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MAKING MEANING: EXPLORING THE TEACHING PORTFOLIO AS A MECHANISM TO PROMOTE TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the experiences of faculty members who are required to document their teaching practice in a portfolio, first as a tool for professional development, and two years later as a tool for performance evaluation for the emergence of evidence of transformative learning, which is demonstrated in evidence of teaching practice and documented through the portfolio process. The data collection for the research was completed in various stages. The first stage involved the document review of teaching portfolios prepared for the first time in 2013. Next, the researcher reviewed the portfolios of the same faculty members who were required to submit an updated portfolio in 2015 to be used for performance evaluation. After the two-stage document analysis, 10 faculty members were interviewed to further explore the learning that occurred from the start of the process over the two-year period to confirm and expand on the data from the document reviews, in addition to examining the impact of the interview and feedback stages of the process. The findings reveal that many of the faculty found this process of documenting and reflecting on their teaching a disorienting dilemma. For some this triggered the opportunity for transformative learning as evidenced in the differences between the two portfolios over two years, and as discussed in the interviews. This work aligns with the conference theme in the area of intersections between development and evaluation in an institution that does not have the traditional tenure system in place for faculty.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore how the teaching portfolio process can trigger transformative learning for faculty members exposed to the teaching portfolio as a developmental, and then an evaluative tool. Based on the assumption that the portfolio would present a disorienting dilemma for faculty members, the researcher conducted document analysis of the two portfolios, prepared two years apart, for evidence of the different phases of transformative learning. Qualitative interviews with a sample of faculty members whose portfolio writing showed signs of transformative learning expanded on their experiences, with a focus on the experience and the portfolio interviews. This paper presents the preliminary findings and analysis from the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformative Learning Theory (TLT)

Transformative learning is defined as the process by which previously uncritically related assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better validate (Cranton, 2000; Mezirow, 2000). The three central themes to transformative learning are personal experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse. TLT integrates elements from earlier domains in adult learning theory including andragogy, reflective practice, emancipatory learning, and critical theory.

There are four ways that transformative learning can occur (Mezirow, 2000). The first is by elaborating existing frames of reference, the assumptions and expectations we hold that affect our experiences in the world. The second is by learning new frames of references. Transforming points of view or habits of mind are the other two ways transformative learning occurs. Habits of mind, predispositions for how we interpret the meaning of an experience, are expressed as points of view, or what we experience and how we experience it.

Perspective transformation is a structural reorganization of the way a person looks at himself (Mezirow, 1991). Critical reflection and discourse are the two key elements of perspective transformation. Mezirow (1991) describes critical reflection as a rational process of an individual seeing that previously held views no longer fit; these views are too narrowing or limiting. Reflection helps an individual to be more open to making meaning of an experience. When reflection is based on why what happened is important, premise reflection, this often leads to transformed habits of mind because we are questioning the validity of the assumptions underlying how we see the world.

Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) is triggered by a disorienting dilemma, which prompts self-examination. Next, there is a critical assessment of one's assumptions, followed by recognition that one's discontent is shared. There is then an exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions. A course of action must be planned, with acquisition of new knowledge and skills to fulfill this plan. The last phases include trying out new roles, gaining confidence and competence in new roles and relationships, and finally, reintegration into one's life with the new perspective.

Teaching Portfolios in Higher Education

Lea (2015) describes academic practice in three dimensions: teaching and learning, research and publication, and leadership and management. While the research and publication

dimension is assessed in terms of tangible outputs, the assessment of the teaching and learning dimension is more open to interpretation across the different elements of teaching, including planning, delivery, and assessment. Teaching portfolios emerged in teacher education programs in the 1980's as a tool for assessment and reflection (Jones, 2010). As the emphasis on teaching excellence increases in significance, this platform enables faculty to present evidence that supports the scope and quality of their teaching performance in the areas of skills, abilities, attitudes, philosophies, and methodologies (Selden et al., 2010). This scope is not readily obtained through traditional faculty assessment practices, including student evaluations and observations.

The teaching portfolio is designed to allow faculty to select documents and materials that showcase their teaching accomplishments for examination by others (Selden et al., 2010). The portfolio is not designed to document all aspects of one's work, but rather a selection of work that contributes to meaningful analysis of teaching performance, evidence, and goals. The portfolio consists of material from oneself (statement of teaching responsibilities, philosophy, methodologies, teaching materials, improvement activities, and goals) and material from others (student course evaluations, teaching observations, improvement activities, and honors or other recognition). These examples are not exhaustive and the common thread of presented materials is that they are representative of effective teaching and student learning (Selden et al., 2010).

In addition to assessment, the portfolio is used as a tool for professional development as mechanism to improve performance. Selden et al. (2010) describe the portfolio as a valuable tool for development for the following reasons: (1) high level of personal investment due to the personal preparation of the portfolio and supporting documents, (2) this preparation promotes reflection, and (3) it is grounded in discipline-based pedagogy, acknowledging the context of one's work. Reflection, defined in the context of the professional portfolio, is a process of "critically examining one's present and past practices as a means of building one's knowledge and understanding in order to improve practice" (Davis, 2006). Although there are other factors, the reflection that occurs during the portfolio process could lead to transformative learning.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research study consisted of a two stages of data collection. In the first stage, the researcher conducted a document analysis of faculty portfolios from 2013, and then again for the same faculty members who completed the portfolio for a second time in 2015. The data was coded using pre-established themes. The second stage consisted of qualitative interviews with eight faculty members, selected after the document analysis due to the presence of transformative learning themes in the second portfolio. The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. These interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis with the preliminary data collected from the document analysis.

FINDINGS

The data collected in this study shows evidence of critical reflection that may lead to transformative learning. The findings are presented in two categories: (a) descriptions of the portfolio and initial submission, and (b) documented differences between the two portfolio submissions.

Portfolio Descriptions and Initial Experiences

At the start of the interviews, each faculty member was asked to define what they think a portfolio is. The way the faculty member articulates what this process means to them, in their own words, supports the themes developed from the document analysis in the areas of reflection and improvement. Some examples of these definitions are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. *Examples of Faculty Definitions of the Portfolio*

Interview Question: In your own words, what do you think a portfolio is?	<i>“...an opportunity to think about what I am doing. To be able to formalize my reflections and justify what I do in order to make improvements.”</i>
	<i>“...analyze what you do every day, an inspection of your job, time to put words on what we do.”</i>
	<i>“A moment to see how I can improve.”</i>
	<i>“Time to reflect on my own work. It is a learning process.”</i>
	<i>“Documentation – a world view of my teaching to shape future direction. A touchpoint for goals and feedback.”</i>

After defining the portfolio, the faculty members were asked to discuss planning for the first portfolio and the components related to the interview – format and discussion, outcomes, feedback. When preparing the first portfolio, the faculty described this planning and preparation as stressful and as a time to follow directions and guidelines provided, even if they were minimal. While support was provided in faculty development workshops and broad guidelines, the idea of explaining one’s practice as an educator was unfamiliar. This was heightened for new faculty members, with one describing the initial portfolio preparation as follows: “...my first year of teaching, and now I have to think about what I do and explain it to others, which for me is stressful.”

The faculty members described the portfolio interview as a positive experience to engage in discourse over their work, accomplishments to date, and to discuss opportunities to improve practice. Although some faculty expressed uncertainty about the actual interview, there was an overall consensus of it being a collegial discussion and sharing. One faculty described the experience as follows:

“I was impressed (that the person had read my work in detail) and intrigued, which gave me a good feeling at the start. This profession can be lonely and this was a nice time to share.”

Faculty members were also asked how they would describe the portfolio process to a new colleague. All of them used key words - reflect, improve, revisit, new ideas, and introspective, to describe the work. Each faculty member focused on the independent, reflective nature of the portfolio, as opposed to the discourse that is also part of the process. Some examples of these descriptions are shared in Table 2.

Table 2. *Faculty Explanations of the Portfolio Process*

Interview Question: If you had to explain the process to a new colleague, how would you do it?	<i>“A time to stop, be introspective, and reflect in order to be proactive. Revisit what you are doing and strategize for what’s coming.”</i>
	<i>“You won’t enjoy it, but you will love the process because you can focus on yourself and celebrate your teaching potential. You will also be forced to think about new ideas and what more can I do?”</i>
	<i>“...simply reflect on what you do and what you can improve.”</i>
	<i>“A moment to take the time to think about what you do and why.”</i>
	<i>“It is an introspective look at the way we work. We need to really analyze and think about how we work.”</i>

Documented Differences Between Submissions

While the initial findings indicate the portfolio presenting as a disorienting dilemma, the faculty members described the time between the two portfolios as time to refine, reflect, and focus more on the why they do what they do, as opposed to just the what. Faculty members were asked to focus on the second portfolio and describe how the planning, preparation, and interview were different from the first time. Table 3 presents an overview of how some faculty responded to questions focusing on differences between submissions. While the faculty members respond in different ways, the common themes described include an increase in reflection, responding to feedback and aligning with criteria, and selectivity in what is included.

Table 3. *Examples of Faculty Descriptions of Updating the Portfolio*

	What does updating mean to you?	What was different?	How did your portfolio evolve?
Faculty #1	“...I had to focus on relating activities and the things I do to categories.”	“Before I wrote everything. Now I had to determine what was valuable.”	“It was more about what this means rather than just what I do.”
Faculty #2	“The changes made required me to justify my work.”	“It was a daunting task to review all of the criteria and my work.”	“It is hard to say, but this time it felt more administrative and a requirement than as a reflective exercise.”
Faculty #3	“Objective – adding in new information, almost mechanical. Subjective – revising my teaching philosophy and	“I wanted to be sure to fill any gaps and articulate the things I do. I realized that there was important things I left out the	“I saw myself evolve as now I have been teaching for more than 6 years.”

	modifying to our context.”	first time.”	
Faculty #4	“Put new things in, discuss changes you have made.”	“I had to discuss things in the way of I do this because...”	“I feel proud and able to discuss this work with others. I shared it with my family and friends to continue analyzing after it was done.”
Faculty #5	“I already knew the structure and what was expected in terms of content. Now I had to revise and add.”	“I was able to discuss more about how I have worked to adapt to different learners and styles.”	“I was able to think about more of where I can improve.”

DISCUSSION

After thorough analysis of the findings in this study, four themes emerge to support evidence of transformative learning through the portfolio process. These themes include (a) the portfolio process presenting as a disorienting dilemma, (b) a distinct shift in thinking and professional roles, (c) evidence of critical reflection, and (d) a recognition of the significance of discourse and openness to feedback for continuous improvement.

As the first step in TL is the presence of a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2000), it is critical to link how the process presents as such. The common element discussed by all faculty is this was the first experience with documenting their practice. The portfolio was introduced as a developmental tool at first, but within two years, its purpose became two-fold: developmental and evaluative. This transition can also be considered a disorienting dilemma as not only is this a new perspective on the process, but it is also the first formal evaluation system for faculty at the institution.

The second emerging theme is the recognition of a change in one’s thinking and professional role, which was recognized at different times, but became concrete during the second portfolio submission. Not only is there a change in role, but a distinct awareness of the process surrounding this shift. One faculty member described the transition from a professional to an educator in the following way:

“I needed to clarify my role as an instructor. I have to send out the message as a lecturer, not as a cook. The students here are future managers, not cooks or waiters.”

This individual was used to working in a structured kitchen environment with other hospitality professionals, but he recognized that his role of a lecturer required him to lead a class with a different perspective.

Another faculty member described a shift in her role as an educator to a role as a leader for colleagues. This required her to revise, modify, and modernize the courses she was responsible for. She described this new role, and how it promotes critical thinking, in the following way:

“I don’t always remember the logic or reasoning why one task is done before another...in explaining to someone else, I am forced to justify and really understand what the course is about and the coherence of why it is taught in this way.”

The next theme is evidence of critical reflection, as evident in the different documents and discussed in the interviews. The statement of teaching philosophy document evolved between the first and second submissions, with a visible move from simply what I do to the why. An increase in theoretical backing and a cohesive alignment of the philosophy with the other sections of the portfolio also demonstrate critical thinking. This is also seen in discussion of personal teacher development, where the faculty members describe what they are doing to understand pedagogy and their practice. In addition to learning new concepts, they are able to reflect on how they put this knowledge and skills into practice in the classroom when discussing the teaching delivery portion of the document. Critical reflection was also demonstrated during the portfolio interviews where the faculty member discussed their work in more detail and received formal feedback.

One faculty member wrote about his ability to balance his personal beliefs about teaching with the abilities and level of the learners he works with. He describes this as follows:

“I believe that all teaching endeavors are the building blocks for a student’s self-actualization in the long term. However, I also believe that as a teacher I must consciously strive to support both the short and medium term goals of my students. Specifically undergraduate and master’s level programs in hospitality administration are aimed at efficient application of academic learning...effective teaching facilitates the application of firm theoretical underpinnings to real world situations.”

In our subsequent discussion during the interview stages, this faculty member elaborated on how he was able to shape his way of thinking and articulate this in his teaching philosophy and practice. He discussed how the feedback from his first portfolio, combined with other reflection and discourse, helped him develop this enhanced perspective, which illustrates evidence of perspective transformation.

The last theme is the recognition of the significance of discourse and openness to feedback for continuous improvement. In addition to discourse during the portfolio process, the faculty members highlighted other times when discourse with colleagues helped them to further reflect and consider new perspectives. This includes dialogue after an observation, following a peer observation process with selective focus on improvement, participating in and leading faculty development workshops, and formative feedback from students.

LIMITATIONS

While the purpose of the research project is to explore learning that occurs during a faculty portfolio process, the researcher acknowledges that some limitations exist. The participants in this study were limited to faculty at a university of applied science in Switzerland. A tenure process for faculty does not exist at the institution, so the researcher acknowledges that in traditional universities with a tenure process, the findings would present differently. A second limitation is that three of the faculty members did in fact use their portfolio as evidence during a promotion process. This may have had an impact on the

participants experience with the second portfolio, which was also used during the promotion process. The final limitation to consider is related to language as not all of the participants identify English as their native language.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to explore how the portfolio process can lead to transformative learning for faculty members. While the portfolio provides a platform that fosters transformative learning through critical reflection on one's practice (Seldin et al., 2010), reflection itself does not definitively lead to perspective transformation. The four themes of analysis provide evidence to support transformative learning and the themes of critical reflection, personal experience, and rational discourse (Mezirow, 2000), but further exploration is needed to probe if the transformative learning is a result of the portfolio process or if it occurs in another context and is realized with the reflection and discourse during the portfolio process.

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