The Learning Portfolio: Reflective Practice for Improving Student Learning


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Central Message of the Book

"More enriched learning is likely to occur if the student is encouraged to come to terms self-consciously over the duration of an academic endeavor ... with the essential questions about leaning itself" (4).
Chapter Highlights and Notes

PART I: About Student Learning Portfolios

Chapter 1 – An Overview of Student Learning Portfolios

Zubizarreta claims that educators have made good and varied use of the portfolio genre but, at the same time, have oftentimes forgotten when launching portfolio projects to include an "intentional focus on learning" (4).

The educator who wants to put a learning-focused portfolio-based assignments into play must avoid doing certain things. When assigning a portfolio-project, the educator must not merely ask students to collect examples of their past work because, for example, these samples are representative of the students' work at college or university, or job-searching students might use a collection of polished projects to impress a would-be employer, or because the teacher in the role of assessor might want to gauge students' progress.

Instead, educators with a focused attention on student learning must asked students to collect and present their work and, at the same time, to bring a "systematic and protracted" inquiry to bear upon learning itself (8). Educators must require of their students that they engage in ongoing "reflective thinking and writing" about learning, which is essential to the development of metacognition, which is "associated with expertise in learning" (13). When framing their portfolio-driven assignments, educators can put an "intentional focus on learning" (4) if they to structure their assignments so that students become aware of "learning itself," including the ways and reasons why they were taught as they were taught, from the beginning to the end of their careers (4).

Educators have at their disposal a second method for turning portfolio-driven assignments into assignments that help students to attend to the process of learning itself. We should involve collaborators and mentors in the portfolio-production process and, in this way, break students our of their isolated roles as learners -- that is, to make their learning about learning a "community property" (11). When we do this, we move isolated learners into discourse communities and, in this way, provide learners with a support that should help them to spend more of their time on higher-order learning activities (12).

If we build our portfolio-driven assignments on the powers of reflection and community, we can expect at least one positive outcome. Our students students will likely increase their metacognitive abilities and, at the same time, become critical thinkers sensitive to the ways and means of learning (10-11).

Chapter 2 – Practical Questions and Issues About Student Learning Portfolios

Before educators develop and assign their first learning portfolios, they should ask and develop answers to a number of important questions.
Question: What is a Learning Portfolio?
Answer: A learning portfolio is "a flexible, evidence-based tool that engages students in a process of continuous reflection and collaborative analysis of learning," and captures the scope, richness, and relevance of students' learning" (16).

Question: Is the learning portfolio a light undertaking?
Answer: Portfolio projects are time-consuming endeavors. The extra time associated with portfolio-based instruction causes many educators to abandon portfolio projects even though they know that portfolio production can create a positive "intellectual space for learners" (16).

Question: How should educators deal with the problem of time when developing their portfolio projects?
Answer: When developing their portfolio assignment and, later, when working with students, educators should put limits on portfolio size. Zubizarreta points out that the learning portfolio is most useful for increasing the quality, not necessarily the quantity, of student learning. Portfolio assignments are actually better when cut down to size. For this reason, educators can make the time-consuming portfolio project less time-consuming educator by stressing matters of quality over quantity (16).

Question: How can the collaborative mentor, a key figure in the portfolio-based assignment, help in putting the emphasis on quality?
Answer: Collaborative mentors can and should "provide" the writers engaged in the production of a learning portfolio with "feedback" when the time comes for the writer to make "decisions about purpose, content, format, and selectivity of appendix materials" (16). Mentors who ask students to produce a concise, focused reflective narrative and to be judicious when selecting evidences in support of claims about learning (17) can help students to produce smaller portfolios that put a valuable emphasis on the quality of what students have learned about their learning. At the same time, collaborative mentors can recommend that old materials be removed from a learning portfolio whenever the writer feels moved to add new materials. By doing this, the collaborative mentor can assure that portfolio revision remain both an "active and refreshing" act (17).

Question: What contents should a portfolio writer include in a learning portfolio?
Answer: The learning portfolio should contain two kinds of writing: 1) a reflective narrative or a number of short reflections on separate or grouped items of evidence that capture the scope, progress, and value of learning; 2) evidence in support of the claims made in the reflection(s) (17). Elements that oftentimes appear in a polished learning portfolio include: a table of contents; a philosophy of learning (reflective narrative on learning process); achievements in learning; evidence in learning; assessment of learning; demonstrations about the relevance of learning; definition of learning goals; appendices (17-18).

Question: What conceptual model(s) should educators use to frame the collection and discussion of artifacts that go into a learning portfolio?
Answer: Zubizarreta argues that students net an increase in the quality of their learning if educators ask their students to reflect on their learning, to provide evidence of their learning, and to collaborate with a mentor. The educators goal should be to focus project activities through the lenses of reflection, documentation, and collaboration (19). When educators bring all three
domains together in the portfolio exercise, they locate the student within a structure of communication that causes the student to invest in learning as community and to increase the quality of their learning about learning (20-21).

**Question:** What single element of learning portfolio assignments is most responsible for driving up the quality of learning?

**Answer:** Writing is vital to the success of any learning portfolio. Because we want the portfolio writer to participate in an "engaged process of learning," we must engage the portfolio writer in a process of writing that "stimulates in the learner not only the conventional aspects of invention, composition, and revision inherent in writing with a purpose but also the complex dimensions of selecting representative samples of one's work, thinking about how and why such information reveals higher-level learning, maintaining currency and vitality in the compilation of materials, and evaluating the relevance and significance of such work" (22). Writing is vital to the success of each of these learning-focused enterprises.

**Chapter 3 – Important Factors in Developing and Using Student Learning Portfolios**

Perhaps the hardest part for educators who assign learning portfolios is teaching students to how to reflect upon their learning. Reflection is certainly the most important component of the learning portfolio project, but most students come to the portfolio project without access to the language of reflection (25). Bearing this in mind, teachers of learning portfolios must provide students with "specific questions" that locate students within the structure of reflection (26).

Teachers who assign learning portfolios face a second challenge. The must remember to require their students to link their reflective narratives on the "extent, meaning, and value of a student's learning" to "an appendix of documentary materials that provide the balance in the portfolio" (28). If students fail to link their narratives to the evidences of learning, the learning portfolio promises to become an unbalanced formal argument instead of a content rich, metacognitive act of critical, substantive reflection (31).

Educators who want their learning portfolio assignments to increase the quality of the students' learning must find ways of tapping the power of collaboration and mentoring. Zubizarreta says that mentors and collaborators a vital to the success of any learning portfolio project. If the goal is to put the learning portfolio at the heart of a "student-centered" environment in which learning is a shared endeavor, the effort of a learning community" (35), then the teacher of learning portfolios cannot down without collaboration and mentoring. If nothing else, collaborators and mentors make real the problem of audience for writers who want to share their substantive thoughts about their own learning (35).

When thinking about who might fill the role of collaborator and mentor, a project designer might automatically think of "the teacher as mentor and collaborator." But students can serve as their own mentors and collaborators. Small groups might provide portfolio writers with "reflective conversations not about instructional performance but about their own learning experience" (36). Peer portfolio mentors can prove especially helpful if they have been trained because peer mentors can bring a critical perspective to bear on the writer's claims about learning. The peer-mentor can join "other students (and the teacher) in creating a community of reflective learners.
through the shared act of developing learning portfolios" (38).

Finally, the teacher of the learning portfolio must consider the problem of standards and standardization. Zubizarreta believes that the portfolio is popular in part because it offers "an alternative, individualistic means of evaluating students' learning" (33). He allows, however, that those who want to push learning portfolios in the direction of individualistic assessment must deal with the reality that "standardization is a necessary factor in establishing standards because it allows for the comparisons that underlie all standards" (34). "Rejecting standardization," writes Zubizarreta, "commonly results in a failure of standards" (34). Zubizarreta argues that learning portfolios could possibly support the interests of those in favor of standards and individualistic assessment if all parties involved agree to "share a common set of standards for both content and format but allow each student the individual, creative opportunity to add a prescribed limit of additional elements that capture the exclusive dimensions of a particular student's learning experience" (34).

**Chapter 4 – Electronic Learning Portfolios**

Before educators decide to assign portfolio-based projects, they should take up the problem of media. Will they ask their students to produce electronic or paper-based learning portfolios? Zubizarreta allows that the "landscape of portfolio development has expanded astonishingly with the advent of multimedia and hypermedia" (43). The ability to produce and maintain electronic learning portfolios has increased because electronic portfolios provide a "high-tech means of collecting and storing information" (41).

At the same time, educators who want their students to produce electronic portfolios must consider the real difficulties associated with this kind of production. To produce and maintain an electronic portfolio, one needs a "daunting amount of training" and must deal with the "potentially confusing variety of hardware and software choices available, and the dizzying pace at which technology evolves" (41).

Zubizarreta stresses that regardless of the medium, the "fundamental process of learning portfolio development remains steadfast" (43). Students will produce their portfolios -- paper or electronic -- if they are helped to develop projects in line with the principles and suggested practices in chapters 1-3.

**PART II: Models of Successful Use of Learning Portfolios**

- Part II presents "a collection of models of successful use of both print and electronic learning portfolios. The variety of models suggests the many ways in which learning portfolios are adapted across purposes, disciplines, programs, and institutions. The diverse models of portfolio implementation offer both theoretical ideas and practical information, and readers are encouraged to consider what would work for them individually to improve student learning." (49)

For those interested in finding locating models that might be applied to programs that they are currently involved in, this section contains overviews portfolio development for those interested
PART III: Sample Learning Portfolio Selections

- Part III "includes practical models and materials that suggest a variety of ways in which learning portfolios can be adapted across the disciplinary courses, programs, and institutions. Some of the materials are print-based, some electronic, but the reader is encouraged to find creative ways of finding and applying common ideas and practices in the shared models and resources. The practical and highly adaptable examples of portfolio selections, assignments, guidelines, criteria, evaluation rubrics, and other resources are described" in this section. (159)

Commentary: Zubizarreta claims that the value of learning portfolio's resides in the learner's ability to become a member of a discourse community. Only one portfolio writer whose work appears in the section on samples -- Connie Thackaberry (208-11) -- made any references to secondary sources -- that is, to the discourse communities to which the students must gain a passing acquaintance if they are to graduate with a higher education. Most other contributors of sample portfolios wrote about the points of origin outside the academy and beyond the academy. Very often, they made superficial, baseless assertions about the value of learning and teaching with technology: "The benefits for personal productivity are extensive. Options like email and mail merge, programs like Word and Access, as well as the Internet will be infinitely helping in maintaining my personal and professional organization and sanity" (188).

The claim in the text is that learning portfolios provide people with higher-level quality of learning, one driven by a metacognitive, socially justified approach to learning. But the socially and, more importantly, intellectually isolated quality of writing in the sample learning portfolios calls into question many of the claims made in Part I. If these samples are meant to represent what one might expect or desire from a student learning portfolio, then they make the case that what we finally would want from a learning portfolio -- even when articulated with honors courses and four-year degree programs comes at us from the vantage of methodological individualism -- would be a demonstration of superficial learning and a demonstrated commitment to methodological individualism.

PART IV: Practical Materials

- "Part IV consists of a wide collection of practical materials -- assignment sheets, guidelines,
criteria, evaluation rubrics, and other materials -- that various individuals and institutions have used as part of developing print and electronic learning portfolios from across disciplines, programs, and types of institutions in higher education." (215)

The practical materials in this section should be consulted by those wanting to work in portfolio development:

- Portfolio Development
  - Four Year (223-27)
  - Math (234)
  - Pre-Service Student Teaching Portfolio (247-48)

- Student Self-Assessment (219)

- Reflective Writing
  - General (235-36, 241-243)
  - Experiential Work Experience (244, 245-46)

- Evaluation
  - Paper (228-29, 230-31)
  - Electronic (232-36)

- Legalese: Portfolio Option, Guidelines, and Contract (237-40)