Variations in higher education portfolio assessment
Discussion of quality issues based on a survey in Norway across institutions and disciplines

Olga Dysthe, Knut Steinar Engelsen & Ivar Lima
University of Bergen
& Stord- Haugesund University College
Aim of this presentation

• Present findings from a Norwegian survey of portfolio use

• Raise the issues:
  • How much variation in portfolio concept and practices is it possible to sustain?
  • To what extent are differences discipline dependent?
  • What are some of the crucial quality issues involved in portfolio assessment seen from different stakeholders (students, teachers, administration, governing bodies)?
The context?

• Sudden increase in the use of portfolios in Norwegian higher education

• WHY?
  – The Quality Reform of Higher Education

• A survey conducted in 4 HE institutions after the Quality Reform showed great variations in
  • Portfolio concept
  • Portfolio practice
The Quality Reform of HE in Norway 2002…
– related to the Bologna process

• Some consequences
  – New study structure 3-2-2
  – New grading system
  – All courses modularized 10-15 ETCS
  – Pedagogical changes expected
    • More student active teaching
    • Closer follow up of students
    • Assessment and instruction closer aligned
      – Alternative assessment forms, i.e. portfolios, project ass ..
Methods

• Electronic survey

• Sites:
  – 1 major university (Bergen) 3 university colleges

• Identification and selection of respondents:
  – Professors responsible for topics within a subject-field

• Response rate:
  – University: 58%
  – University Colleges: 76%
Research questions

• How is the portfolio conceptualized and practiced?
  • Working portfolio – assessment portfolio
  • Types of work
  • Feedback practices
  • Grading practices and use of criteria

• Are there disciplinary differences?
  • Hard and soft disciplines
  • Professional – non professional

• What quality issues are involved?
  • Reflection
  • Feedback
  • Criteria
Results from the survey

? Do you differentiate between working portfolio and assessment portfolio?

Findings
Big difference betw. Univ. and Univ. colleges
Big difference between “hard” and “soft” disciplines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University in Bergen</td>
<td>28 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University colleges</td>
<td>57 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disciplinary field</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Math /sciences</td>
<td>16 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hum, Social Science and Law</td>
<td>35 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher and preschool teacher ed</td>
<td>63 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and social worker ed</td>
<td>47 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineers</td>
<td>35 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results from the survey

Type of work (entries)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expository&amp; argumentative texts</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection texts</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case, project assignments</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factual tests</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice related assign.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings:
Big difference “hard” and “soft” disciplines
### Results from the survey

#### Who gives feedback?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback</th>
<th>Soc +Hu</th>
<th>Math+sci</th>
<th>Engin.</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are comments made available for other students?</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are students asked to document how they have used the feedback?</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Findings:**

“Soft” disciplines use peer-feedback to a greater extent than “hard” disciplines.
Results from the survey

? Are written criteria used for assessing the portfolio?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Are written criteria used?</th>
<th>Soc+ Hu</th>
<th>Math+ Sci</th>
<th>Engin.</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings:
Written criteria not common practice except in Health ed.
Summary of findings

- Pf-practices are diverse and a common understanding of pf seems lacking
- Differences dependent on type of education (professional-non-professional) and discipline
- Feedback (teacher and student) is a common element in pf-practice
- Written criteria not common practice except in Health ed.
Discussion

• How much variation in pf concept and practice is acceptable in order to still call it a portfolio?

  – Reflection:
    • Yancey: ”It is reflection (= reflective text?) that transforms a collection of papers to a portfolio”

  – Issues influencing the necessity of reflection:
    • The purpose of the pf
    • The time frame for the pf
    • The writing of metacognitive texts very foreign to many university disciplines (regarded with suspicion)

How do we deal with this?
Stakeholder’s views of quality and portfolio variations

• Students
  • Variations problematic – importance of mastering assessment forms?

• Teachers
  • Flexible pf increase learning quality?
  • Flexible pf give higher validity?

• Administrators and governing bodies
  • Standardization necessary to ensure reliability of assessment

• post Bologna
  • Standardization for mobility?
Quality issues regarding feedback

- Feedback crucial to learning quality (Black & Williams)
- Teacher feedback
  - no information about quality of teacher feedback in survey
- Peer feedback
  - widely used
  - only 29% of students get instruction or training in giving feedback
  - 80% of students’ comments given in public fora
- Public feedback (accessible in VLE)
  - Higher quality feedback if public? (Dysthe/Tolo)
  - Students learn from reading comments given to other students
Quality issues related to feedback

Different stakeholders’ views:

• **Students:**
  - good feedback a major quality issue in portfolios

• **Teachers:**
  - Ambivalence: Increased quality for students’, but workload an important issue

• **Administrative/governing bodies:**
  - feedback contaminates assessment results: ”Whose work is it anyway?”

How do we deal with these quality dilemmas?
Some practical recommendations

- Discuss to what extent the portfolio concept and practice is a result of disciplinary characteristics and reflect the overarching goals of the study programme. Confront superficial notions of pf

- Discuss how metacognitive and/or critical reflection on course contents can enhance the quality of the portfolios: Is a reflective letter useful or not? (related to course aims)

- Discuss criteria for good feedback among faculty

- Introduce students to crucial elements of good feedback practices and design effective training for them at different levels.

- Focus on the development of explicit criteria and scoring guides as a means to higher reliability and more transparency in the grading process.
Teachers’ attitude towards pf as a tool for learning

Consequences in relation to passing exam?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sign. less failure</th>
<th>Less failure</th>
<th>No change</th>
<th>More failure</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16 %</td>
<td>35 %</td>
<td>22 %</td>
<td>1 %</td>
<td>27 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consequences in relation to the students’ overview of subjects?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Much better</th>
<th>Better</th>
<th>No change</th>
<th>Poorer</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12 %</td>
<td>46 %</td>
<td>20 %</td>
<td>5 %</td>
<td>16 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Effect on the students’ general writing competence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Much better</th>
<th>Better</th>
<th>No change</th>
<th>Poorer</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12 %</td>
<td>48 %</td>
<td>28 %</td>
<td>0 %</td>
<td>12 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Teachers’ attitude towards pf as tool for learning

**All taken into account portfolio assessment demands too much work for me in relation to students’ learning benefit!**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither nor</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9 %</td>
<td>28 %</td>
<td>22 %</td>
<td>34 %</td>
<td>8 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**All taken into account portfolio assessment demands too much work for the students in relation to their learning benefit!**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither nor</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 %</td>
<td>9 %</td>
<td>21 %</td>
<td>46 %</td>
<td>20 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pf-assessment gives a better foundation for assessing the students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither nor</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 %</td>
<td>58 %</td>
<td>23 %</td>
<td>6 %</td>
<td>3 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Plagiarism has been a problem in relation to pf-assessment in our subject**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither nor</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 %</td>
<td>13 %</td>
<td>27 %</td>
<td>41 %</td>
<td>14 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>