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Now, Where was I Going? A Sideways Look at Portfolio-Building

Abstract: Gerry Power of the IALS writes about the benefits of compiling a portfolio which records and reflects on the skills he has aquired through work and which he can apply in his work as a mentor.
Keywords: education; professional development; law librarians

Introduction

Lifelong learning is much discussed today. The government and our professional organisations, including CILIP and BIALL, emphasise for us the importance of independent learning throughout our careers. We gain many insights into our work and professional outlook by reflecting on our achievements, problems and gaps in our skills. The portfolio approach is now common in continuous professional development in teaching, nursing, librarianship and other professions and it offers many opportunities for self-assessment and reflection. This article traces some of the insights gained by one member of BIALL in compiling a teaching portfolio and in mentoring others in their portfolio-building for chartered membership of CILIP.

A portfolio usually contains selected evidence of a person's work and professional achievements. It demonstrates a range of knowledge and skills developed over time and the outcomes of an individual's training and development plan. It may also demonstrate adherence to, and ownership of, a set of criteria and professional values, such as a code of professional practice. Portfolios differ in their rules and criteria, but the CILIP approach to portfolios is documented on their website.[1]

Know yourself and your learning

Ask yourself some questions. Think of something that you have done regularly in your work for the past year, or two years, or five years, depending on how long you have worked in library and information services. Can you list all the changes to how you have done it during that time? How have those changes come about? How have you learned to deal with the changes? Answering this question will help to show you just how much we learn by experience in the workplace.

The compiler of a portfolio looks at whole-person learning and development: not just knowledge and skills and theory, but attitudes and feelings too. In our working lives we learn much through experience. What does experience teach us? It can be difficult to identify and document the learning without a log or record. We learn all the time at work, things we did not learn at college or on a course, including dealing with difficult situations, trouble-shooting, problem-solving, unexpected and unfamiliar tasks, dealing with people, getting to grips with technology, etc. The portfolio-compiler can keep a log of all the different ways of workplace learning and ways of applying that learning. Learning logs are useful pieces of evidence here. Some common examples include logging the basics of new software (do you muddle through, experiment, or read the manual!), dealing with an emergency or unexpected situation, acting up in a more senior role, or dealing with challenging users. Documenting the experiential learning in this way helps the portfolio-compiler to record and reflect on their learning and how they build on the skill or knowledge later in time.

A good portfolio is a rich record of a variety of learning and development outcomes, and will offer insights into how best we learn. An important aspect of this is to differentiate between our role as practitioners/managers and our role as learners. Think of the number of times you have been to a conference or course and you find your thoughts wandering back to the workplace and you get preoccupied with work matters. A well-designed course or conference will offer you enough induction to help you distance yourself from the everyday role, so that you can concentrate on the learning and get the most from it. This was a particular challenge for me and many of my fellow-students on the teacher-training course at Birkbeck. We had to learn early on to leave the day job behind! Being a student/learner involves a certain humility before the learning task.

Our attitudes and feelings have an important role in our learning too. We all have to deal with stress in our working lives from time-to-time and hopefully we all learn to cope with it and to minimise its effects on our well-being. Reflecting on ways to deal with stress, and how to promote calmness and patience in the workplace, are some of the evidence I put in my teaching portfolio. Of course, stress is a very individual thing and everyone deals with, or learns to deal with it, differently. Thinking

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about how we recognise it and overcome it is important to our learning and development.

Make discoveries

As we sift, select and present evidence in a portfolio, we make all kinds of discoveries and insights about our learning. I can vouch for this myself and for the people whom I mentor. Evidence needs to be examined closely in various ways before it goes in the portfolio, including:

- Attribution: who is responsible for the evidence. Often it will be the compiler's own work, or a team effort with mixed responsibility. The attribution must be very clear.
- Sign-posting: each piece of evidence needs to fit into a matrix and needs to be linked to other pieces, depending on criteria. The categorisation and arrangement of the evidence can reveal a lot to the compiler.

This discipline helps the compiler to uncover a lot of tacit knowledge/skills and in time to document them. Portfolios help the compiler to discover a lot of the "glue" which binds his or her professional practice.

The portfolio process can pose a number of challenging questions to the compiler. Common questions which I have encountered in my own portfolio and in mentoring include:

- Is this evidence sufficient or do I need more?
- What happens if I have no evidence of a particular part of my work / learning?
- What evidence do I leave out?
- What form can the evidence be in, e.g. printed, pictures, reports, statistics etc.?

The answers to these questions often lie in a discussion with one's mentor or peer-mentor and in a careful understanding of the portfolio task itself, its criteria and aims.

Doing reflection

A very important skill for the portfolio compiler is reflection or reflective practice. In my experience, this is the most difficult and demanding part of the whole process, because it is necessary to demonstrate that the learning outcomes and evidence satisfy a set of values, for instance a code of ethics.

One way to get the reflection underway is with a mentor or peer-mentor. On the teaching course, we explored a variety of ways of doing reflection in small groups of three to four peer-mentors. We used various ways to give each other feedback on presentation and teaching techniques. We went to each other's workplaces to observe teaching in practice. We observed the teaching of experienced teachers. This greatly helped to prepare us for the formative and summative assessments of our teaching by experienced HE teachers. Getting a variety of feedback gave us plenty to reflect on and write up for the course-work and portfolio.

In my mentoring of chartership candidates for CILIP, I have found that the reflecting process is also often the most difficult part of the process for them. Facing the blank page of self-assessment and not knowing where to start can be daunting and off-putting. A common perception is that any form of self-assessment is a solitary navel-gazing exercise. Whilst there is some individual writing and thinking involved, it can be shared and discussed with a mentor also, or with other critical friends. I find that once mentees have built up some evidence in their portfolio, they can start thinking about some of the ethics and professional values which underpin their practice. From my own experience of mentoring, here are some examples of points which have triggered useful discussion and led to some reflection:

- How can I make my teaching more inclusive? We started off by exploring both barriers to learning and different teaching methods and materials. This led to some reading about why some people often feel excluded in formal learning, like classrooms. This in turn prompted the revision of some lesson-plans and more use of colour and graphics in materials.
- Looking at ways of doing things "before" and "after": the portfolio can include previous drafts or versions of working documents and it is often useful for the compiler to think about the changes make from previous versions. What processes were used to change the arrangements, in what way do the outcomes differ as a result of the changes, have changes resulted in any improvements and for whom?
- Reaching a feeling of stagnation or inertia with a particular task or process. The discussion here starts off by asking if there is any alternative way or ways of doing the work and by a little brainstorming. Thinking about alternatives, and their implications, can lead to a fruitful exchange of ideas.

Hillier[2] outlines a number of ways of reflecting for teachers, including the lens approach. We can analyse our work / practice from a variety of points of view:

- Our own viewpoint
- Our manager's or senior management team's
- Our colleagues' / team members'
- Our users' or learners'
- Our funders'
- Other stakeholders'

By exploring these different viewpoints, and by documenting them, we build up a more complex and rounded picture to aid reflection.

The benefits of reflective practice are many. We achieve a keener insight into our services and

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organisation. We become more confident in challenging received wisdom and in analysing decision-making. We develop listening skills and the skills of critical questioning and being a critical friend. We help ourselves and others to identify and explore the meanings of different processes, services, and performance.

Keeping on-track

Not everyone wants or needs to build a portfolio, but portfolios are for everybody. You can compile a portfolio no matter what sector or role you are working in. They can help you as you start out in your career, mid-career, or if you are coming to the end of your career. I have met and talked to several chartership candidates who wanted to gain the chartered status as a significant achievement just before retirement! The benefits of portfolios are many. The skills which we demonstrate in our portfolios are often eminently transferable. So next time you are faced with a blank page, as you tackle your annual appraisal form or as you apply for that new job, your portfolio can give you resources and encouragement to take that next step.

Footnotes

[1]See CILIP's framework of qualifications at http://www.cilip.org.uk/jobs-careers/qualifications/pages/qualifications-.aspx (seen on 29 March 2010).

[2]Yvonne Hillier (2002) *Reflective teaching in further and adult education*, Continuum: London, p. 7.

Biography

Gerry Power is at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, London. He is Access Librarian at IALS and a regular contributor to LIM.

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Studying Law in the Netherlands: the Role of the Library

Abstract: Ben Beljaars and René Winter contribute a thoroughly well-researched article on the profile of current users of academic libraries in Holland. They discuss their information requirements and usage; the relationship between the library and the law faculty; the use of digital resources in legal education and developments in legal information literacy.
Keywords: academic law libraries; Netherlands; legal education

Motto

'The law library is your friend and companion throughout your degree. If you take the trouble to familiarise yourself early on with the resources and services offered by the library you will save yourself a great deal of time.'[1]

Introduction

Academic libraries in the Netherlands form the heart of an extensive digital network which can function as a treasure trove for legal education.[2] They actively manage extensive information resources which can be consulted

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