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Case Studies of Good Practice in the Assessment of Student Learning in Higher Education

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<h2>Case Studies of Good Practice in the Assessment of Student Learning in Higher Education</h2>
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Title of Case Study: Teaching Portfolio
<p>Context where the assessment was used: (please describe in full the context, such as the institution, discipline, student group, year/level of programme, the teaching/learning methods, or other relevant contextual information)</p> <p>This Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching is located in the Faculty of Academic Affairs in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). It is aimed at new and existing academic staff in higher education (third level) institutions in the Republic of Ireland, including lecturers, librarians, and academic support staff. The latter two have responsibility for teaching in their areas. It was initially offered in 2000, and is continuing apace today, with currently over 90 academic staff having successfully graduated from the programme to date.</p> <p>The teachers ranged from a number of higher education institutions throughout the Republic of Ireland, from a wide variety of subject disciplines in the Applied Arts, Science, Tourism and Food, Engineering, the Built Environment and Business. They also varied in their teaching background from Apprenticeship courses to undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.</p>

The aim of this portfolio assessment is to give programme participants an ideal source from which to view their own teaching philosophy, practice, effectiveness, goals and development.

Learning Outcomes being Assessed: (Briefly outline the module/course learning outcomes that are being assessed)

There are two modules on the certificate programme. Module one is entitled 'Learning and Teaching in Higher Education'. The aim of this module is to provide teachers in higher education with a wide range of practical learning and teaching methods, including the use of relevant learning technologies that will help their students learn more effectively. They will gain solid background knowledge in recognised theories and national and international best practices in learning and teaching in higher education so that they understand the reasons for choosing certain teaching strategies.

In addition, these specific areas are salient for new teachers:

- Identifying learning needs of individuals and groups;
- Demonstrating the application of principles of equal opportunities and social inclusion in their own teaching practice;
- Analysing teaching experiences through research about learning in their own courses and through student feedback;
- Evaluating effective learning and teaching through self, peer and tutor observation of teaching;
- Effectively participating in special interest groups and networks in third level learning and teaching;
- Identifying specific areas of interest in learning and teaching for further study and professional development;
- All the above is to be realised through the compilation of a teaching portfolio based on an experiential model of learning.

Module Two is entitled: Developing Curricula and Assessment Strategies. The aim of this module is to facilitate lecturers to take a competent and proactive role in the development of high quality curricula in their own third level contexts. The module will enable participants to creatively explore, and to apply a range of ideas in the design of curricula and assessment strategies.

A number of key areas have been identified for learning: developing personal critical philosophies of curriculum development including application of equal opportunity and social inclusion principles; identifying educational needs of target student groups and developing curricula of appropriate types and suitable levels accordingly; creatively applying a range of curriculum development models showing cognizance of national and international debates; demonstrating a critical understanding of a wide range of assessment strategies and mechanisms; selecting, applying and evaluating appropriate learning technologies to support

curriculum design and assessment; applying an appropriate evaluation strategy for curriculum design and assessment for participants' own specific contexts.

Assessment Procedures/Details

There are a number of formative feedback opportunities built into each module. Participants are broken into groups, of no more than 6-7, and allocated a tutor to provide portfolio support. In these tutorial groups, all participants are offered the opportunity to avail of written formative assessment by a tutor on submitted draft work part-way through each module. To ensure consistency of feedback, a formative feedback form has been devised and distributed to all tutors. Alongside this, work-in-progress seminars are built in to the module timetable to allow participants to share and discuss their portfolio entries with each other and the tutor.

It is pointed out to the participants at the outset that it is useful to remember from the outset that *time* is an important element in teaching portfolio development, and it *should* be a time-intensive process. Meaningful collections of work cannot easily be put together all at once: reflection and review should make their portfolio development an iterative process. They may find themselves re-visiting aspects of their portfolio throughout the entire development period.

It is also indicated to them that there is no single correct recipe for preparing a teaching portfolio. Since it is a highly personalised product, no two are exactly alike. However, a guidelines booklet on the development process, alongside webct support, and a set of clearly defined assessment criteria are available to ensure that the process is clear and the product is assessable.

At the close of each module, the portfolios are summatively assessed as Pass/Fail under a number of criteria:

- Organisation and Planning
- Implementation, development and innovation
- Evaluation and reflection
- Scholarship
- Presentation

- Overall Assessment Comment: this is included to ensure that through their portfolio development, the participant has met the learning outcomes for that module. A decision on this is taken based upon an overall piece of critical reflective writing provided to make a case that the participant has successfully met all the module's learning outcomes. To help them structure that piece of writing, it is suggested that they relate their analysis to the module learning outcomes by taking each module learning outcome and exploring it from the perspective of what and how they have implemented it in their classroom practice. When completed, they should use their responses to write their analysis of their overall learning from the module, and say how the experiences have made them think about their teaching and perhaps have led to change within their overall practice.

List Strength/Limitations:

Strengths:

Undergoing the portfolio development process would provide the course participants with distinct benefits. It would capture the complexities of their actual teaching and it matches assessment to the teaching style of the module. It has clear goals, as they were decided at the beginning of the module and are clear to both tutors and participants alike.

The aim was for it to promote new conversation about teaching around the represented institutions in Ireland. It was felt to have the potential to create a culture in which "*thoughtful discourse*" about teaching becomes the norm. It creates a concrete evidence of teaching over time: documents the development or "*unfolding of expertise*" in teaching.

It gives a profile of participant abilities. Depth: it enables participants to show quality work, that is done with the help of resources, reference material and collaboration with others. Breadth: a wide range of skills can be demonstrated. Growth: it shows efforts to improve and develop and demonstrates progress over time.

It is a tool for assessing a variety of skills: written as well as oral and graphic products can easily be included. It develops awareness of own learning: participants have to reflect on their own progress and the quality of work in relation to known goals. It also caters to individuals in the heterogeneous class: since it is open-ended, participants can show work on their own level. Since there is a choice, it caters to different learning styles and allows expression of different strengths. Finally, it develops independent and active learners: participants must select and justify portfolio choices: monitor progress and set learning goals.

Limitations:

Encouraging reflective writing amongst participants can be challenging, alongside ensuring that adequate support is provided in the area of academic writing.

Contributor's Reflections on the Assessment:

(Including, for example: views on how students reacted to the assessment, how it may transfer to other contexts, any advice for others trying it, validity/reliability issues, resource implications, .etc..)

The teaching portfolio has been used as the assessment mechanism for the Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching for over 5 years. During that time, bi-annual formal evaluations have been conducted, the results of which have been transmitted back to the programme participants. The evaluations included collecting data about the portfolio as a form of assessment. A number of lessons have been learned by the course team:

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1. Regular discussions take place on the need for deeper personal reflection and in the provision of evidence of theory influencing their own practice.
2. It is strongly emphasised for the need for greater detail of what is going on in their own classroom practice, and how it has been informed by the course.
3. In this postgraduate certificate, individual participants develop their own teaching portfolios, but in the process of so doing, they are actively engaged in a community of peers and course tutors as co-learners in this process. They participate in the portfolio process as a cohort, beginning their work in September and handing in their portfolios in May of that academic year. The formation of such a community of respect among the participants is critical to creating an environment for successful reflection as well as successful learning and teaching.

Useful Resources/Literature

Lyons, Nona (1998) *With portfolio in Hand: Validating the New Teacher Professionalism*. New York: Teachers College Press.

McCormack, C. (2000) *Compiling a Teaching Portfolio*. University of Canberra: CELT.

Schön, D. (1995) *The Reflective Practitioner: how professionals think in action*. Aldershot: Arena.

Shulman, L. S. (1987) Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching, *Educational Researcher*, 15(2), pp. 4-14.