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**“EMOTIVE WORD PORTFOLIO? – A CASE STUDY ON THE CHANGE OF
PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT IN THE FIELD OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION”**

Author:

University Assistant MMag. Alexander van Dellen

Department of Practical Theology, Catechetics/Religious Education and Religious Didactics

University of Innsbruck

Karl-Rahner-Platz 1

A-6020 Innsbruck/Tirol

ABSTRACT

The starting point for the case study at hand is the implementation of new curriculum requirements as a result of the recent adjustment of the “Catholic Religion Education” Bachelor and Master Degree programmes to meet the Bologna Process criteria. Consequently, portfolios can no longer be used as the basis for the final examination, as they have been until now. Following a description of the underlying problems related to the different types of portfolios and their use in teacher education training, the starting situation of portfolio assignment will be examined. Finally, the findings of the evaluation by students will be presented in order to draw conclusions for a new portfolio concept.

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INTRODUCTION

The compilation of a compulsory portfolio for students enrolled in all university courses for religious education was first introduced in the academic year of 2002/2003 at the Department of Practical Theology, Catechetics, Religious Education, and Religious Didactics. Portfolio work was understood mainly as work on a product portfolio or an examination portfolio. Essentially, a portfolio consisted of a collection of all written work produced within the course of study in the fields of Religious Education and Didactics, as well as during teacher education training. The portfolio was used as the basis for the qualifying exam for Religious Education.

In the course of the adjustment of both undergraduate and graduate studies for “Catholic Religious Education” (Bachelor and Master) to meet the Bologna criteria, new curricula became effective in the winter semester of 2009/2010, rendering it impossible for the portfolio to continue to be used as the basis for the concluding qualifying exam.

All undergraduate and graduate fields of study are faced with new examination regulations, which require focusing on the subsequent occupational area and further require a new attitude towards evaluation, where students have more authority and autonomy concerning their learning curve.

These facts present a challenge to me as an educator to create a new portfolio concept which aims to support the process of development during the course of Religious Education.

The intention followed, was for students to document and reflect upon their individual learning curve as regards an improvement of competence in the course of their education by means of a development portfolio.

My first step will be to explain the problematic background of the term “portfolio“, as well as the idea behind the portfolio in teacher training.

Definition

The term portfolio is used in many ways in the area of education, as a variety of educational ideas and goals have encroached on existing portfolio practices.

Accordingly, there are manifold types of portfolios being employed in a practical context. The content of a portfolio essentially depends on its function or its educational purpose. In constant with US-American authors, Urban Lissmann distinguishes amongst five different types of portfolio:

1. A *portfolio of produced work* is a collection of individual work samples which precisely document the learning curve.

2. An *evaluation portfolio* documents what a student has learned.

3. A *presentation or product portfolio* is a collection of work samples of which a student is particularly proud.

4. A *development portfolio* illustrates the process of development a student has undergone.

Working on a development portfolio allows students to identify their own learning progress.

5. An *application portfolio* consists of a selection of meaningful documents, which are significant for the criteria outlined by a respective accepting institution.

The boundaries between these five portfolio types can be blurred and they tend to overlap.

In practical employment they are not used in isolation, but mainly as hybrids of two or more. In educational practice, portfolios mainly follow two different objectives: On the one hand, portfolios serve to not only evaluate students regarding their examination results, but to include the process of learning into the assessment of their achievements. On the other hand, portfolios aim to support reflections upon one's own learning curve.

In accordance with Pearl and Leon Paulson, the following presents a definition which considers fundamental aspects of various types of portfolios:

“A portfolio is a goal-oriented collection of documents, which is compiled in constant with students' active contribution, illustrates a student's achievements in one or more areas, and which aims to support reflections upon one's own learning curve in the course of a particular period of time during training. The collection must include the student's participation concerning the selection of contents, the criteria for selection, and the definition of assessment criteria, as well as references to self-reflection by the student.”

Following this definition, portfolio work aims for a cooperative relationship amongst those involved and follows the notion of “securing evidence” to make available information regarding learning curves and results towards further reflections, as well as an increase in independent modes of study.

The concept of portfolios for teacher training

Regardless of the fact that discussions in the German-speaking world concerning the use of portfolios have in the past mainly focused on the context of primary and secondary schools, there currently exist very few universities or colleges which do not base their teacher training on a portfolio or alternatively are considering this step.

Educators tend to make the experience that students struggle to plan their own revision schedules, to devise their learning process independently, and to correctly assess their own abilities.

Birgit Brouër points towards new studies which show that teacher trainees and young teachers are influenced substantially by their own experiences as pupils, their own experiences regarding learning, and by observing those who currently teach them.

During the first few lessons held in the course of their teacher training programme or their first teaching job, students automatically resort to patterns which were acquired early on; additionally this new experience is often noted to be highly stressful.

Therefore it is important for teacher training programmes to initiate learning processes which free students of such patterns. Brouër believes self-reflection to play a central role, as it “enables students to observe their own learning process on a meta-level, which is paramount to identifying personal patterns of experience”. In order to support students while learning to be a teacher rather than a pupil and to aid their personal understanding of their individual learning experiences and observations, universities increasingly employ the use of portfolios. Working with portfolios stimulates reflections upon acquired patterns, as well as new experiences and “thereby questions patterns and potentially can dissolve them“. ‘In doing so, the underlying objective is to illustrate a student’s development.

METHODOLOGY

In developing preliminaries for the re-conception of portfolio work it was important to me to not design these top-down, but to rather include students into the process, who had already created their portfolios. I based the concept on problem-oriented interviews with six students. I selected students according to the following criteria: A balance of male and female students

and a balance of students from the various fields of study of Religious Education. The interviews were conducted individually and comprised these key questions:

- How did compiling your portfolio work out?
- Please give a short description of the contents of your portfolio.
- In the course of which class and in which manner was the portfolio initiated?
- As a student, did you recognise on your own that it would serve your interests to keep a portfolio?
- Now that portfolio work is being re-conceptualised, what do portfolios need to look like to be useful tools for students in their reflections on personal development of competencies?
- Until now, students have often waited for the completion of their studies before compiling a portfolio. Which measures would you deem sensible to help students work on their portfolios alongside the course of their studies?
- Should the portfolio be evaluated: Regarding personal contents which may be part of a portfolio, what would educators and students need to consider?
- Which other aspects concerning re-conception are important to you?

In evaluating the interviews, I decided to analyse the recorded conversations concerning contents on the one hand retrospectively, regarding hitherto existing portfolio work, on the other hand towards the question of re-conception.

The following is my analysis and comparison of the individual results.

Experience when compiling a portfolio

As regards experience when compiling a portfolio, all six students exhibited discomfort and a lack of clarity concerning the definition of what a portfolio in fact is and how

it is to be viewed in the context of Religious Education studies. In combination with the lack of clarity, two students raised the point that this caused them to experience a high level of insecurity. They believe this to be rooted in the fact that in no class was there provided precise information as to what a portfolio needs to include, as well as in that fact that students in teacher education training were asked to compile an additional portfolio at the “Institut für LehrerInnenbildung und Schulforschung (ILS)” and were therefore confronted with two different understandings of the term portfolio. All three students in the teacher training programme regard the compilation of two portfolios at two departments as a redundant doubling of their efforts.

Personal portfolio contents

The interviews show that all three students in the teacher training programme designed their portfolios according to their own assessments of what appeared sensible. A substantial part of the content was dedicated to reflections upon teaching performance and their own learning curve during education, as well as to the documentation of the improvement of competence. Two of the graduate students also designed their portfolios to document the improvement of competence during the course of their studies. The students all view portfolios to mainly serve as tools for reflections upon learning curves and the improvement of competence, although the three graduate students compiled their portfolios as “product portfolios” while undertaking their undergraduate studies.

Memory of the introduction of portfolios during education

None of the students was able to explicitly recall a specific memory of portfolios being formally introduced in any one class, which in all probability may be the reason for the aforementioned insecurity regarding actual portfolio design.

“Consciousness of the usage of portfolios” during the course of study

Five of the students interviewed were unaware of the requirement to keep a portfolio alongside their studies: The three undergraduate students compiled their portfolios only shortly before taking the qualifying exam for “Religious Didactics”. In the course of their graduate studies, they were confronted with the necessity to compile a portfolio only when they were at the stage of completing the final seminar. Two of the students in the teacher training programme “Catholic Religion Education” were unaware of its own portfolio requirement in addition to the compilation of the ILS portfolio. One of the female students, however, consistently worked on her portfolio for the entire duration of her studies, as she viewed it as a tool to help her independently reflect on experiences made in the course of her practical work.

“The New Portfolio” as a sensible contribution to reflections upon personal development of competence

All six interviews show that preliminary conditions need to be established, to provide an ideal starting point for the re-conception of the use of portfolios:

- ◆ Clear information needs to be provided at the beginning of every degree programme, explaining what educators in the respective field of study expect a portfolio to be and how best to design and keep it.

- ◆ For students' conceptions, all educators need to follow a standardised understanding of portfolio work.
- ◆ All three teacher training students would appreciate an arrangement with ILS, to counteract the potential insecurity caused by differing understandings of portfolios and the ensuing redundant doubling of efforts.
- ◆ Two of the three graduate students believe a key requirement for portfolio work to be continuity in keeping a portfolio throughout the duration of Religious Education.

It is noteworthy that all six students understand a portfolio to make sense only when it is compiled in a process-oriented manner. Regarding reflections upon the personal development of competence, all those questioned believe the following documents to be important:

- ◆ *Reflections upon individual work experience*, however four of the students decidedly refer to *reflections upon actual taught lessons*, as they believe these to best illustrate the personal improvement of competence. In this context, two of the interview partners underline the importance of providing space for descriptions of negative experiences, as these equally benefit the process of learning.
- ◆ Three of the students specified the inclusion of *selected passages of written work or classes* to be essential in the contents of portfolios. Two students explained the criteria for this to be *what* the selection and actual contents of the documents in question are.
- ◆ Three students believe *reflections upon spiritual learning experiences* to be desirable in theological portfolios and two students explicitly call for the *documentation of competencies acquired outside of academic education* (work experience, side jobs, etc).

One of the students interviewed deemed it sensible to define goals concerning competencies upon commencement of studies and to then use these as guidelines for assessment upon the completion of studies.

Continuity of portfolio work during the course of studies

In order to maintain the presence of the concept and keep a portfolio during the course of studies, five of those interviewed believe one possibility to be for individual classes or work experience programmes to provide time to work on portfolios.

The portfolio as an instrument for assessing achievement

The interviews show that all those questioned would in fact welcome a differentiation between an evaluation portfolio and a personal development portfolio. Three of the students stated that some may otherwise only file successful documents into their portfolios for fear of bad marks. Three students further believe transparency in the evaluation process of portfolios to be essential to guarantee security and clarity. Two of those interviewed mentioned of their own accord that marking was important, as students may otherwise not apply effort when compiling their portfolio.

Further suggestions for the re-conception of portfolios

Another suggestion made by three of the students is the establishment of a buddy-system for portfolio guidance on the basis of “best practice examples”, offered by those in the process of completing their degrees to those at the beginning of a degree. One of those interviewed hypothesises that a presentation of individual portfolios at the end of a degree would promote the importance of portfolio work.

In summary it can be noted that all six students experience the current state of portfolio work as rather unhelpful. As regards re-conception, all interviews conducted show general agreement concerning key factors. The interviews also show clearly that reflections upon practical work experience constitute a valuable contribution to the documentation of individual development of competence.

CONCLUSION

The results of the evaluation are the basis for the re-conception of portfolio usage. Since the interviews show that a standardised understanding of the term portfolio amongst educators and an agreement with ILS to avoid the doubling of efforts for teacher training students is essential, my next steps were the devising of a faculty-specific examination for future portfolio work, as well as contacting ILS.

Faculty-specific examination for portfolio work

The staff of five at the Department of Catechetics/Religious Education and Religious Didactics met three times to gather ideas concerning the re-conception of the usage of portfolios.

The central point of discussion was the shared concern of implementing the concept of a portfolio in a way which would counteract students' current perception of this tool as an inconvenient duty and – as the continuous documentation of personal achievements concerning competence - help it to be viewed as a beneficial aid for future occupational activities.

The evaluation results from the interviews fell in line with the department's own conception to from now on employ course-related development portfolios rather than product portfolios, enabling students to track the development of their progress. In this context, the following

questions were discussed in the second team meeting: Which competencies do students acquire in the course of their Religious Education? Which classes or work experience occasions promote which competencies?

In connection with these two questions, our main concern for the re-conception was to respect the fact that students bring their own set of already established competencies with them when commencing their education. We outlined individual competencies which we believe education should provide: personal competence, role competence, leadership competence, communication competence, presentation competence, method competence, planning competence, specialisation competence, team-mindedness, and conflict-mindedness.

Agreement with the “Institut für LehrerInnenbildung und Schulforschung (ILS)”

A first agreement with those responsible at ILS for portfolio work has determined that both departments will work together on a shared basis for portfolio usage.

The evaluation by students, the faculty-specific examination concerning portfolio work, and the agreement with ILS show that future portfolio practice needs to pay attention to the following: The requirement for successful portfolio work is for students to receive precise information as to what a portfolio is, what purpose it serves, and which format it needs to have. The introduction of portfolios further requires a supporting framework. For Religious Education the course’s first class “Aufarbeitung eigener Lernerfahrungen” is an ideal starting point. Birgit Brouër believes the precondition for successful portfolio work to be “the creation of a positive attitude“. In order to achieve this, it is important for students beginning work on their portfolios to “appreciate that a portfolio is beneficial to their success”. For the future, portfolios and work on portfolios need to be incorporated to a higher level into individual classes both in undergraduate and graduate studies. Only in doing so can the concept of a

portfolio be installed in sensible way in student consciousness and continuous work on portfolios - as well as continuous motivation to do so - be guaranteed. Incorporating portfolios into degree programmes in this way will generate and promote communication concerning learning and achievement amongst students and amongst students and educators. This, of course, is one of the key objectives behind portfolios. Personal exchange will contribute to another aim: consciousness of personal development when becoming a teacher. I believe a suitable undergraduate class for this to be “Catholic Religious Education“, as well as classes related to teacher training work experience, as both evaluations show that students found their first practical work experiences in schools to be helpful when reflecting upon their improvement of competence. Future portfolios should further include other evidence of learning, which students select independently and which they believe best illustrate their personal learning curve and their improvement of competence. The class “Abschlusseminar” is ideal for students to present individual portfolios to one another, whereby every student would exhibit samples which he/she believes to best exemplify his/her own progress in the course of the degree. Feedback concerning their work which students would receive would no doubt be appreciated as recognition of the often high level of effort which students put into their portfolios.

Both the interviews and specialist literature concerning portfolio work show that parts of portfolios should indeed be called upon as a basis for alternative achievement assessments. If students do not receive a mark for their portfolios, the danger of putting little or no effort into the compilation thereof is imminent, as they would then invest spare time into classes with higher levels of pressure to perform well. This fact needs to be considered for the re-conception of portfolios. Wintersteiner recommends dividing portfolios into two parts. One part can be viewed as a draft of achievements and would consist of representative allotted documents; the

second part would consist of personal documents, which each student would submit voluntarily.

In order to best implement the re-conceptualised portfolio in the winter semester of 2012/2013, the following steps are necessary:

- ◆ Examination for external educators at the department, treating the re-conception of portfolio work. The examination's aim would be to familiarise external educators with the new concept of a portfolio, in order for students to experience only *one* concept of a portfolio.
- ◆ In order to determine if the underlying concern fuelling a re-conception will result in a helpful tool for illustrating improvements in competence on the basis of each student's learning curve, I aim to in the future evaluate the usage of the re-conceptualised portfolio.

In authoring the case study at hand, I was encouraged in my belief that it is rewarding to introduce students to alternative approaches to learning and achievement, in order to not only illustrate perspectives on their chosen career pathway, but to give them a deeper understanding thereof.

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