a form of assessment which privileges experience over the written artifact, subjectivity over objectivity and development over standardization this tension becomes even more difficult to resolve. Perhaps key is that examiners, in their turn, take a sufficiently informed and reflective approach to the task of professional judgement in which they are engaged, as we hope this paper exemplifies.

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