COURSE PORTFOLIO
A STRATEGY FOR HIGH EDUCATION TEACHERS’ EVALUATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Clementina Nogueira
Estela Lamas
Instituto Piaget
Portugal
cnogueira@almada.ipiaget.org and elamas@gaia.ipiaget.org

Abstract
The European Space of Higher Education convergence has stressed the importance of a potentially systemic shift in paradigms, away from what has been labelled the “instruction paradigm” towards the “learning paradigm”, i.e. shifting the interest from the teacher to the student, thus leading to pedagogical implications which imply that teachers reflect upon their methodologies of teaching, evaluate the work they develop with their students and change their proceedings accordingly.

We propose the course portfolio, a fraternal twin of the teaching portfolio as Cerbin, its inventor, has named it, as a strategy to:

- evaluate (auto and hetero-evaluation) what teachers do;
- promote critical reflection;
- promote collaborative work among teachers;
- improve teaching skills;
- document the progress teachers gradually accomplish through this strategy;
- make teaching and learning visible as a scholarly activity.

Although the construction of a portfolio is a much-personalised process, we believe that meeting together, sharing points of view and discussing strategies, will certainly bring benefits from the input of others (colleagues and experienced teachers). We acknowledge the importance of teachers’ critical reflection through dialogue within their community of practice. Teaching is a solitaire endeavour and working in co-operation with others minimizes that solitude and increases the possibility of feedback, maximizing, therefore, the possibility of change. This is the main strategy of the construction of the course portfolio, in this study. On the other hand, teaching, to be recognised, as a valuable and scholarly activity needs to be open to public scrutiny, something that the portfolio will allow.

In this paper we present the process of building a course portfolio in a Portuguese Higher Education institution that has at its core a formative approach to teaching. Teaching in Higher Education, in Portugal, does not require any kind of pedagogic or didactic preparation, so many of those who teach in universities and colleges have never been prepared for this professional activity that takes most of their time. A group of ten teachers accepted the challenge of producing a course portfolio in order to evaluate their performance and promote their professional development. We will describe the process and the preliminary outcomes of the study.

Keywords:
Teaching portfolio, course portfolio, teaching evaluation, professional development, higher education.

INTRODUCTION
In a follow-up to the Bologna Process, when the European Ministers in charge of Higher Education met in Prague, on May 19th 2001, European education systems were presented a new challenge – The Continental / Napoleon education model study a lot in a short time to work all along your life was then replaced by the Nordic / Anglo-Saxon model study all along your life to work all along your life. Education professionals know that the primary goal of education is student achievement.
Nevertheless, there is great disparity on how these professionals see the achievement of such a goal. Nowadays, learner's scope has been greatly enlarged. Different ages require different motivations. At present, instructional design focus preferably the student’s learning profile; subjects are presented to students in account their previous knowledge.

Educational systems are changing very quickly. Some specialists see these changes as signs of a potentially larger systemic shift in paradigms, away from what has been labelled the “instruction paradigm” towards the “learning paradigm”, i.e. Educational systems promote the shifting of the focus from the teacher to the student, the learning process thus gaining more attention from the teacher. In fact, paradigm shifts occur when difficulties begin to appear in the functioning of the existing paradigm. The search for an alternative paradigm leads to innovation:

- new students' styles;
- new teachers' styles;
- new curricula;
- new methodologies ...

hoping to solve the major difficulties one faced in the old paradigm.

Because of recent knowledge gains in many fields, many who in the past were non-participants in education need to be brought into the fold. In the past people received a college education and embarked in a lifetime of work often for the same employer or company. In an ever-changing global economy, there is a need for people to become lifelong learners so they can maintain themselves ready to move with and adjust to a changing job market. Life long learning is very important characteristic of life in an information society.

Consequently:

- Institutions (schools, colleges, universities…) must keep pace if they are at all serious about offering all people equal opportunities in education;
  - equal educational opportunities require that institutions develop new curricula, to respond to the diverse intelligence profiles of their students;
- Education professionals must keep pace if they want to hold on to their jobs;
  - education professionals must develop new methodologies that promote an array of opportunities of learning.

Ederer, Schuller and Willms [1] call our attention to the fact that education systems must assume the job of offering students the opportunity to enjoy and understand their cultural legacy. According to the director and co-directors of the Human Capital Centre of the Lisbon Council, if students enjoy and understand their cultural heritage they will be able to preserve and perhaps even contribute to enrich society; that's why they suggest that: “seeking excellence in research should never be allowed to become an excuse for underachievement in the educational tasks. Indeed, in the end both objectives require each other to be successful” [2]. That is the reason why they refer to “the best job of educating” as a “basic determinant” [3].

The learning process as a whole is thus an important challenge; the process itself must come before information. The shift of focus from information to learning will no doubt stimulate the learner's inherent curiosity to keep learning since the process itself becomes part of the challenge and a source of pleasure. As a result, we need to focus on

- the constant interconnection between learning subjects and their working life;
- meaningful learning through materials and processes that may make sense;
- pragmatic knowledge focused on learning that learner can readily perceive as useful;
- the development of critical thought by helping learner sift through the large amounts of information in a reflexive attitude towards our job.

We come back to the Lisbon Council Policy Brief, underlying the following criteria: (i) inclusiveness; (ii) access; (iii) effectiveness. Indeed, it is in this socio-political-educational context, that we call up your attention to the job teachers are called to develop. Let’s find out the educational potential of the use of portfolio, specifically, the teaching portfolio, in our case. How can it help us looking for a good performance in the educational tasks?

1. “THE TEACHING PORTFOLIO” PROJECT

The teaching portfolio project started six years ago as part of a larger concern the administration of the ESE Jean Piaget in Almada had with the evaluation of its faculty. As the administration had to make hiring decisions on whether or not to renew faculty contracts it became obvious that anecdotal evidence gathered from students, colleagues and section heads was unreliable and insufficient. Furthermore, this information often focused on these faculty members’ performance in the more
measurable administrative tasks such as attendance, punctuality, filling out of forms, turn around time of student work, etc. How was the administration to assess faculty performance? If the effective participation in administrative tasks and preparation in their knowledge base were not hard to measure and assess, the same could not be said of their pedagogical preparation and performance in the classroom itself. At the time there was no effective answer to the question and soon the issue was overshadowed by more pressing administrative needs.

With the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), it became necessary to rethink teaching and learning methodologies in higher education. According to the decree 74/2006 of March 24, a “central issue in the Bologna Process is the paradigmatic change of teaching from a passive model, based on the acquisition of knowledge to a model based on competence acquisition.”, and consequently, the need to “identify competences and develop methodologies which support their achievement. Putting this new learning and teaching model into practice is the challenge that the higher education institutions now face.”

It seemed then that two currents had converged: one internal to the institution given the need to evaluate the pedagogical preparation and performance of its faculty; the other external, as a result of the need to find different teaching methodologies which addressed the needs of a new paradigm which was now becoming a standard for those involved in higher education.

When one of the authors of this paper decided to start her doctoral program that initial concern with the evaluation of faculty pedagogical performance returned. This time though, instead of having a summative focus, the concern became of formative kind. Most Portuguese higher education faculty lack formal pedagogical training because it is not a prerequisite in recruiting, hiring or tenure. It seemed to make little sense to focus on a summative evaluation process when the faculty had not had a chance to receive a formative opportunity to develop their pedagogical repertoire.

This project is part of a larger doctoral action research project having as a main objective the analysis of the impact the development of teaching portfolio can have in the professional development of a group of ten higher education faculty members.

Considering the objectives of the study itself, the methodological choice of action research seemed appropriate, since action research “involves identifying problems in particular settings, generating hypotheses about the causes and ‘cures’, and most importantly, acting on these and evaluating the impact” [4]. Since the assessment of the faculty pedagogical performance was really “the problem”, and we were seeking a research methodology that best answered that need, we felt that action research would be the best approach since it is

- practical – it has an impact not only on the knowledge base but also on performance during and post research;
- participatory and collaborative – it has a dialectical or critical approach;
- liberating – it promotes cooperation among participants;
- participatory – it is not positivistic;
- analytic – it emerges in communities that seek to solve their problems.

Thus the methodological approach to this study had been found.

The literature review carried out on the topic of pedagogical performance, known in the anglo-saxon literature as “teaching evaluation”, soon led us to the idea of the teaching portfolio as a evaluative tool. The portfolio is in line with the tenets of action research and meets the main objectives we had for the study. In addition, it was felt that the development of the teaching portfolio rather than an individual activity would be a collaborative project in which a group of similarly-minded faculty members could participate. With this project we hoped to foster the development a community of practice into a learning community.

We felt that the reflection in action and about action [5] that both action research and portfolios foster would be fundamental to the ownership of the kind of work each faculty member develops. Within a community of practice in which faculty members share common objectives, each becomes a mirror in which others can see themselves, leading to the desired self-development and assessment in a climate of camaraderie that facilitates hetero-assessment. It is in this same direction that McAlpine & Weston [6] place themselves when they mention that reflection can work as a metacognitive strategy to evaluate and improve teaching. This evaluation has as its ultimate goal the improvement of the teaching/learning process and therefore the improvement of students’ learning.

The process of evaluation in general, and of people in particular, is a hard endeavour, full of pitfalls and dangers. People naturally resist the evaluative process for fear of being found lacking. Many faculty members refuse to participate in evaluative processes because these may mean a questioning of one’s professional self-concept, something that may be hard to deal with. With the creation of a peer community, participating voluntarily in a formative evaluation process, many of the barriers become non-existent as participants progressively accept each other’s vulnerability in the process of
sharing what happens in each the classroom and with specific students. The fact that participation in this process leads to professional development may also be one of the additional factors that motivates faculty members to participate. As such, the portfolio becomes a tool that meets many of the expectations mentioned: in fact, it gives the faculty member a chance to participate in self-reflection and self-evaluation and, additionally fosters:

- development of analysis and reflection among faculty members;
- documentation of each participant's involvement and development;
- give evidence of what each faculty member considers to be “effective” teaching;
- development of self-assessment skills;
- development of collaborative efforts;
- respect of differences and preferences among faculty members;

In spite of the portfolio's potential for both formative and evaluative activities, we must not forget McAlpine & Weston's [7] admonition that:

(...) knowledge is necessary for the process of reflection to be effective, yet the process of reflection enables the building of knowledge. This suggests that without specialized training or support from experienced teachers who can model their own ways of reflecting, inexperienced professors may find it hard to develop their knowledge bases and improve ability to reflect.

This is the reason why the creation of this learning community of faculty members started with the adoption of ground rules based on the notion of the portfolio as a vehicle for joint reflection and training in the context of ongoing workshops. According to Fernández [8], faculty members are capable of assessing their own professional practice and it is in this process that they can truly be said to (self)-develop. He suggests that the faculty portfolio can be a tool for the development of the desired abilities of analysis and reflection. Furthermore, it helps document the process itself and its outcomes. It is, then, an effective coming together of two vital processes: formative evaluation and professional development. It seems almost hard to conceive of an effective process of professional development that does not, through diagnostic evaluation, include a starting point and the various benchmarks integral to the process of formative evaluation.

Seldin [9], an earlier proponent of this method in the USA, states:

Earlier assessment methods, such as student ratings or peer observations, were like flashlights. That is, they illuminated only the teaching skills and abilities that fell within their beams. As such, they shed light on only a small part of the professor's classroom performance. But, with portfolios, the flashlight is replaced by a searchlight. Its beam discloses the broad range of teaching skills, abilities, attitudes and values.

Nevertheless, its use as a formative instrument is even more relevant since, according to Cano [10]:

It is a tool that cannot be used from all epistemological standpoints because its use is based on a conception of learning and teaching processes rooted in constructivist principles by which each person involved in professional and personal development constructs his own knowledge. This meaning-making occurs in light of his previous experiences and the use they may have in other contexts to which he may want to transfer those experiences.

It is in light of this constructivist perspective (or socio-constructivist according to Awouters & Bongaerts [11]) that it makes sense to use the portfolio as a tool since in itself the portfolio is a process for the construction of personal knowledge about pedagogical practices. According to Fernández [12] there are three main objectives, or rather competencies that can be attained through the use of a teaching portfolio:

1. development of the practice of reflection about one's pedagogical performance;
2. development of a positive attitude towards team work;

It seems hard to find an evaluative tool which matches the philosophical underpinnings of this project better than the portfolio. It is, however, still important to refer to Cano [13] when she mentions that since the concept of a portfolio has its origin in different fields of study, it is important to make sure that be repurposed in a way that addresses the needs of a professional development environment. For this reason and in this study the portfolio will be developed in connection with a research project, specifically an action research project, in which its potential as a tool for formative evaluation will be tested in the areas of problem analysis and training needs of higher education faculty in light of the new paradigm taking shape within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

A particularly interesting version of the teaching portfolio is the course portfolio which “more closely resembles the scholarship of discovery than its fraternal twin the teaching portfolio” [14] because it focuses on a single discipline of study and, as a result, focuses more narrowly on student learning
than on teacher performance. Its creator (Cerbin), mentions in his own portfolio in 1992: “a single course is an ideal context in which to explore relationships between teaching and learning. Courses represent coherent entities in which teachers integrate content and teaching practices to accomplish specific aims within a particular time period” [15]. We will see further on that the group that participated in this research project chose to have their portfolio focus on a specific course of study.

1.1. The first steps

The first phase of this project focused on receiving institutional support to carry it out. After that was achieved, the next step what to find the faculty members that might eventually participate in the project. The working relationships between the different members of the potential group to be formed seemed paramount since its success depended on ongoing group meetings, reflection, and overall involvement, sharing and motivation to stay committed to the project. For this reason we sought to gather a group of faculty members who would be as homogeneous a possible particularly in the area of highest degree received. All the faculty members had a Master's Degree with the exception of two who were finishing their Master's Degree and one who had a Bachelor's Degree. On the other hand we looked for faculty who were not in the process of working on their PhD’s so that they could focus their attention more narrowly on the development of their portfolios. After contacting each faculty member individually and briefly explaining the project, we held a joint meeting (April 2008) in which the project was explained in detail and the potential participants were asked to commit to the project for the length of its duration. Almost without exception faculty members showed great interest in the project and the promise it held in helping them further improve their performance in the classroom by learning new methods of teaching and learning in harmony with the Bologna Process and the opportunity to do so in a collaborative atmosphere.

The fact that one of the authors was part of the institution's administration may lead one to believe, at first, that this was a disadvantage since faculty members could feel pressure to participate in the project. However, that possibility was clearly dispelled by the fact that those in the school's administration have established long term relationships with most faculty members and the fact that preliminary meetings were held with all potential participants in which those who might not be interested could be candid in their response. In addition, the support received from the main institutional administration sent the message that the school as a whole is concerned with and values the professional development of its faculty particularly in its pedagogical dimension.

2. THE PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

The project was truly launched during the first workshop (2nd and 3rd of July 2008) in which we focused on the teaching portfolio, its characteristics, use, and structure. This first workshop was fundamental to the cohesion of the group and we consider it a decisive moment in the involvement and motivation the faculty have demonstrated during the life of the project. It is important to note that the presence of a long time teacher trainer (and co-author of this paper) lent great credibility and was fundamental to the overall process. We find that in the different models of teacher develop for higher education faculty it is common to find mention of a senior faculty member who serves as a mentor to the participants, both individually and as a group. The outcomes of this first workshop were two fundamental “products”: each faculty member elaborated his/her own philosophy of teaching and together the faculty members agreed on a possible structure for the portfolio. While the first “product” was the result of each individual's work, the second was the result of the effort of two sub-groups. At the time the participants decided that they would work not with a teaching portfolio but with a subject matter portfolio because they felt that it would be easier, during a first phase, to focus on a specific area of study than to attempt to use several in the process of developing the document. We were all aware that, as Cerbin mentions, this version of the portfolio—the course portfolio—more fully enables the interaction between teaching and learning and leads to a deeper reflection because it is reciprocally motivated.

During the phase that followed the participants focuses on the creation of a space (meta-discipline) in the Moodle platform with resources about portfolios both at epistemological and pragmatic levels. From this convergent space, from the invitation to study and reflection, faculty members created their own individual spaces in which each of them could, if he so chose, create his own, and should he choose to do so, make it available for other colleagues to look at leading to shared reflection. It is important to mention that in a group such as this in which people have different levels of ease with newer technologies it was emphasized that computer skills, for example, were not conditions for
participation since all materials would be provided in hard copy. Each faculty member had the option of creating either a digital or a paper portfolio.

The different phases that make up the formative experience facilitated by this project were interspersed with short group meetings in which members of the group shared information on available resources, scheduling of videotaping of classes for group analysis and discussion or inclusion in a portfolio, etc. During these meetings we sought to learn how the portfolio development process was impacting the classroom practice of the various faculty members and the degree to which the process was leading them to make changes in their performance, that is changes that were a result of the process and led to development of more careful and reflective pedagogical practice.

At this point we started the process of autoscopy since “Autoscopy is, without a doubt, an excellent training tool” [16]. These authors argue that “nevertheless it is vital to bear in mind the need to recognize and give the faculty member, as an autoscopic subject, ownership of his profession, thus promoting, besides the evaluative process, his own autonomy in thinking and doing.” That became the objective - to foster the autoscopy and heteroscopy in the group as a whole while at the same time supporting “the autonomy in thinking and doing” of each participant since there was no pre-existing model of the “good faculty member.” The goal was to have each participant evaluating himself in light of their own preferences, their theories and practice always benefiting from the feedback from the group. As Solomon states [17] “lack of interchange of ideas inhibits the healthy development of personal convictions, because these only become real and clear when one is able to talk about them with others. Constructive reflection about the experience participants had in the classroom creates a social forum for discussion.” Such a forum creates the context for analysis and reflection of experiences that are often hidden, or in the word of Sá Chaves & Amaral [18] it allows for “the development of the solitary I into the sympathetic I.” Thus, it works as a mirror that gives participants a look at themselves that would otherwise be unknown to them.

The second workshop, centered around autoscopy, was a two-day activity (10th and 11th of December of 2008) in which each faculty member showed portions of the filming of their classroom and had the chance to both contextualize the images and evaluate them. The experience was extremely important to the participants because it gave them a chance to receive feedback and, at the same time, see the benefit of the autoscopy they had gone through. Many positive comments pertaining to each other’s performance, such as “I continue to be pleasantly surprised,” or “I really like to watch you; I learned many things with you, but then I was already expecting that,” or even a focus on personal characteristics of the participants: “you should use your humour … because you are a fascinating person,” to a variety of suggestions to strengthen a specific faculty member’s classes or help him overcome specific challenges. All of these made the second workshop a productive reflection space. The autoscopy and heteroscopy that took place were based and recorded on an analysis grid which allowed a great many aspects to be addressed such as the physical classroom, the location and motion of the faculty member in the classroom, verbal and non-verbal communication, level of engagement between faculty and students, use of e-learning tools, visual aids and their characteristics, student conferencing outside of the classroom, use of humour, etc.

Given that the semester is almost over, we have yet to receive student feedback as it pertains to the learning and teaching process that took place throughout the semester. This feedback was gathered using the MISE-Student survey [19]. Similarly, participating faculty members took the faculty version of the survey (MISE – Professor) as a tool to collect their experiences and reflect on their practice. The results of both surveys will then be compared to see to what degree there is an overlap of experience between the faculty and the students as collected through the MISE – Professor and the MISE – Student. This will be another element that the faculty members will be able to include in their portfolios.

2.1. Next steps

From this experience, up to now, we can report a high level of involvement of the group during organized workshops. There was, however, less than optimal autonomy outside of these meetings. For this reason we confirm that the strategy followed of giving participating faculty the resources necessary, such as scheduling of filming, or the surveys for assessment of learning and teaching involvement so that the faculty will have the relevant materials to include in their portfolios is an adequate strategy. In addition, it seems that some faculty members have had difficulty capturing in writing their reflections along the way, something that also needs to be considered in future iterations of this process. As one faculty member mentioned, “I have had a hard time putting into writing what I did. It is easier to talk about it.” Even though it is clear that the reflection did take place, judging from the impact it had on the curricular units taught, it lacks written expression, or when it exists is not fully
developed or has little depth. While some faculty members have collected anecdotal evidence from their classrooms others have already created texts that reveal greater reflection. We have decided that the group needs greater leadership in the process from here on out in order to provide the kind of support the participants need in the ongoing development of their work. In actuality this seems to be the greatest challenge to the creation of the portfolio: the written component, the systematic description of the process and the reflection that ensues. Taking into consideration the challenge that it was for the participants to product texts that speak to their experience, we will from now on request that the participants create texts during different phases of the process, as a base for the overall structure of the portfolio [20]: a) reflection on their syllabus; b) explanation of instructional practices; and c) documentation and analysis of student learning.

We are planning a third workshop in which participants can continue the autoscopy process and also to discuss student evaluation practices. Acknowledging the results obtained with the portfolio project, its utility and the contribution brought to the teaching/learning process, it has been decided to involve another group of faculty members as from thee beginning of the second semester. In research terms, this new step will offer the opportunity to work on the changes brought up by the regular shared reflection promoted inside the group. We look for an improvement of the strategy used, the refinement of the activities, the quality of education offered by the institution. On the other hand, we profit from the opportunity to compare the results obtained by the two groups, not in terms of each members accomplishment, but in terms of the shift verified in both cases, either in what concerns methodology, either in what concerns the resources utilized. Learning process promotion as well as pupils’ achievements will be considered the outcomes to be registered and analyzed. As planned and declared in the abstract submitted, we look forward to confirm the potentialities of the portfolio strategy chosen to work on, i.e., we aim at facilitating the evaluation of the faculty members’ work, at promoting and registering critical reflection leading to a better fulfilment, to help faculty members discover the benefits of collaborative work and together develop teaching skills.

However, having in mind that teaching in Higher Education, in Portugal, up to the present, has not required any kind of pedagogic or didactic preparation, taking in account the experience gained with the project we just presented, we intend building up a post-education training course in this area. Knowing that the primary goal of education is student achievement, we must consider a curricula that will give the opportunity to solve the major difficulties faculty members have faced in the old paradigm. The goal of such a training course will be the opportunity to construct new students’ styles as well as new faculty members’ style, thus promoting a constant interconnection between learning subjects and working life; making learning meaningful, choosing contents which may make sense in daily life, keeping a pragmatic knowledge, i.e., offering contents which may be of use, developing critical thought, i.e., promoting a reflexive attitude towards faculty members’ job. Being aware of long life learning Europe recommendations and profiting from the contributions new technology has brought into the EHEA, we take the option of a blended learning course, where flexibility, adaptability and intentionality will be the principles required to allow the construction of an inviting learning ambiance as well a process of interactivity which will lead to cooperation and collaboration.

**CONCLUSION**

This project is still at an early phase and, consequently, it is not possible to carry out a very reliable evaluation of its outcomes. We can, however, based on comments such as “this year I also did something different: I defined class objectives from class period to class period” or “I did something different and it is due to this project,” state that the project has had a positive impact on these faculty member’s classroom practice. These and other comments reflect the changes that have taken place in different areas such as in teaching and learning strategies, the depth and frequency of faculty reflective practice, or even in the various ways in which student assessment can be carried out. This last aspect is often mentioned by the faculty members and for that reason has been selected as the topic for the next workshop. We can give as an example the experience of one of the faculty member who said “after watching my classroom video and speaking with my father and my sister, I decided to change the way I assess the students and started thinking and thinking about it and finally, there was light!”

Maybe the success that this kind of projects have in the creation of actual learning communities and communities of practice is the proverbial cherry on top of the cake. The obvious benefits are the improvement of the teaching and learning processes and, consequently, student success in terms of the depth of their learning. In the words of one of the faculty members, “I think that these meetings,
besides helping us develop ourselves as faculty members also help us discover other faculty members we had not yet discovered and to learn from them. It is really interesting, indeed”, in actuality, it is the learning with them, from their successes and lack thereof, with their ha-ha moments and the ongoing change in what it means to teach.

As we said, introducing the presentation of this experience: “The search of an alternative paradigm leads to innovation (…) hoping to solve the major difficulties one faced in the old paradigm”. Thus, we confirm what we wrote in the abstract: “Although the construction of a portfolio is a much-personalized process, we believe that meeting together, sharing points of view and discussing strategies, will certainly bring benefits from the input of others (colleagues and experienced teachers). We acknowledge the importance of teachers’ critical reflection through dialogue within their community of practice.”

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