

COMMENTARY

Portfolio critics: Do they have a point?

ERIK DRIESSEN

Maastricht University, Netherlands

During the last 8 years when I was totally engrossed in developing and researching portfolios, I have become convinced of the tremendous potential of portfolios for performance assessment in workplaces – formative as well as summative. A portfolio allows the collation and integration of evidence on competence and performance from different sources to gain a comprehensive picture of everyday practice (Snadden & Thomas 1998). However, I have also become keenly aware of the portfolio's limitations.

I am greatly indebted to many portfolio critics, students, teachers and authors, who have bombarded me with their invited and uninvited critical comments. A particularly memorable instance occurred after I and my co-authors had published what we thought was a very judicious and well-balanced paper on portfolios in a leading general medical journal in the Netherlands (Driessen et al. 2005). Imagine my dismay when the journal's next issue carried critical letters from a medical student from my own university (Vermunt 2005) and a postgraduate trainee (Iglesias del Sol 2005). They were attacking my portfolio implementations, the ones I had worked so hard to perfect. Their main grievance was the amount of time-consuming paperwork. To them the portfolio was just that: a huge useless pile of paper.

They were not alone in their frustration – portfolio users are not famed for their unreserved enthusiasm. In my experience, most critics aim their arrows at one or all of the following issues (Norman 2008):

- The frustration that also fuelled the letters in reaction to my article: the sheer amount of work involved in producing and evaluating a portfolio.
- Mechanical application of rigid rules for portfolio content and format makes students feel they are being forced – as one Foundation Trainee put it – ‘to jump through hoops’.
- Portfolios are intrinsically a history of individual experiences and performances coloured by personal interpretations. Surely, the inherent subjectivity of the material renders it ill fitted to underpin objective and fair high-stakes assessment decisions.

Apart from the concrete criticisms, the most salient insight I have distilled from the protests of portfolio opponents is that the portfolio is not a miracle cure. It is not a magic wand that only needs to be waved to make all our educational hopes and wishes come true. But are the critics the only ones in the

portfolio debate? Of course not. There are also the advocates of the portfolio. Some of them are true believers of its benefits and its blessings. Personally, I am more irritated by them than by the average critic. Why, you may ask. The supporters are on my side, aren't they? I agree. What I do not agree with is their glib response to each and every criticism: ‘the critics just do not understand what the portfolio is about but this will be fixed once they see the light, helped by faculty development and other enlightening activities’. I doubt it is that simple. I would rather take them seriously and harness their objections to support portfolio improvement. I will now consider the three main criticisms.

More trouble than it is worth

A succinct but crucial piece of advice that I gleaned from comments made by many portfolio critics is this. Keep your portfolio ‘lean’. Students and teachers alike have an aversion to massive portfolios whether on paper or on screen. Literature provides too many instances of portfolios that are literally conceived as a vast collection of materials contained in a folder (Hrisos et al. 2008). This can be indicative of a lack of clarity about the objectives among teachers as well as students. Students think they should compile extensive portfolios to match vague criteria. However, there are good reasons why so many portfolio definitions refer to a *selective* and *purposeful* collection of materials (Paulson et al. 1991). Additionally, teachers and students stand to gain only when portfolios are tailored to their needs. So we should create *lean* portfolios that are fit for purpose, whose content is geared to their objectives and whose objectives are meaningful and well defined (Burch & Seggie 2008). What does this mean in practice?

When summative assessment is the sole objective of a portfolio, students can be asked to include only materials related to the competencies to be assessed and to mark which parts of the portfolio have special relevance to which specific competencies. Then assessors only need to focus on what is relevant to the assessment without having to wade through pages and pages of useless information. When a portfolio is made for formative assessment, it should be clear what final objectives are pursued.

The competencies and performances at stake are to be defined and explained to all portfolio users. More importantly perhaps, mechanisms need to be in place to ensure the

Correspondence: Erik Driessen, Department of Educational Development and Research, Maastricht University, Universiteitsingel 60, Maastricht, 6211RW Netherlands. Tel: +314 33885774; fax: +314 33885779; email: e.driessen@educ.unimaas.nl

formative aspect is done justice. In other words, assessment should provide insights that help students progress towards their objectives. A mentor who helps students to appraise their strengths and weaknesses and set realistic goals that are monitored is an essential ingredient of formative portfolio assessment.

Jumping through hoops

This is another frustration of portfolio critics. If a portfolio is applied unthinkingly, mechanically and with no clear purpose, we, and what is worse teachers and students, are saddled with nothing more than a labour-intensive add-on. Critics have every right to complain. This really is a waste of time. Can we put this right? Fortunately, there is an excellent remedy: an open structure as well as clear guidelines. The signs from research are that students need to be at liberty to select topics that are meaningful to them. A study by Mansvelder-Longayroux showed that trainee teachers reflected more superficially on topics that were less relevant to their day-to-day practice (Mansvelder-Longayroux 2006). When portfolio content is rigidly prescribed without any real thought to what the portfolio is intended to achieve, reflections are bound to be superficial. Students may even make up topics – *jump through hoops* – and teachers are left to grade a load of nonsense. The key issue is to strike a balance between structure and freedom. With their first portfolio, students need support and clarity as to what is expected from them. This can be achieved, for example, by organizing a portfolio along the lines of professional roles or a competency profile, such as the CanMEDS roles or the Scottish Doctor learning outcomes (Friedman Ben David et al. 2001). Further guidance can be provided by a well-informed mentor, who introduces the portfolio, explains its objectives, monitors students' progress, and offers advice when needed.

Too soft for comfort

Portfolios are seen by many as subjective and thus too 'soft' for high-stakes decisions (Roberts 2002). The literature has taught us that we need to temper our expectations that portfolio assessment can meet rigorous psychometric criteria of validity and reliability, because portfolios are just too individualistic and too non-standardized (Baume et al. 2004). It was Snadden who, in a commentary, was the first to raise the question whether we should continue trying to fit non-standardized portfolios to objective psychometric criteria (Snadden 1999). Webb et al. came up with the brilliant idea of applying criteria from qualitative research in favour of psychometric ones (Webb et al. 2003). They pointed out that portfolio assessment was primarily concerned with qualitative information and to a lesser extent with quantitative data. Curiously, that was what all the portfolio critics had been saying all along. Only this time the problem was turned into the solution. Researchers started to design more holistic assessment procedures. A surprising insight from a recent literature review on portfolios in medical education is that it is possible to achieve acceptable inter-rater reliabilities with assessment that is grounded in qualitative criteria (Driessen et al. 2007). As it turned out, 2–3 raters

were sufficient to make reliable decisions on portfolios. Paradoxically, this suggests that portfolio assessment may not be all that inherently subjective after all.

Studies that reported on successful procedures for portfolio assessment have shown that for assessment to be effective, the following factors are crucially important: holistic scoring rubrics, small groups of trained assessors, and specific rater training expertise, including benchmarking and discussion between assessors (before and during the assessment procedure).

Realistic portfolio use

We have seen that we can deal with the subjectivity complaint and we know how to do so effectively. Now, it is time to return to the frustrations inflamed by excessive workload and prescribed, meaningless content. Again there is no denying that the critics do have a point. The literature abounds with reports of disastrous outcomes of portfolios that suffer from these defects. Encouragingly, the literature also tells us that portfolios are far more successful if we design a realistic portfolio: one with less volume and a less counterproductive structure. Based on my experiences with portfolios at my own university, I can only acknowledge the power of this strategy. Results are far better with a realistic approach. In other words a good portfolio is lean but fit for purpose, with considerable freedom for students but also appropriate guidance when needed. And even then portfolio designers and organizers need to be open-minded about critical feedback from portfolio users, the students, the mentors and the teachers.

Do the portfolio critics have a point?

Do portfolio critics have a point? Yes, they have. And we ignore this at our peril. Are the critics right? Are we wasting everybody's time? I do not think so, and recent systematic reviews provide some evidence for this (Driessen et al. 2007; Buckley et al. in press; Tochel et al. in press). My message in a nutshell is that, yes, portfolios are susceptible to many threats but we can identify and remedy these, if we listen to the critics. There is evidence that, if we acknowledge potential weaknesses and concentrate on the strengths, success is within our grasp. I recently discovered that a journalist who had interviewed me about the portfolio's potential benefits had also interviewed my home-grown critics whose scathing letters had given me sleepless nights. At the time of my interview I did not know of these other interviews. Imagine my surprise when the specialist trainee as well as the student critic, who had graduated by now, took a much milder tone this time when they were interviewed (Croonen 2008). What surprised me even more was that their new recommendations mirrored my realistic portfolio approach. Both former critics advocated: 'keep your portfolio lean', 'select content with a clear purpose in mind', 'make the portfolio personal'. Their best recommendation to my mind, however, goes like this: 'If necessary, boycott the format prescribed by your university if you feel it makes for a portfolio that is excessive in size and lacking in purpose'.

To sum up my realistic portfolio approach in a few take-home messages for which I am indebted to many constructive critics:

- a. Make the portfolio lean and meaningful for learning.
- b. Make it personal for students.
- c. Define and communicate its purpose.
- d. Fit form and content to purpose.
- e. Design credible assessment based on qualitative criteria.
- f. Appoint mentors to guide and support portfolio learning.

Let us keep this in mind when we ask our students and teachers to spend their valuable time learning with the help of a portfolio. They may even enjoy it.

Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges Jan van Tartwijk and Mereke Gorsira for their help in preparing the article.

Declaration of interest: The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

Notes on contributor

ERIK DRIESSEN, PhD, is Assistant Professor and Educational Psychologist in the Department of Educational Development and Research, Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences, Maastricht University, Netherlands.

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