Putting Together Professional Portfolios

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What Is a Portfolio?

In this introductory chapter we discuss what we mean by 'a professional portfolio'. We explore different models of portfolios and consider ways these might be used to support professional development.

Key ideas

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- **Different models of a professional portfolio**
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Why develop a professional portfolio?

Central to the process of developing a portfolio is our understanding of what it means to be a learning professional, that is, someone who continues to develop and enhance their skills and understanding for the benefit of the learners they work with. A professional portfolio provides a space in which you can plan and reflect in depth on your practice, helping you identify your strengths and find ways of building on these.

What is a professional portfolio?

There are many different ways in which a portfolio can be developed and we explore different constructions of portfolios, ranging from prescriptive formats to open-ended frameworks. Underpinning the use of portfolios in professional development are some common principles related to how practitioners learn and develop their professional practice throughout their careers. We contextualise these principles by drawing directly from the experience of teachers, school leaders and lecturers in tertiary education who have developed professional portfolios across a range of professional development programmes, and from current research on portfolio-based learning and assessment. We also look at the design and construction of e-portfolios as the use of these is becoming more common in professional development programmes.

In broad terms, a professional portfolio could be described as a collection of material put together in a meaningful way to demonstrate the practice and learning of an educational practitioner. Portfolios are used for different purposes and vary in the way they are designed and constructed. Most portfolios are built up over a period of time, though even this may vary in length, with some portfolios created in a concentrated way over a short period of time, often as part of a programme of study. Other portfolios are maintained and regularly updated as the practitioner moves through his/her career. However, a professional portfolio is not a random collection of material and artefacts. The items relate to what the practitioner sees as important in the development of his/her practice, whether this is in a classroom, seminar room, school or wider educational setting. The format of portfolios also varies in the way items are gathered and then presented. The key issue here is that the design and presentation of the portfolio makes sense to the practitioner and anyone else who might read this, such as a critical friend, tutor or line manager.

What are the benefits and challenges of developing a professional portfolio?

Designing and building a professional portfolio is a powerful means of planning, enhancing and reviewing practice. Here are some of the benefits of producing a professional portfolio identified by participants on different professional development programmes. Developing the portfolio:

- created a sense of achievement

- built my self-confidence

- was an opportunity to conduct an in-depth self-evaluation

- developed my skills of reflection

- developed greater awareness of the context I work in

- made me think about where I want to go and what I need to develop

- strengthened my understanding of my development as a practitioner

- gave more rigour in analysing my practice

- created a sense of my own journey as a professional

- allowed me to become more critical

- let me appreciate some of my successes more

- helped me know and be confident about my strengths

- enabled me to think about my practice and ways I can develop this.

Clearly, producing a professional portfolio has benefits personally for an educational practitioner by building confidence and greater understanding as well as other benefits, with the educational practitioner looking in depth at his/her practice and then finding ways to improve this. However, there are some challenges. Among the issues identified by course participants are:

- the portfolio could become simply a paper trail

- constructing and assembling the portfolio is time-consuming

- very 'messy' at the start when trying to find a format

- the portfolio can create an atomistic approach – looking at different tasks without making connections

- the portfolio can focus on the functional aspects of practice without looking at the 'big picture'.

In this book we seek to enable you to derive benefit from the process of designing and constructing your portfolio by providing a range of techniques and examples that will also help you avoid some of these pitfalls.

Why do you want to develop a portfolio?

The first issue to consider is the purpose of your portfolio, so we will begin by exploring some of the different purposes and then relate these to the design principles and formats of different types of portfolios commonly used in education.

> 🔑 Key Question
>
>   Why do you want to develop a portfolio?

There are many reasons why you might be developing a portfolio. Is it:

- a contractual obligation: perhaps as part of a professional review and appraisal process

- for an academic or professional award where developing a portfolio is part of the learning and assessment process

- part of a professional development programme where a portfolio is the means to review practice and plan further professional development?

Is the purpose of your portfolio:

- to illustrate achievements

- to demonstrate ongoing development of thinking and practice

- to collect evidence

- to provide a vehicle for reflection?

Your reasons for developing a portfolio will provide some broad parameters for you to begin the process of designing the format and deciding on the contents.

> ### Task: Thinking about why you want to develop a portfolio
>
> Jot down some reasons and think about how these might shape your portfolio.

Different models of a professional portfolio

There are many different types of professional portfolios used in continuing development of educational practitioners. Some portfolios are very structured while others are far looser in their design and contents. In some programmes there are clear guidelines to which the practitioner must adhere; in others, practitioners can determine the size, scope, format and contents of the portfolio. There are advantages and disadvantages to both structured portfolios and to more open-ended portfolios.

Portfolios with prescribed structures are evident in programmes leading to a professional qualification or an academic award where the portfolio forms part of the assessment of these programmes. Increasingly these programmes use a competence framework or standard and the portfolio is the means to demonstrate the achievement of the areas of practice specified in a particular framework. The guidelines are useful in helping you design the shape and scope of your portfolio and helping you to plan the activities you must undertake and decide how to gather the relevant evidence. However, such tight guidelines can also be limiting as there is little scope for you to examine areas of practice and to add materials that have a special significance for your development within your professional context.

At the other end of the continuum, with open-ended portfolios the choice is very much shaped by what the practitioner sees as meaningful and important. This is a considerable strength of this type of portfolio because it allows you scope in exploring and presenting what you see as meaningful and what you regard as your strengths and successes. However, this greater flexibility makes the task of designing and building a portfolio more complex. These types of portfolios are more challenging because you are being asked to make decisions about what you see as relevant and important to your development. Some practitioners might see this as daunting while others will relish the challenge.

Is your portfolio open-ended, in which you have scope:

- to choose the documents and artefacts

- to decide on the design and presentation of the portfolio?

Is your portfolio clearly structured, in which you have to include:

- specific items of evidence to illustrate aspects of professional practice

- specific formats for the presentation of the portfolio?

Task: Let's consider your portfolio

Use the questions above to map out the broad parameters of your portfolio.

In practice, probably most portfolios used by educational practitioners are a mixture: there are guidelines for the broad format and contents but there is some scope to allow practitioners to shape either the format or the contents of a portfolio to reflect better their own circumstances and practice. We can see this in the different portfolios we look at now.

Looking at different portfolios

We will illustrate the differences in the purposes and design of portfolios by drawing from our work on a number of development programmes. Here we look at different formats of several portfolios. We will look in more detail at specific elements of a portfolio in later chapters.

Portfolio A is taken from a masters programme taught by one of the authors in the USA. Here participants were undertaking a course on a cross-curricular approach to the development of expressive arts. The participants were from all sectors of education and included a number of special needs support assistants. As part of the assessment each participant was asked to compile a portfolio recording and reflecting on their own development in expressive arts throughout the programme. This is an example of a portfolio that uses course work built up during the programme.

Portfolio B represents the current practice in many schools in the UK where staff maintain a record of the professional development opportunities they have been involved in over the course of a school year.

Portfolio C is from a professional qualification for aspiring headteachers where participants lead a major school development project. As part of the assessment of the programme participants develop a portfolio of evidence charting the process and outcomes of the project and reflect critically on their own learning.

Portfolio D is from a programme in which teachers can seek accreditation as an accomplished teacher. Teachers must present a portfolio to demonstrate their practice in specific aspects of teaching and learning. The teachers can opt to present their work as an e-portfolio.

Portfolio E is from an action research programme set up by a local authority in which staff complete a portfolio to record the process and outcomes of the project and subsequently the portfolio is available for other staff members to use.

We will now look at the contents of each of these portfolios. Although each portfolio is linked to the professional development of the educational practitioner, there are some significant differences and we will look at how these determine the design and contents of the portfolios.

What is in a professional portfolio?

There is considerable variation in how the portfolios are presented and types of materials included in these different portfolios.

Portfolio A: Course portfolio

A key outcome of the first part of the course was the development of the participants' confidence, enthusiasm and skill in expressive arts. The design of this portfolio is very like the portfolios used by artists and architects to present their work. Participants were asked to collect any items that had been significant in their development in expressive arts during the programme, including artefacts and materials they had created themselves. These were then presented in a portfolio with a short commentary in their learning log explaining the significance of each item.

Course portfolio

- course outline and learning plan
- a learning log maintained during the programme
- a tape of music composed by the participant
- a montage the participant produced
- a short digital film of the process of making the montage
- photographs of her own art work
- a poem used as a starting point for two short prose texts written by the participant
- two examples of her own artwork – a pencil drawing and a cloth hanging
- a small sketchbook
- a reflection on the programme

Portfolio B: CPD portfolio

As part of the school's policy, all staff maintain a record of their continuing professional development (CPD). In the guidelines all teachers are asked to (1) keep a record for the professional development activities they have engaged in over the year, (2) reflect on their development as preparation for their annual review and (3) complete a written evaluation for any professional development course they attend in or out of school. The evaluation form asks staff also to identify what actions they have taken as a result of this professional development.

CPD Portfolio

- a self-evaluation form for the professional review interview
- agreed plan of action for the coming year
- a list of professional development activities and dates
- three evaluation reports on courses attended
- attendance certificates and notes from courses
- the agreed reports of previous professional reviews

Portfolio C: Competence-based portfolio

An important aspect of the professional qualification for aspiring headteachers is the school-based project in which the participants take forward a whole school development project. The portfolio is the final assessment task. The structure of the portfolio is based on the competence framework and the contents are specified: the aspiring headteachers present a portfolio of evidence and a critical commentary illustrating their achievement of the different elements of a competence framework through their work in leading the school-based project. The framework maps out the core management tasks and personal qualities of a headteacher.

Competence-based portfolio

- introduction and outline of the school context
- outline of the structure of the portfolio
- project plan
- claims for competence matched against the core functions of leadership
- an index of the evidence
- items of evidence linked to the competence framework
- critical reflective commentary

Portfolio D: Portfolio for the accreditation of prior learning

This portfolio is from a postgraduate programme also based on a standard. The standard here maps out the different aspects of 'accomplished teaching' and specifies a number of professional actions the teacher must demonstrate. As part of the assessment process the teacher must build a portfolio of evidence illustrating the activities undertaken and the impact of these on the learning and achievement of pupils in the class. This enables the teacher to demonstrate how they have met the various elements of the competence framework through a series of case studies. There is a clear specification for the portfolio and a set of assessment criteria but participants can opt to present their work in an e-portfolio.

Accreditation e-portfolio

- plan for developing a claim
- short digital video illustrating the context of the classroom
- PowerPoint illustrating in graph form baseline assessment data
- examples of e-learning materials
- examples of pupil work and achievement
- e-journal on project
- PowerPoint presentation with photographs and audio commentary on the accomplishment of each professional action specified in the competence framework
- critical reflection on the process of professional learning

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Portfolio E: Project portfolio

A group of teachers from a local school cluster have been working together with a university tutor on an action research project to improve attainment in mathematics. The teachers have been sponsored by their local authority and given time for the work to be conducted and for the group to meet together as well as a small budget to buy resources and materials. Teachers are expected to maintain a portfolio throughout the project which is discussed regularly with the project leader and their school co-ordinator. At the end of the project the portfolio is finalised and a copy submitted to provide materials and guidance on the mathematics project and on action research for other teachers in the associated schools.

Project portfolio

- project plan
- baseline data
- research report
- resource materials
- guidelines on research methodologies
- reflections on the process of the action research project
- materials used in the project
- PowerPoint presentation to teachers

There are some common features shared by these portfolios, but there are also some significant differences.

Task: What similarities and differences do you see between these sample portfolios?

Make a note of some of the similarities and differences between these five sample portfolios.

First steps in planning

These portfolios have been chosen because they help illustrate the range of portfolios used by educational practitioners. The next step is for you to consider how one or more of these examples relate to your portfolio.

> **🔑 Key Question**
>
> How do some of these portfolios match what is required in your portfolio?

There is a variety of reasons why an educational practitioner might want to develop a portfolio but underpinning all of these are some common principles. Although in each example the portfolio has been developed for a different purpose, there are some common features. Portfolio components typically include four broad types of materials:

- *Planning:* planning is an important element in all portfolios, whether this is the planning of project work or professional development activities. Plans are also included in portfolios for the accreditation of prior learning where the practitioner will draw up a plan to construct his/her portfolio based on personal experiences and accomplishments and possibly address any additional areas needed to meet all the requirements of a particular programme.

- *Description:* the outline and description of the area or areas of practice is important so there is a clear and accurate account of the activities the practitioner has undertaken.

- *Evidence:* documentary evidence, testimonies and artefacts that illustrate what the professional practitioner did and achieved. This can include such items as curricular materials, pupils' work, artefacts produced, professional development materials, documents from a school project, learning resources and, increasingly, digital resources.

- *Reflection:* reflection is a vital part of the portfolio, in which the professional practitioner reviews and critically appraises his/her practice and experiences. The length of these reflections will vary, but this is an important element in portfolio-based learning.

> **Task: Planning the timescale for the development of your portfolio**
>
> Create an initial time plan for the development of your portfolio, building in time for self-evaluation and undertaking any activities, creating a structure for the portfolio, gathering evidence and reflecting on your development as an educational practitioner.

Thinking about these questions will help you to move from the task of producing a portfolio to considering a wider set of activities associated with portfolio-based learning.

Portfolio-based learning

Designing a portfolio is a demanding task and we have to be concerned that this does not become simply an administrative task of gathering different pieces of paper. Instead, the process of designing and constructing a portfolio itself should be a valuable learning experience. It becomes a tool to promote reflection and deeper learning. In portfolio-based learning the educator plans, collects and reflects on the process of their own development as a professional practitioner. The portfolio is constructed in a dynamic way, with items being collected, reviewed and refined over a period of time. Some portfolios may continue to the completion of a particular programme while others may be maintained across the span of a practitioner's career.

Designing a professional portfolio

Portfolios are increasingly being used in professional and academic qualifications in which portfolios are used as part of the assessment process to provide 'evidence' of the achievements and learning of the educator. Frequently the portfolio, or at least some of the elements of the portfolio, become the topic of discussion and reflection with a critical friend or colleague. Working with a critical friend, mentor or tutor can provide feedback useful for the development of the portfolio and which will also serve to deepen your understanding of the principles underpinning your practice.

How you go about the task of designing and building your portfolio is important:

- Will this be a portfolio that you develop and complete at the end of a programme or is it something that is maintained and reviewed throughout the programme?

- Is the design and construction of the portfolio something you will be doing by yourself or are there opportunities to reflect on the process and contents with other practitioners or with a tutor?

> ### Task: Working with others
>
> Jot down some of the people with whom you might discuss the development of your portfolio.

Stages in the development of your portfolio

In designing and building a portfolio, a practitioner has to decide what has been important in his/her practice, what the successes have been, what areas might be enhanced or improved. This process of reflection is central to both structured portfolios based on a competence framework and to more open-ended portfolios. If you are using a competence framework you have to consider how you achieved these broad areas in the specific context of your own establishment: what does it mean, for example, to lead learning in your school or department? If it is a more open-ended portfolio you have to determine what has been important and how you might demonstrate what you have

achieved. For both types of portfolios you are reviewing, evaluating and, most importantly, making sense of your own experiences and professional practice.

There are then a number of key questions you have to consider as you begin the process of developing a portfolio, which we will consider in greater depth in later chapters in this book.

- *Planning*: how you can plan your learning to take account of the important dimensions of your professional learning in your work context.

- *Practice*: the frameworks you can use to chart your own practice and development.

- *Gathering and selecting evidence*: selection of relevant and appropriate evidence.

- *Reflecting:* ways you can reflect critically on your practice and development.

Summary: Setting out the parameters of your portfolio

In this chapter we have looked at some of the issues you have to consider as you begin the process of developing a portfolio. Here are a number of questions designed to help you set out some broad parameters for the project.

Purpose and audience

- Why are you developing a portfolio?

- Who is the audience: is there more than one; do they have different requirements?

Design of the portfolio

- Is the portfolio paper-based or electronic?

- Are there any restrictions in terms of length?

- Is there a competence framework or a set of criteria that must be used?

Contents of the portfolio

What kind of material can be included:

- text

- visual material

- digital material

- artefacts?

Recording and reflecting on learning

Does the portfolio include:

- a description of event and/achievements

- evidence of performance

- reflection?