Student Portfolios as Object and Process

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Students in the KU Masters in Public Administration program develop portfolios to demonstrate their growth and their successful preparation for their professions.

OVERVIEW

Background
Project grew from collaboration

The University of Kansas Masters in Public Administration program (MPA) relies on collaborations between its graduates, faculty, and practitioners to create a rich, vibrant curriculum. One result of the collaborative nature centering this program was the creation of a portfolio project. Several faculty members were aware of other departments and universities that utilized a portfolio, and they thought such a project could have benefits for our students. We realized that we shared several beliefs about the strengths of portfolios. Portfolios are used in a wide variety of professional disciplines and academic settings. In the academic setting, portfolios tend to be structured documents meeting specific requirements that demonstrate past, present, and future learning on the part of the student. Learning is documented through projects as well as reflective writing showing measurable progress in a specific field of study with evaluation by faculty.

After investigating diverse portfolio models, our department worked together to draw up a plan for a MPA portfolio. We decided that our portfolio project would be both an object and a process, and that students would have the freedom to adapt it to their learning needs.

Implementation
Students begin portfolios first semester

Students begin the two-year MPA program in the summer term. At that time, we also begin the portfolio project. We have a collaborative introduction that includes speakers who are current students, former students, faculty, and field practitioners. Through panel discussions, these various individuals relate how they approached the portfolio. They describe their reaction to it, how it helped their growth as a student, and its impact on them as a job candidate and employee. We also provide examples of completed portfolios. The portfolio work extends over the entire two years of graduate work, both the first year in the classroom and the second year as an intern in the field. A close identification with a mentor chosen by the student also provides a life-long benefit of friendship and professional advice.

The student portfolios utilize many different and unique formats. Writing is important in all of these formats, and the best portfolios tie these formats to written reflective statements. Writing helps record student development over time, provides a vehicle for

dialogue between student and faculty, demonstrates improved writing skills, reinforces learning by critically evaluating performance against established goals, becomes a living document, and provides ownership for learning to the student.

Performance
Portfolios and professional development

Over the three years that we have used the portfolio, we have seen students mature as professionals through the writing that centers the project. The portfolio writing makes visible ideas revolving around in heads of students. They have a record of their ideas and experiences that they can tap into as they encounter new ideas and situations. The portfolio develops around student interests, such as competencies, school materials, and work experiences. Student reflections give them a sense of their progress and what they want to do. In the second year of the MPA degree, students have moved off campus to their internships and have only three formal meetings with the MPA faculty. During that year, the portfolio unites their fieldwork with academic work in a visible, powerful manner.

We have observed that portfolios move students to consider the concrete elements of their work and studies. They also point out that reflection is important, in particular because it is analytical. Many students continue using a portfolio during their professional careers as they have found it helps them understand work issues that they encounter.

Reflections
Extending use of portfolios

The benefits have been positive, enough so that we are extending the use of a portfolio project to other Public Administration students. We have found that a portfolio helps students showcase their accomplishments, demonstrate their growth, and reflect the most important part of their work. In addition, portfolios can be utilized as a resume.

Besides the regular MPA students, we offer graduate classes to non-traditional students who meet at two off-campus sites. These students use a portfolio to help identify what they have learned on the job as well as through class work. They already can see the benefits of reflective writing for their careers, and they utilize the portfolio to approach promotions for their current work situations.

BACKGROUND

Several MPA faculty members were aware of various portfolio models, such as the KU School of Architecture and the California State University Department of English portfolios, and we were interested in the potential benefits of using a portfolio for our graduate students. One gain we anticipated from portfolio use was that graduate students would be pushed to participate in their own education:
1. They would need to identify their strengths, and
2. They would need to address their weaknesses.

The department already had open interactions among faculty, graduate students, and professional practitioners, and we wanted to continue that collaboration by working together on this project. Thus, the portfolio project formally began with a meeting with KU faculty, MPA students, alumni of the MPA program, and a facilitator from the Department of Public Administration at West Virginia University, which has a history of using portfolios in an academic setting.

As result of that meeting, we decided to use elements of several types of portfolios—all with an emphasis on reflective writing—with guiding questions for the students:
- What are my goals and where do I want to be?
- Over the past day, week, month, year, what has been my significant learning?
- What experiences have changed me?
- What is my present level of learning and what gaps in learning do I hope to fill in the near to immediate future?
- How does my portfolio reflect that learning?

Project Notes

Department Goals
The primary mission of the Department of Public Administration in awarding the Master of Public Administration degree is preparing students for careers in local community management positions, especially in city, county, and non-profit organizations. The Public Administration graduate program's purpose is to enhance student learning beyond the academic setting by providing a framework for continual personal and professional development and learning.

Why Portfolios?
Portfolios are used in a wide variety of professional disciplines and academic settings. For example, architects use portfolios that are both creative and autobiographical in nature to identify important achievements that are used as part of the job search process and/or the job selection process. In academic settings, portfolios tend to be structured documents meeting specific requirements that demonstrate past, present, and future learning on the part of a student. Learning is documented through projects as well as reflective writing showing measurable progress in a specific field of study with evaluation by faculty.

Other Models
The KU School of Architecture uses portfolios to:
- Function as a resume
- Present students' graphic projects and accomplishments, which feature their creative architecture work with almost no narrative
- Demonstrate an individual's growth as an architect
- Showcase the most important part of a student's work
- Select work that is specific for a job
- Act as a reflective tool to introduce a student's individuality and personality

California State University English Department uses portfolios to:
- Deal with specific competencies (writing, literature, language, technology) emphasized in the educational program

- Showcase artifacts such as letters, articles, essays
- Describe what an individual views as important in his or her work
- Teach specifics for a mandatory class

Portfolio Project Outline (see following pages)

PORTFOLIO PROJECT
UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS
GRADUATE PROGRAM
IN
PUBLIC ADMINSTRATION

"The one who attempts to be an artist and has not learned the craft is never going to be an artist"
—Diana K. Osburn, Ed. A Joseph Campbell Companion

Purpose: To provide students a framework for continual personal and professional development and learning.

Characteristics: Unique
Personal/Professional
Creative
Goal oriented
Current/on going
Reflective

Potential Elements: Goals
Resume
Class Projects
Work Projects
Observation
Significant learning experiences
Source references
Reflections

Format: Journal
Compilation of activities and projects
Categorized by competencies (State of Kansas, Canadian Civil Service, ICMA)
Reflective essays

Resources: Faculty portfolio coordinator
Faculty (to be used as a tie to academic setting during the intern year)
Mentors
Supervisors
Members of previous MPA classes
Administrative Director

Other Resources: *The Reflective Manager: How Professionals Think in Action* by Donald A. Schon, Basic Books, Inc.
"Leadership Skill Development Requires Practice," David Maxwell, pp. 19-20, IPMA-HR News, March 2003.
State of Kansas Competencies:
http://da.state.ks.us/ps/subject/comp/default.htm
Canadian Civil Service Competencies:

http://www.coach.gc.ca/webs/overview/structure.asp
ICMA Competencies: www.icma.org .
Student portfolios in KU Public Administration office
Student portfolio on line at http://www.geocities.com/mrkrothert

Questions guiding portfolio development:
What are my goals and where do I want to be?
What is my present level of learning and what gaps in learning do I hope
to fill in the near to immediate future?
Over the past (day, week, month, year), what has been my significant
learning?
What are the experiences that have changed me?
How does my portfolio reflect that learning?

IMPLEMENTATION

For first-year students in the MPA program, the portfolio project begins in the summer with a seminar that introduces the course/project. This seminar includes presentations on professional and academic portfolios. Program alumni share their portfolios and discuss ways they have seen their value. At this time, we also present students with various models or competencies for effective government management, which will center their portfolios. During this first year on campus, students are encouraged to form working relationships with the portfolio project director, faculty, alumni, and supervisors as they begin developing their portfolios.

All students begin their portfolio work with Ray Davis. The introduction includes a PowerPoint presentation, a panel of graduates who discuss the experience, and examples of portfolios to view. Ray encourages students to find a mentor that they will work with throughout the project. He tells them to look around, ask questions, and be purposeful as they identify a person who matches their interests.

In the second year of the program, students have full-time internships. Faculty and staff meet with students three times during the year for week-long professional development seminars, a time when the portfolios begin to take shape. At the first meeting, students reflect on their work experiences in a structured format. The second meeting is devoted to leadership traits, and the last meeting finalizes the portfolio as a tool for their ongoing development. Students are encouraged to write outcomes for faculty and mentors as they reflect on their work experiences.

Project Notes

Why Writing?
The student portfolios utilize many different and unique formats, based on students' needs. Some follow a journal format, some are a compilation of activities and projects, and some are categorized by one of the competency models. Writing is important in all of these formats, and the best portfolios tie these formats to written reflective statements.

Writing is important because it::
- Records student development over time
- Provides a vehicle for dialogue between student and faculty and/or mentors
- Demonstrates student's improved writing skills over time
- Reinforces students' learning by critically evaluating their performance against established goals
- Becomes a living document to the student
- Provides ownership for the student

Models for effective government management
These are defined practices, knowledge, skills, and behaviors that assist in career planning and lead to an individual's success as a senior-level manager. They include the International City/County Management Association, Practices for Effective Local Government Management; State of Kansas, Competency Model; and the Public Service Commission of Canada, Leadership Competencies for ADMs and Senior Executives.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE

The portfolios come in many forms: some look like budgets; some are journals; some are simple reflections on academic learning, experimental ideas, or development of personal skills. Just as portfolios come in many formats, the students use them in different ways. At one extreme are comprehensive documents similar to an architectural model. Students use these for resumes by selecting appropriate information for a particular job. Some portfolios consist of very personal statements about a student's struggles and personal development; these are kept confidential and not shown to faculty and mentors.

What we've observed:
- The portfolios move students to consider the concrete elements of their work and studies; generalities aren't enough to provide adequate means of deliberation.
- The portfolio usage points out that reflection is important, in particular because it's analytical. It's one thing to just think about an issue, and it's another to go through the process of describing what was learned.
- We have found that students continue using portfolios at all levels of their professions. When they just enter a field, it allows them to think about where they want to go. One former student, now a city worker, uses a portfolio as an ideas journal. He also volunteered to be a mentor, and he created a portfolio to help him handle that responsibility.
- In the second year of the MPA degree, students have moved off campus to their internships and have only three formal meetings with the MPA faculty. During that year, the portfolio serves as a powerful connection between the faculty and students. It unites the fieldwork with academic work in a visible manner. The portfolio often registers changes in behavior and language as students develop their mastery of this subject.

Other observations:
- The mentor that students select to help them on their portfolio generally becomes a life-long friend, a relationship that's important for professional life.
- The portfolio can be used for employment, but its most important use is to serve the writer as a self-reflective tool.
- The portfolio pushes graduate students into more responsibility for their own work, both as students and professionals. The faculty and university are here to serve students, but they also need to explore what they want to do on their own. The portfolio meshes the academic world with practical applications.
- The portfolio process also serves to put students into a configuration of life-long learning. It causes students to think about opportunities and their own life-long achievements.
- Writing a portfolio encourages continual drafting and communication. Students have to sharpen their thinking and develop substance through their responses to questions they are asked about their portfolios.

Project Notes

Example of Student Portfolio (html file)
http://www.geocities.com/mrkrothert

Student Comments About Portfolios
A recent MPA graduate who is now employed by the city of Olathe spoke at the Summer 2004 orientation. She said that when the portfolio project was presented to her class, their initial response was to joke about it, for they didn't see the benefits. What she has learned is that a portfolio demonstrates how its author deals with people. For example, the city of Olathe is moving towards a competency-based model. When they interview job candidates, they want to know about that person—what did he or she have to go out on a limb to do, what took a little more courage? Finding out that information helps them to determine how that person will handle various situations on the job.

She also discussed a search that the city of Olathe was doing. The city wanted to hire a chief financial officer who has a CPA. However, included in that position need is a person who can tell a story—who can do what the portfolio does, which is to be able to fill out what the details of the job mean.

Students recognize that portfolios allow writers to organize what's on their mind. Portfolios allow them to look at what they have done well, to consider their mistakes, and to tell a story based on why they've made the choices that they did. These stories reflect the author's thinking and decision-making ability, and the stories show how they build relationships. These, in turn, demonstrate competencies, which in Public Administration include communication, finance, and customer service. This broad focus gives a foundation that centers work.

REFLECTIONS

The results have been positive over the three years of the portfolio project. Our experience has shown us that the portfolio is important for the writing benefits, but it's also important for thinking about one's self in purposeful terms.

In a recent job interview, one student used the portfolio when questioned about a skill in which she did not have direct work experience. Instead, she relied on the portfolio to influence the interviewer. Her portfolio work demonstrated the process she went through to learn the skill required for the position: she had used experiences from both academic and work-related learning to educate herself. She got the job.

We're learning:
We now offer a portfolio project for career options students, non-traditional students who attend either the Overland Park or Topeka campus. We weren't prepared to present this at first, although it was our intention to do so at some point. Because of our portfolio work with the MPA students, we could see the benefits that we wanted to extend to these students as well:
- Showcase their accomplishments;
- Use as a resume;
- Demonstrate their growth; and
- Reflect on the most important part of their work.