

# Enhancing the use of a teaching portfolio in higher education as a critically reflexive practice<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*Teaching portfolios in higher education are used for the purpose of reflecting on the lecturer's practice to improve student learning. Significant to academic development is the need to encourage staff to engage in scholarly writing about their teaching and student learning as a critically reflexive practice through the development of teaching portfolios. It was noted through the implementation of an academic development programme at a university of technology across faculties that not many lecturers were in possession of teaching portfolios and for the few who were, their main reason for developing them was for promotion or to participate in teaching awards. This paper is about exploring the use of teaching portfolios for critically reflecting on one's teaching to enhance student learning, underpinned by Schon's reflection on- and in- action principle. The study used qualitative interpretive research design to determine the awareness of university teachers on the purpose and importance of teaching portfolios. It was found that 19 participants were aware of the reflective purpose of the portfolios while 11 compiled them out of compliance. This outcome implies that more lecturers need to be engaged in developing critically reflexive teaching portfolios for enhanced teaching and student learning, as well as for increased participation in the scholarship of teaching and learning.*

**Keywords:** academic development, critical reflexive practice, scholarly, scholarship of teaching and learning, student learning, teaching portfolio.

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching portfolios in higher education globally have been mainly used for promotion, achievements and awards. For instance, Tigelaar et al. (2006), Davis (2009) indicate that portfolios are used as tools to contribute to the development and growth of teachers, and are created to keep a record of accomplishments that can be submitted for promotion or other employment; (see also *The Higher Education Monitor* 2017, Council on Higher Education). However, teaching portfolios also make a significant contribution to the improvement of teaching and learning. Lim and Lee (2014) argue that electronic teaching portfolios (e-portfolios) create opportunities for academics to form professional learning communities (PLCs) through which they can collaborate to reflect on their own teaching, and engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning. While Lim and Lee write about the e-portfolio, this article focuses on teaching portfolios

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in general, whether manual or electronic. During the implementation of a staff development programme with specific reference to the topic of teaching portfolios, it was noted that not many lecturers were in possession of portfolios and those who were, had developed them out of compliance. However, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2018), through its frameworks for enhancing academics as university teachers, emphasises the importance of enhancing academics' teaching skills in order to maximise their impact on learning. This article presents the use of teaching portfolios as a critically reflexive practice at a university of technology as part of academic staff development. Reflexive practice is explained by Hibbert and Cunliffe (2015) as questioning own experience, focusing on the self and own assumptions in relation to other people for the purpose of improvement.

The article is inspired by the researcher's role as an academic developer aimed at empowering academics to reflect on their practice in order to improve their teaching and student learning. The researcher reflects on her academic developer role by responding to the following objectives:

- to determine the awareness of the purpose of developing teaching portfolios among academic staff
- to establish the need for academic development initiatives on the development of teaching portfolios as development tools.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *What is a teaching portfolio?*

There are different types of portfolios and different definitions. Pelger and Larsson (2018) define teaching portfolios as documents that comprise reflective work samples that a teacher has collected over a period of time across various teaching and learning contexts. According to Granberg (2010), teaching portfolios can be categorised into reflective, credential and marketing portfolios where reflective portfolios are meant for encouraging student teachers to reflect on their learning process, supported by their lecturers' formative assessments; credential portfolios being used as summative assessments; and marketing portfolios for displaying teachers' accomplishments. While Granberg refers to portfolios of student teachers, the significant principle of reflection also applies for lecturers, and this is the main focus of this paper. Subbaye and Vithal (2015) suggest that portfolios are presented for promotion applications (as structured self-assessment reports), some for confirmation of tenure, and others for a qualification. This approach appears to focus on compliance as opposed to reflection. In the next paragraph I discuss the views of other scholars on various uses of portfolios.

### *Theoretical framework: Teaching portfolios as reflective tools*

Reflection is an important activity in higher education as it enables one to look back at how one is performing and improving all the time. This argument is underpinned by the work of Schon (1983) about the reflective practitioner which entails reflection on action and reflection in action as a means of bringing about improvement after or during a certain practice or incident. Reflection on action involves identifying a particular practice or incident, thinking about the situation before and after an intervention; about bridging the gap between before and after; and then determining what could have been done differently. Reflection in action, on the other hand, refers to thinking about what one is doing whilst in the process and is inspired by surprise because the activity might have been unplanned or yielded unexpected results (Schon 1983). Both are done through writing about these practices and observations of one's work. Stierer in Murray (2008) refers to writing about one's work as a reflective tool more than a communication medium. As lecturers write about their teaching, they reflect on how they teach, who their students are, how students respond to their teaching, and the impact of this teaching.

In line with this argument, Fong et al. (2014) indicate that teaching portfolios are used to encourage staff to engage in professional learning and enhance their teaching. As they willingly reflect, their teaching is enhanced because they take responsibility for their own professional development (DHET 2018). In their reflection, they refer to the teaching philosophy that they set for themselves, evaluate themselves against this philosophy and the results obtained from their teaching. This is further supported by Prilla (2015) who views reflection as observing one's own actions and those of others, which in the case of this paper involves lecturers observing their actions and the actions of students. FitzPatrick and Spiller (2010) also concur that portfolios are used for reflective purpose and professional development.

#### *Teaching portfolios as evidence for promotion or awards*

One of the purposes of a teaching portfolio according to Granberg (2010) is to meet the need for national standards or address issues of accreditation. The example here can be that of promotions, teacher awards and certification programmes in higher education (Fitzpatrick & Spiller, 2010). For instance, in South Africa, annual Vice Chancellor's teaching awards are held; for a lecturer to enter this competition, a teaching portfolio must be submitted with all evidence of teaching achievements and professional development sessions attended. CHE (2017) indicates that teaching portfolios are used in the promotion process, where candidates are expected to provide clear description and evidence of their teaching practice. In some institutions the requirement may be inclusion of evidence of professional courses aimed at improving teaching and learning. When teaching portfolios are used as evidence of attendance of professional courses, lecturers may just comply without a meaningful impact. However, the latter part of the statement 'to improve teaching and learning' needs to be considered. I discuss this in the next paragraph.

#### *Teaching portfolios and scholarship of teaching and learning*

Scholarship of teaching and learning entails lecturers in higher education using literature to investigate and reflect on their own teaching practice and formally communicate the process and results to their peers (Pelliccione & Raison, 2009).

These authors further argue that the development of professional teaching e-portfolios promotes academic reflection and engages teacher education students in the scholarship of teaching. While the authors refer to student teachers, the principle also applies to lecturers at institutions of higher education. One of the main aspects of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) is the ability of lecturers to reflect on their teaching practice which may take the form of teaching portfolios.

The DHET (2018) highlights the importance of staff development where lecturers are equipped to improve the quality of teaching and to encourage research-based teaching in which lecturers conduct research on their own teaching. This is where they are supposed to use their portfolios as reflective tools to reflect on their research findings and how their teaching and learning improved. They are also encouraged not only to teach based on their experience but also use theories by adapting them to their context to inform their teaching (Kreber, 2002).

## METHODOLOGY

This paper resulted from a qualitative (interpretive) study which was conducted among lecturers after conducting workshops for them on developing teaching portfolios as critically reflective tools. This was useful for obtaining insights into teaching portfolios and the meaning attached to the experiences of selected academics (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

**Purposive sampling** was done incorporating all 20 attendants of the workshops as participants and with an addition of a random sample of 10 more lecturers who did not attend the workshops. All these participants consented in writing to participate in the study, and they were assured of anonymity.

**Data collection:** Data were collected using evaluation questionnaires as a research instrument with open-ended questions distributed to the first 20 participants who attended the workshops; the same questions were also asked of the 10 additional participants. Interviews were audio-recorded and the data transcribed verbatim. Participants' responses were allocated numbers to differentiate their responses and a (P) to denote the participant.

The interview questions sought to establish whether lecturers possessed teaching portfolios, what inspired them to develop these portfolios, their understanding of the purpose of portfolios, and how the development of portfolios influenced their teaching practice and student learning.

**Data analysis:** The transcribed data were analysed through identification of themes in line with the questions asked. The following two themes were identified from the three main questions:

- Reflecting on performance and professional development
- Compliance.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the research in response to the following objectives:

- to determine the awareness of the purpose of developing teaching portfolios among academic staff
- to establish the need for academic development initiatives on the development of teaching portfolios as development tools.

Of the 30 participants, 21 indicated that they had portfolios, eight did not, and one did not respond to the question. This shows that the majority of lecturers from this sample do have teaching portfolios, although not all of them were regularly updated. It could therefore be argued that the group that did not keep their portfolios updated possibly regarded them as a means of compliance rather than as a reflective and reflexive tool.

The study revealed that lecturers were motivated to develop portfolios by different factors, but the two main themes were **Reflecting on performance to improve teaching** (by 10 respondents), and **Professional development** (15 respondents).

For instance, the following responses relate to reflection and improvement of teaching:

In order to keep track of teaching techniques that had a positive outcome. To learn from those that didn't. Also as a means of developing portfolio that provide evidence of your teaching and learning experiences. (P4)

The reason why I developed my portfolio is to keep record of what I do, how I do it, and identify areas of improvements. (P12)

Apart from the fact that it is obligatory, as an academic, I also realised that it actually guides you, it actually leads you. You always refer to it when you need to move forward and that is where I keep all my stuff, my teaching stuff, achievements, and conferences and workshops that I have attended. All certificates are in the teaching portfolio. Should there be a need of what I have been doing, it makes it easy for me. I just go to the teaching portfolio. (P23)

What inspired me is because I am from a background of where I was taught about planning, organising, control and monitoring. So all activities that I plan, I normally put them in that file, so that even the very activities that I give to students, when I set them as a test, then I can go and take some of those and then compile them into a test. Then on that portfolio again, it has my philosophy of teaching and that is where also after they have written a test, I will keep the list there so that I can from time to time check the progress. (P24)

The second theme on the inspiration to develop a teaching portfolio was **professional development** and the responses include the following:

To reflect on my teaching, to evaluate and monitor the efficiency of my teaching. (P17)

Needed for academic engagement and improvement. (P3)

It's like my CV, to start there. But it also, it's a place where I see whether I have grown or not, as a lecturer. (P29)

These statements confirm the literature about the role of portfolios as reflective tools by which lecturers reflect on their own teaching and are encouraged to improve through professional development (Fong et al., 2014; DHET, 2018).

While 19 participants developed portfolios out of a need to reflect and develop, 11 participants did this out of compliance with institutional requirements. Under the theme of **Compliance**, the following responses were noted:

To be able to evaluate my performance and also to show my achievements and apply for promotion. (P7)

This statement is however, applicable in both themes, namely reflection and compliance. The participant knew that portfolios are meant for reflection but also for promotion which is an aspect of compliance. Others said:

I was given an instruction to keep a teaching portfolio when I was appointed at this institution in 2011. (P19)

First our head of department mentioned, from time to time you submit a programme, you have to have a teaching portfolio. The second one, we attended orientation, formal mentorship, and it was mentioned there. Then the third reason is for promotion, awards, it was a requirement. (P21)

Actually we were asked to do it, and I also attended a programme where it was part of it, was part of what was assessed. These two modules that were compulsory for all academics. I attended some years back. I am not sure if they are still doing that, the one on teaching facilitation and assessment and I still refer to them and see if I am still relevant. Sometimes when you have to submit for, when you apply for promotion, there is quality assurance programme, probably they want to assess what you have done, evidence. (P25)

One of the documents needed for promotion requirement. You see our subject file is electronically available. So one section that has to be there is the teaching portfolio. There is a specific division in our subject file which is a teaching portfolio. (P27)

These participants developed their portfolios purely out of compliance with the instruction. In such a case, the values of a portfolio for the lecturers or their teaching may not be acknowledged. While compliance is good, creating a portfolio mainly for compliance makes one lose sight of its more important value, which as FitzPatrick and Spiller (2010) remark, is reflection and professional development.

On a question regarding the purpose of a portfolio, the following responses, among others, were received (still on the theme Reflection and improvement of teaching):

To assist me reflect on my teaching practice for the purpose of improving deep learning of students, as well as helping me to be conscious of what I am doing in my class. (P2)

It assist me to do some reflection on how I teach my students and where to rectify some mistakes if I have them. (P15)

I think the purpose, now that I have been through PGDip, the main purpose is to use it as a reflective tool, and a tool that you use not only to ... you know, say what is wrong with these students but to say 'is it me'. I think that's the purpose of the portfolio where you are saying, ... because you also would have a teaching philosophy to also assess how far are you from this belief that you hold very close to you. So it's a continuous tool that you say, this is where I want to go, am I there, how far am I and what is it that I can do to get there and it also helps you to realise that each year how different the class is, you engage with different people and some strategies that might have worked last year might not work this year with a new group. (P29)

For the three participants, the purpose of portfolios was compliance as reflected in the responses below:

To align my teaching with the institutional process plan and other docs comply for the Integrated Performance Management System (IPERMS) and promotion, to assess my own progress as lecturer and teacher. (P1)

Proof for IPERMS. Qualifications. Keep track of congresses and training and research outputs. (P8)

... it is for administrative purposes. It helps me to, when I apply for something like promotions, award, I give them something to evaluate me. (P26)

The final question regarding the influence of the portfolio on teaching practice and student learning yielded positive responses from all 27 participants. The following are examples of the responses:

I am always trying new things to benefit the student. I recently tried flipped classroom environment. (P9)

I have realised that there are so many other methods to teach and assess. Measure my own performance. (P1)

I have had to adjust my teaching in the classroom to suit the needs of individual students to promote their academic success in my subjects. (P17)

These three responses affirm the argument by Scott (2010) that portfolios enable lecturers to evaluate their actions and those of students. They indicate that lecturers keep monitoring the impact of their teaching on students' performance, and improve their teaching strategies where there is a need. Furthermore, lecturers also use portfolios to evaluate themselves to see how they progress from one year to another as reflected in the statements below:

Like I said, it helps me to evaluate myself with myself, because for example, when I came here, I came from a very different teaching environment and in the different environment I will start afresh, then that is a benchmark I make for three to five years and seven years whether I do something right and then also I look at students, their activities, progression, students throughput, pass rate in my students, how it is improving, how it is behaving, and that gives me an indication of whether I am doing well or not even in terms of when I make a teaching portfolio, I also see how my students are doing in my subjects, if I see the majority of students are passing, normal bands, then I see I am doing well. But if I see that on average, the majority of students are not doing well, there may be two reasons: the quality of students or the quality of teaching. I may not have control over the quality of students, so that gives an indication of whether I have done well or must stress on some areas. (P26)

Vastly, because as I said the main purpose is to guide me, I use it to guide me on my day to day teaching and in that I have seen a lot of improvement in my teaching because every now and then if I get demotivated, I go back to it and it brings that spark back, that this is what I believe in, this is what I said I will do, so I do it, and in that I have seen a lot of progress and improvement in my own teaching as well as my students because it goes back to benefit them and their performance as well. My performance and their performance. (P23)

I can see the difference in myself when I started teaching. Now I am a lot braver to start things, which I was not at first. Sometimes when you look back at the achievements, they encourage you to get better and try new things. (P30)

One would have thought that academics would be able to link portfolios with the scholarship of teaching. However, from the responses above, there seems to be no direct link between teaching portfolios and researching own practice as encouraged by the Framework on Enhancing Academics as University Teachers (DHET, 2018). There was only one lecturer whose response indicated some awareness of scholarship. She said:

It has improved the way I teach so much. I once attempted to write a paper to reflect on the differences, for example, what I normally do in the beginning is an online quiz. I ask them what are your expectations? Why are you here? and generally not just in the module... Now looking at the students who apply for Masters, they are more prepared than the ones who did not do my module. Like I said I partnered with someone from one institution, trying to compare its students for that module and you could see a huge difference between mine and theirs. So to me, this portfolio has assisted a lot. (P28)

This response indicates the awareness that portfolios can also be used to record research conducted by the lecturer and the impact that his/her teaching has on learning. Finally, it is essential to highlight the implications of these findings for academic development and scholarship.

#### *Implications for academic development and scholarship*

The findings of this study indicate the need to continue to equip academics on the development of teaching portfolios. The aim is to empower them to move from compliance to reflection for personal and professional development. As Biggs and Tang (2007) argue, teaching portfolios should be used to reflect on the implementation of constructive alignment and aligning curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment. Although the questions were not directly about the specific content of the portfolio, most participants indicated what their portfolios entailed and the aspects referred to by Biggs and Tang (2007) were rarely mentioned.

University teachers need to be encouraged to reflect on their scholarship practices, and to link theory with practice by engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning (Pelger & Larsson, 2018). The scholarship

of teaching and learning as an academic niche is gaining momentum in institutions of higher learning, and needs to be encouraged among academics. SoTL has the potential to encourage reflective practices such as using teaching portfolios. As Pelger and Larsson (2018) argue, communities of practice on writing portfolios can be established with the aim of promoting professional development and scholarship. These communities of practice, each allocated an experienced mentor, can meet at agreed times to work on teaching portfolios and share their experiences, as well as influence their teaching and student learning through presentations. University teachers can also be encouraged to compile reflective reports after every staff development programme offered, which will be part of the lecturer's teaching portfolio. In this way, both academic development and scholarship of teaching and learning are advanced.

## CONCLUSION

Teaching portfolios have become necessary to contribute towards the academic development of lecturers in higher education. Having engaged as an academic developer with some lecturers in the staff development programmes on creating teaching portfolios as critically reflexive practice, it became clear that 11 participants were not so familiar with the purpose of portfolios. This study was about determining their awareness of the purpose of teaching portfolios, and whether capacity building with regard to teaching portfolios is needed. From the data collected through interviews, it was found that 19 lecturers are aware of the pragmatic and reflexive elements of teaching portfolios, hence their use as reflective tools, while 11 created portfolios just to comply with institutional requirements and for promotion. However, 27 of them observed the impact that portfolios had on their teaching and on the improvement of students' learning. Only one respondent could demonstrate a clear link between portfolios and the scholarship of teaching and learning. On the basis of these findings, it is argued that there is a need to create a culture of critically reflexive practice through the use of teaching portfolios. Linking teaching portfolios to improved performance as a scholarly practice is essential in its own right rather than merely for compliance. Academic development initiatives need to be strengthened by working together with scholarship of teaching and learning programmes to create groups of communities of practice focused on teaching portfolios, in order to encourage more reflection on teaching practices.

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