**Writing for the U.K. Professional Standards in Higher Education: An autobiographical narrative**

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## Abstract

The process of writing and submitting a portfolio for the U.K. Professional Standards Framework is described as a reflective, evidence-based approach to teaching and the support of learning in Higher Education. Through an autobiographical and personal narrative approach, the journey through the submission of a portfolio at Descriptor 3 level (Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy) is described with an analysis of the pervading motivational factors. A range of pedagogies are classified as 'traditional' well-known approaches with interpretative differences, new and innovative approaches which have been uncovered by this exploratory research for evidence and 'adventurous and exploratory' pedagogies which appear to have no referential touchstone. Personal reflection considers the incentive dimension of the submission together with the excitement and reward of the enhancement of professional practice and the encouragement for others to follow this pathway.

## Key words

Portfolio; reflection; pedagogy; Professional Standards; innovative approaches; autobiographical narrative.

## Introduction

The U.K. Professional Standards Framework recognises and benchmarks teaching and learning support in Higher Education (Higher Education Academy (HEA), 2012). Gaining recognition through HEA accreditation (directly or through an 'in-house' institutional scheme) provides national recognition of a professional commitment to teaching and learning in Higher Education and demonstrates an alignment with the UKPSF. A portfolio is submitted at one of four role descriptor levels and a successful submission detailing areas of activity with core knowledge and professional values supported by evidence, may result in the award of the status of Associate, Fellow, Senior Fellow or Principal Fellow of the Academy. Broadly, these reflect seniority and experience but the values underpinning the descriptors are all congruent with the enhancement of learning experiences for students and the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning support.

The analysis and evaluation of a portfolio as a reflective evidence based approach to student learning and a demonstration of continuing professional development through a dynamic approach to teaching and learning seems to be a relatively recent process. Many exemplars have their roots in nursing (for example, McColgan & Blackwood, 2009; Ghaye & Lillyman, 2006) although portfolio presentation for professional standards certainly has been

available prior to this:  I applied for membership of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE - a predecessor to the HEA) via this method in 2002.  However, the recognition of this approach as a valuable tool in self-evaluation and self-development  is now more widely recorded (Seldin & Miller, 2009) and there has been interest in Ghaye's (2011) treatise on the contribution of reflection to human 'flourishing', for example.

**Methodology**

This paper reflects on a recent submission of a portfolio at Descriptor 3 (Senior Fellow) level.  As with performative autoethnography, it allows the juxtaposition of academic writing and a free-writing (first person) style (Mitra, 2010).  It takes the form of autobiography and personal narrative for reflective academic practice.  As such, it uses this approach as a method for scholarly analysis and argumentation as well as meditating on lived experiences and may form an ideological challenge to traditional discourses.  Portfolios for teaching and in the support of learning '*define themselves against traditional expectations for objectivity that require detachment and distance from potential audiences*' (Willard-Traub, 2007).

Narrative inquiry privileges lived experiences with its philosophical foundation in Deweyan theory (Dewey, 1976) whereby individual experience is characterised by a continuous interaction with social, cultural and institutional narratives.  This iterative process allows personal experiences to be shaped, expressed and enabled in a relational, temporal and continuous framework allowing for rich and complex stories to unfold through time (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

There is some element of reflexivity in this analysis but the outcomes are promoted less in an overtly collaborative context than may be implied by the normative use of that term.  There is use of professional experiences to understand and critique knowledge that is introduced, then appraised and directed to make sense of experiences using that knowledge (Sinacore, *et al*., 1999).  Whether the knowledge always underpins practice or is discovered subsequently, is an interesting discourse debated further here.

An analysis of motivational factors behind this submission might help to analyse any bias in the methodology.  There was the gift of time to reflect on my passions and to try and capture these in fluent, evidenced writing.  Obviously, I had an interest in whether my evidence from a relatively untested subject area could meet the UKPSF and how I could translate my discipline evidence into a clear textual framework within the dimensions of practice.  I hoped to 'reflect-in-action' to improve future actions and reflect critically on practice (Ghaye, 2011) but also to balance my interpretations of innovation in teaching and learning with those reported through research channels.  I did see the compilation of the portfolio as engaging in an intrinsically enjoyable and challenging activity although with some degree of nervousness but not particularly as 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) seen as total absorption in the task and the optimal state of intrinsic motivation or for psychological well-being (Robertson Cooper, 2008).  I do have an operational management 'day job' and the aspects of this which overtly are focussed on teaching and the support of learning could be selected, analysed and reflected on to place in the portfolio over a period of time.  However, I was able to identify with some of Ghaye's principles of reflective practice, namely: discourse, being energised by experience, creative and critical thinking and a

postmodern way of knowing that helps reflective practitioners to construct understandings of the educative *potency* (my italics) of their teaching.

Unlike some, I was not motivated at the time by employment factors (promotion or another post) but intrinsically driven to capture my professional practice in a synthesised, yet meaningful, way and to ascertain if my analysis and reflection would reach a pre-determined threshold.

**The challenge of translating to and from the subject discipline**
In 2002, I was concerned that I would struggle to articulate the vagaries of my subject (Outdoor Studies) as an academic discipline in a seemingly traditional landscape of teaching and learning which comprised lectures, seminars and tutorials. Even though I had come from a recognised academic background of first degree in a traditional subject at a Russell Group university followed by a doctorate, I had spent some years defending the 'playing out' image that I felt was emergent with this embryonic subject area. However, latterly I demonstrated the value of key, transferable skills for graduate employment (Prince, 2005) including research to evidence that meta skills and personal development are particular strengths developed through our undergraduate degrees in the subject area. My beliefs and values have always been grounded in the outcomes of realising the maturation of students and their development as people and in the contribution they can make in fulfilling their potential as graduates and as professionals in the field. I find that my key philosophy has not changed since working in higher education and that is to facilitate and support student pathways to achieve this, not only in terms of the selection of programme or modules, but in the opportunities available which create 'added value' and a personal and individualised experience.

Through the process of defining professional activity, I was able to identify and celebrate not only widely recognised methods of curriculum delivery but the innovative and unique approaches which we had developed in establishing the first Outdoor Studies undergraduate degree in the U.K. at St Martin's College (legacy institution of the University of Cumbria). My portfolio was accepted by the adjudicating panel without revision and I acceded to membership of the ILTHE, converting to a Fellow of the HEA in 2007.

I was excited to see how the landscape had changed in ten years and how I might create a rich and accurate narrative of my current contribution as a leader and manager as required by Descriptor 3 (D3). The portfolio of our courses has expanded in ten years as have the responsibilities of my role commensurate with those to whom D3 is targeted. However, my teaching contribution has not diminished, although it is perhaps more focussed on the higher levels of teaching and learning (final year undergraduate and postgraduate students) and, being further on in my career, I have more research and scholarship to support the curriculum.

I did not find it difficult to populate the dimensions of practice required by the portfolio (Areas of Activity, Core Knowledge and Professional Values) although it did take me some time to upload and interweave the evidence in the e-portfolio and structure and present the text in a limited wordage. My referees kindly supported my portfolio and supplied testimonials with evidence far beyond what was asked for.

Unlike student assignments in my experience, this submission was to anonymous markers (verifiers) rather than *vice versa.*  I felt that I had provided the content and evidence required and this was acknowledged by the internal verifiers.

However, it was soon obvious that I had misunderstood or misconceptualised the criteria for assessment and the parameters of the portfolio.  I had valued the 'what' of my practice but not the 'why' other than through my own authored publications.  I needed to situate the portfolio within the broader pedagogic literature, using models and theories.  I needed to provide a justification and a rationale for practice and leadership with scholarly underpinning to support my choices, approaches and techniques in teaching and for the support of learning.

**Embedding pedagogy in professional practice**
It seems almost harder to justify pedagogical theory with more experience.  The models, theories and approaches to professional practice are well versed, understood and authored.  There is almost a weariness with quoting the familiar and the interest is in new, emerging and creative pedagogies.

'Traditional' pedagogies are often subject to critique and changing interpretations as well as debate related to the subject discipline and reconsideration or revaluation of older, established proponents or philosophies.  For example, 'experiential learning' is a key concept of teaching in the outdoors and this needed distilling and summarising through many authors and through the progression of time (e.g. Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Usher, 2009; Ord & Leather, 2011).  Jonassen & Land (2012), Laurillard (2012) and Fry (2009) provide relatively current commentary and critical perspectives on teaching and learning.  In each of the dimensions, I justified my choices by pedagogical theories and approaches, supported by reference.

Although teaching and learning in the outdoors needs to be 'safe' in terms of physical health and safety frameworks and psychologically, it is not always 'safe' in terms of a secure pedagogical approach.  I was reassured by reading the UKPSF aim of 'foster(ing) dynamic approaches to teaching and learning through creativity, innovation and continuous development in diverse academic and/or professional settings.'  Research into the derivation of more innovative pedagogies illustrated some approaches apparently without previous reference and others being the subject of a paper previously unbeknown to me, the discovery of which both excited and reassured me.  I like to refer to the philosophy of 'learning as an adventure' but could not find any resources on an adventurous or an exploratory pedagogy.  Perhaps this reflects an antithesis of terminology in so far as if 'pedagogy' is the science of teaching, it is a deductive, positivist approach and opposed to any inductive schema.  It may be that this ideology is so opposed to the audited practice of defining learning outcomes, delivering learning and teaching to address these and concluding as to whether or not they have been met.

I use adventurous teaching by creating an element of surprise or uncertainty of outcome.  Surprise is seen as a tool for motivational learning: when subject expectations are not borne out, students' attention is focussed.  I was pleased to discover a whole article on 'surprise'

(Adler, 2008) in which students are able to recognise gaps, weaknesses or false assumptions in their understanding and thus, seek deeper learning.  Adler supplies a persuasive argument for using surprise as a pedagogical tool for educational benefits and enhanced learning and I was able to provide background material to support an example activity of such.

**Reflection and Outcomes**

Illeris (2009) describes the 'incentive' dimension whereby attitudes to intended learning and mental energy are mobilised through interest.  The incentive here was to meet the UKPSF but I found much interest in consolidating my understanding of established pedagogy and in the exploration of those approaches not well recorded.  I enjoyed the challenge of gathering appropriate evidence and mastering the lexicon of focussed semantics.   The excitement of presenting a personalised collection for the enhancement of professional practice was rewarding beyond the decision on the outcome.

A brief analysis of colleagues' motivations for undertaking portfolio collation towards Descriptor 3 showed commonalities with my own experience and some differences in emphasis.  Some saw the award as the motivating factor, particularly initially, and another thought that it was important to outline practice and why it was worth recognising. However, most saw the process of compiling a portfolio as a journey of discovery, eventually more rewarding than the end product as it allowed for a synthesis and cogent ordering of diverse activities and ideas into a coherent structure.  Varied and complex strands reached a higher level of organisation to uncover synergies not previously recognised but consistently were underpinned by strong principles, beliefs and values.  One member of staff felt that there were aspects of his portfolio which he could use in other areas of professional development such as planning peer reviews, performance reviews and applying for a teaching award.  All commented on the importance of sharing valuable and innovative ideas on approaches and practice through a personal narrative influenced by personal philosophy and professional practice.

The process is iterative.  There is no pass/fail and I am not even sure what the pass mark would be.  In this sense it is 'qualificatory' and aligned with a judgement on meeting the Professional Standards or not.  Portfolios which do not meet the standards are referred back as 'portfolios requiring additional work to meet UKPSF'.

My portfolio was initially referred back as needing more pedagogical theoretical framing beyond my own authorship but was successful on resubmission. I saw this as frustrating at first, particularly since I had been advised to the contrary and my submission reflected the format submitted for Fellowship previously.  However, I soon realised that this was a learning process for all, including my mentors, particularly as I was one of the first to submit in this way at my institution. I recognised that once the criteria had been fully understood and met, the portfolio would be accepted.  Furthermore, I can now contribute to subsequent mentoring of, and advice to, future candidates and to the evaluation of the escalating number of portfolios through reasoned and lived judgement.

**Conclusion**

The collation and focussing of evidence for continuing professional development and enhanced professional practice for teaching and the support of learning in Higher Education is an intrinsically rewarding and challenging process.  Evidence-based reflective practice through the submission of a portfolio is seen as a valuable tool for self evaluation and development.  In trying to meet the UKPSF, a range of pedagogies was explored : 'traditional', new and unrecorded approaches were researched and led to exciting and motivational learning in the pursuit of the enhancement of student learning experiences and the improvement of the quality of teaching and the support of learning.  This autobiographical narrative on the journey towards attaining UKPSF is presented as a learning process and one which it is hoped might guide and support other colleagues in their own professional development and encourage them to write and collate a portfolio towards achieving professional standards recognition.

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