Teaching portfolios in higher education and their effects: An explorative study

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Abstract

Although many authors claim benefits of teaching portfolios for use in higher education settings, there are few empirical studies that investigate these benefits.

This article deals with the question of whether teaching portfolios are used in higher education, and if so, which effects they bring about. Furthermore, the attitude of teachers towards the use of teaching portfolios is examined. The study shows that currently not very many teachers are using teaching portfolios. When used, a teaching portfolio is an instrument that can bring about some important positive effects. Respondents report that, due to the use of portfolios, they were stimulated to reflect on their own teaching, to actualise the learning content, to improve their course materials, to search for alternative educational methods, etc. When teachers are using teaching portfolios it is important that, besides any negative effects, they also experience positive effects. If this is not the case, teachers will see the teaching portfolio only as an extra administrative inconvenience.

1. Introduction

During the last decade, not only learning has changed to a large extent in the direction of more co-operative learning and using authentic situations and problems as a starting point (Dochy, Segers, Van den Bossche, & Gijbels, 2003; Gillies, 2004), but also teaching has changed and the need for monitoring teaching quality and professional development by means of portfolios has emerged (Kelchtermans, 1993; Smith & Tillema, 2001). A teaching portfolio consists of a collection of documents and reflections about a person’s teaching competences (Lally, 2000). Complementary to this, this collection must show us the efforts, the progress and the achievements of a teacher (Järvinen & Kohonen, 1995). In the literature, teaching portfolios are seen to have several purposes. Smith and Tillema (2001) name four main purposes: documentation of performance, monitoring growth, revealing discrepancies in development, and enhancing self-responsibility. Reflective analysis and artifacts are seen as two major components of a teaching portfolio (Berk, 1999; Wolf, 1996). Järvinen and Kohonen (1995) state that a teacher is able to come to a deeper self understanding through reflection. In this way, a teaching portfolio can be seen as a vehicle for the growth and the learning of a teacher (Athanases, 1994). Järvinen and Kohonen (1995)
call such further development of educational knowledge and skills the autobiography of growth. As personal development is mostly an action over time, also creating a teaching portfolio is not an activity at one particular moment in time, but a process that needs to be realised over a certain span of time (Meyer & Tusin, 1999; Wolf, 1991; Wolf, 1996).

The way in which a teacher uses a teaching portfolio strongly depends on the objectives which are set (Centra, 1994; Zeichner & Wray, 2001). Depending on the objectives, which people set themselves or are set by others, one can create a teaching portfolio to meet the demands of an external evaluation (Hurst, Wilson, & Cramer, 1998) or to reflect upon one’s own professional skills (Järvinen & Kohonen, 1995; Smith & Tillema, 1998; Tillema & Smith, 2000).

In short, the portfolio can have two goals: development and evaluation (Burns, 1999; Centra, 1993; Doolittle, 1994; Seldin, 1997; Snadden, 1999; Tillema, 1998). Tillema and Smith (2000) placed these objectives of portfolios on a continuum. At one end of this is professional development, at the other is striving for a certificate for a promotion, selection of job offer. As well as this, they suggested a second dimension that measures whether the use of a teaching portfolio is voluntary or obligatory. If these two dimensions were combined, one would get four perceptions of the use of portfolios. Tillema and Smith (2000) place the terms self-review, self-evaluation and self-assessment—distinguished by Powell (2000), speaking about the grammar of internal evaluation—on this continuum. Furthermore, Tillema and Smith add a fourth type of assessment, ‘self-appraisal’, to it.

It can be noted that the way in which teachers use teaching portfolios depends, on the one hand, on the degree to which they strive towards optimising their professional development or towards obtaining a promotion and on the other hand, on the voluntary or obligatory formulation of a teaching portfolio (Smith & Tillema, 2001).

There are teachers who put together a teaching portfolio to obtain a doctoral degree. They work towards the goal of an external evaluation. Such striving may, or may not, be stimulated by the teaching institution. If teachers put their teaching portfolios together from such a point of view, this can be named as self—review or self—appraisal, depending on whether there is any obligation from the teaching institution. However, there are also initiatives which have the objective of promoting teaching portfolios as instruments for the optimisation of teachers’ professional development by self—reflection on their performance. If a teacher creates a teaching portfolio because of the latter purpose, and does this voluntarily, one can say that the portfolio is being used for self—assessment. Self—evaluation is the term used if the teacher is aiming to optimize his professional development but is being forced by the educational institution to create a teaching portfolio (Powell, 2000; Smith & Tillema, 2001).

In the past, teachers often used a teaching portfolio because by doing so their teaching practice could be confirmed by examples (Wolf, 1991). According to Wolf (1991), there are two reasons for this: either they were taking their doctoral degree and had to illustrate their teaching methods with good examples, or they had received a reprimand and had to look for evidence to prove that they were indeed good teachers. In other words, a product was being delivered. The big disadvantage of such a teaching portfolio was that only achievement mattered. No attention was given to the reflective process which teachers had to go through to get to such a product (Tillema, 1998). Since the majority of teachers are not eligible to take a doctoral degree or do not have to fear negative criticism, this group is not stimulated to draw up a teaching portfolio (Wolf, 1991). After all, they do not have to evaluate their teaching performance to meet external demands. Yet such investigations of one’s own educational performance may prove to be beneficial to professional development (Tillema, 1998). Projects such as the ‘Teacher Assessment Project’ (Wolf, 1991) investigated the roles which teaching portfolios could play besides that of the one-sided tendency of achieving a positive evaluation. Wolf concluded that a teaching portfolio “can (and should) also serve such purposes as promoting the development of individual teachers and highlighting exemplary practices” (p. 131).

Frequently, authors make a primary distinction between different forms of portfolios: evaluation, employment and development portfolios (Frederick, McMahon, & Shaw, 2000; Hurst, Wilson, & Cramer, 1998; Lally, 2000). In both evaluation and employment portfolios, teachers mainly discuss their best work as a teacher (Frederick et al., 2000; Lally, 2000). They are advised to do this so that their educational skills can be demonstrated (Frederick et al., 2000; Lally, 2000; Smith & Tillema, 2001). These two forms of teaching
portfolios have evaluation as their final goals. A development portfolio is strongly focussed on the process of reflection that teachers have to undergo when creating a teaching portfolio. Teachers should undertake initiatives for improving their teaching practice via development portfolios (LaBoskey, 2000; Lally, 2000).

Although, the dictionary describes a teaching portfolio as a file or folder, authors use the term teacher portfolio or teaching portfolio in a lot of different ways, varying from small nuances to a whole other understanding of the term. For this reason we developed our own definition of a teaching portfolio, based upon recent literature (Athanas, 1994; Borko, Michalec, Timmons, & Siddle, 1997; Darling, 2001; Doolittle, 1994; Lally, 2000; Järvinen & Kohonen, 1995; Murray, 1995; Seldin, 1997; Wolf & Dietz, 1998); A teaching portfolio is a purposeful collection of evidence, consisting of descriptions, documents and examples of what is good teaching for the teacher. Moreover, it contains reflections upon one’s educational practice (including illustrations of its complexity). Such a teaching portfolio can be managed by the teacher himself or by a central internal authority. Using a teaching portfolio, the teacher passes through a learning process aiming at improving the individual and institutional quality.

This definition is used in the following empirical study.

2. Empirical study

The main research question of this study is twofold: ‘Are teaching portfolios really used in higher education, and if so, which effects could they bring about?’

In order to find an answer to these main questions, we formulated the following, more specific, research questions:

1. Are teaching portfolios used by teachers?
2. Which forms of teacher portfolios are used?
3. How are teaching portfolios used?
4. What are the reasons for starting to use a teacher portfolio?
5. What do teachers see as possible consequences of a positively evaluated teaching portfolio (if the teaching portfolio is evaluated)?
6. What do teachers see as possible consequences of a negatively evaluated teaching portfolio (if the teaching portfolio is evaluated)?
7. Which effects are experienced due to the use of teaching portfolios?
8. What is the attitude of teachers towards the use of teaching portfolios in their educational organisation?
9. Does the attitude of teachers towards the use of teaching portfolios in their educational organisation depend on their gender, age or educational organisation?

3. Design of the study

3.1. Procedure

In order to investigate whether teaching portfolios are really used in higher education, and if so which effects they could bring about, an empirical study was set up by means of a survey. We also tried to understand the purposes and effects of the use of portfolios (Silverman, 2000). Furthermore, the attitudes of teachers towards the use of teaching portfolios were examined.

3.2. Subjects

This study took place in three schools for higher vocational education and in one university. Those institutions were selected at random. Three hundred and sixty four teachers were asked to fill out the questionnaire. School A had 33.04% of the respondents, school B 24.35%, school C 9.57% and university A 33.04%. For each institution, at least one contact person was appointed to distribute and collect the questionnaires.

A higher proportion of female teachers (53.85%) than male teachers (46.15%) participated in this research. Furthermore, most of the respondents were older than 40 years: 36.8% of them were aged between 40 and 49, and 36.8% of them were over 50. 17% of the respondents were between 30 and 39 years old.

In total, 364 questionnaires were sent out, of which 129 were returned. The response rate was 44.5% for school A, 40% for school B, 11% for school C and 49.4% for university A. During the data collection and analysis, it was discovered that 12 of the received questionnaires were not filled out in a proper manner. Hence, 117 questionnaires were entered in the analysis, representing a total response of 32.1%.
3.3. Possible causes of non-response

Analysis of the causes of non-response seemed to be of interest (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). From interviews with the different contact persons in the schools, we learned that a possible cause of non-response could be the time at which the questionnaires were sent out. School A and university A got the questionnaires at the end of the school year. This is quite a demanding time for teachers. Often exams are still taking place, exams must be evaluated and deliberations must be done.

At university A, 49.4% of the filled in questionnaires were returned, in spite of the busy time of year. The contact person from university A remarked that a few respondents were working at different departments of the university from where the questionnaires were distributed. As a consequence, those respondents filled out the questionnaire only once.

A second possible explanation for non-response was fear on the part of the teachers. When the questionnaires were sent out for the second time, while all teachers were present, some of them told the researchers, who were there to clarify the goals of the research, that they did not want to participate because of the contact person. They doubted the strict anonymity of the gathered data. After all, due to the information about gender, age and educational organisation, the contact person could trace the identity of the respondent. Clarifying the fact that the contact person should only collect the questionnaires was not enough to persuade those teachers to participate.

From the written comments on the questionnaire and from a meeting at school A, it seemed that not all the teachers knew about ‘teaching portfolios’. Some of them explained that they could not fill in the questionnaire because of this. Nevertheless, the questionnaire included a general definition of a teaching portfolio, in order to avoid this kind of problem.

A final explanation for non-response was the increasing workload with which teachers are dealing. This was also mentioned by the respondents in their written comments on the questionnaire. We can conclude that in this research, there are several different causes of non-response. This non-completion of the survey represents possibly a response bias which limits the studies generalization.

4. Research instrument

For the purpose of this explorative research a questionnaire was developed, consisting of open ended and multiple choice questions. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. In part A, personal data, such as gender, age, institution were gathered. Part B contained questions about the teaching portfolio. Finally in part C, teachers could record personal comments.

The questions about the teaching portfolio (part B) were prefaced by a definition of a teaching portfolio (see earlier). This definition was followed by questions dealing with the ‘application’ of the portfolios. Teachers were asked to indicate whether they kept a teaching portfolio or not, or whether someone else was keeping one for them. If so, they were asked how and why they were using it, how it was being used, etc. These questions were searching for an answer to the first part of the main research question: “Are teaching portfolios really used in higher education?” Furthermore, part B looked for reactions of teachers to the use of teaching portfolios and is aimed at the second part of the main research question: “Which effects could teaching portfolios bring out?”. The development of the questions was based upon findings from the literature (Athanas, 1994; Centra, 1993, 1994; Lally, 2000; Smith & Tillema, 1998). In part C of the questionnaire, teachers were asked for some general comments about teaching portfolios in higher education.

In a short introductory letter, attached to the questionnaire, we briefly clarified the purposes of the questionnaire.

5. Data analysis

For the analysis of the quantitative data we used descriptive statistics, T-tests, ANOVA and the Bonferroni method. The answers to the open questions were analysed in a qualitative way. We analysed the content of the answers and deduced some categories. Answers were classified according to these categories.

6. Results

6.1. The use of teaching portfolios

Only 13.3% of the respondents keep a teaching portfolio themselves; and for 8.8%, the institution keeps a teaching portfolio for them. Respondents mainly use teaching portfolios in a paper version
(43.5%) or in a partial paper, partial electronic version (43.5%). A completely electronic version of a teaching portfolio is only used by 13% of the portfolio users.

More than half of the respondents, namely 58.4%, are free to give personal meanings and interpretations to the use of their teaching portfolios. On the other hand, one fifth of the respondents are not free to give personal meanings and interpretations (16.7%; totally disagree, 4.2%; partly disagree). Furthermore, 66.7% of the respondents agree with the statement that teachers have to follow the guidelines of the policy makers. Seventy one percent of the respondents say their teaching is evaluated by using their teaching portfolio. Sixteen percent say their teaching is not evaluated by using their teaching portfolio.

Eighty four percent of the respondents agree with the position that teaching portfolios are seen as a way to reflect on the educational practice of teachers. Sixteen percent of the respondents do not agree with this use of a teaching portfolio. Furthermore, 72% of the respondents believe that teaching portfolios improve the educational qualities of teachers. Finally, 58.3% of the respondents agree that teaching portfolios are also used to improve the quality of the institution.

7. Reasons to start using a teaching portfolio

Since this question is only applicable to respondents who are using a teaching portfolio, this question is answered by 22.1% of the research population.

Many of the respondents (60.9%) reported that they started creating a teaching portfolio on their own initiative. The results also show that 26.1% of the respondents are obliged by their employer, namely the educational institution, to keep a teaching portfolio.

The remaining respondents (13%) started to use a teaching portfolio because it was recommended by the educational institution they are working for.

It is worth noting that none of the respondents started creating a teaching portfolio because it was recommended by colleagues.

8. Consequences of a positively evaluated teaching portfolio

Open ended questions concerning the consequences of a positively evaluated teaching portfolio delivered us written, qualitative data, which are sorted into categories. Next, these answers were counted. The results of this data processing are represented in the following paragraphs and listed in Table 1.

In total, 146 answers were counted. This means that some of the 117 respondents mentioned a few issues which were classified into more than one category. The non-response category represents 44 of the 146 answers. The next largest group is confirmation of a professional approach; 15.75% of the respondents think that confirmation of their professional approach is a possible positive consequence of a teaching portfolio. A few of the teachers' reactions will illustrate the given answers; “Recognition by the faculty instead of only by students”, “A positive encouraging word by an authority”. Opportunities for promotion also turn out to be a positively valued consequence of a teaching portfolio. This category holds 13.01% of the answers. The incentive to go on category counts for 8.9% of the answers. Increasing quality of education is another possible outcome for the respondents (6.16%). Respondents report that working with a teaching portfolio brings more clarity and reduces ambiguity about teachers' responsibilities. The respondents suggest that portfolios can result in more responsibilities (5.48%). The categories significant appraisal and no consequences each represent 4.79% of the answers. A few answers categorised under significant appraisal are: “pedagogical qualities will be taken into account for promotion and appointment to a post”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of consequences</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-response</td>
<td>30.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmation of professional approach</td>
<td>15.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for promotion</td>
<td>13.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentive to go on</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing quality of education</td>
<td>6.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More responsibilities</td>
<td>5.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant appraisal</td>
<td>4.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No consequences</td>
<td>4.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of solidarity</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay increase</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping syllabus/techniques up to date</td>
<td>1.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulating reflection</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No extra pay increase</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep taking refresher courses/keep optimizing</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative work</td>
<td>0.68</td>
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“objectiveness (hopefully) of educational effort and qualities”, “recognition of educational qualities in the personal portfolio, especially in the area of promotions”. The following reactions illustrate the answers in the no consequences category: “I don’t think that such a portfolio should be an instrument for evaluation throughout an authority. The pressure that lies on teachers is already high enough.”, “no consequences, because I think that a teaching portfolio should be an instrument to stimulate personal growth.”, “teaching portfolios as a result of a coached start of an educational career, of keeping up to date and adjusting, not of evaluation. A treasure-chest to look back and reflect on your own evolution.”. The next category is a feeling of solidarity, with 4.11% of the answers. A few teachers defined this feeling of solidarity: “an example for other colleagues, they will be stimulated to reach the same goals.”, “especially more opportunities to tune to colleagues.”. The pay increase category includes 2.74% of the answers. Keeping syllabus/techniques up to date is mentioned in 1.37% of the answers. The rest of the answers could be classified according to: stimulating reflection, no extra pay increase, keep taking refresher courses and keep optimizing, and more administrative work. Each of these counts for one answer from the respondents.

9. Consequences of a negatively evaluated teaching portfolio

The answers to the open ended questions concerning the consequences of a negatively evaluated teaching portfolio were also sorted into categories and counted. The following paragraphs and Table 2 show us the results.

We counted 142 reactions here. This means, again, that some of the 117 teachers gave answers which could be classified into different categories.

As with the question looking for possible consequences of a positively valued teaching portfolio, the non-response category is also the largest and counts for 43 of the 142 answers given, meaning 30.29%. The possible sanctions concerning the career category represents 16.9% of the answers.

The respondents name transfer to another job in their institution, slower career development, stagnation in career development and being dismissed as possible consequences of a negatively valued teaching portfolio. The next categories, reduced motivation and taking refreshers count for 9.86% of the answers each. Some of the respondents (8.45%) had the opinion that coaching could be a consequence of a negatively valued teaching portfolio. Respondents mean that coaching could help teachers to evolve to a positive evaluation. A quote from a teacher will illustrate this consequence: “Coaching within the educational institution (taking care of teachers) is essential. With this the working of it stands or falls.” Additionally, we identified the categories increased motivation to change, obligatory flexibility, increase in workload, and no consequences. Each of them represents 3.52% of the answers. As an example of an answer in the increased motivation to change category, a respondent remarked “Maybe a person is a bit more motivated to work on shortcomings, but this also happens without a teaching portfolio”. Another teacher said that a possible consequence of a negatively valued teaching portfolio is “work to do”. Examples of quotes from the obligatory flexibility category include: “obligation to ask advice from colleagues concerning another approach”, “a lot of consultations”, “looking for other methods for improving teacher tasks and textbooks or handbooks”. A response illustrating the no consequences category is “I think there should only be consequences for a positively valued portfolio”. The self-reflection, constructive appraisals, and bureaucracy categories each included 2.82% of the given answers. Finally there are three categories with one answer each: lack of concrete assistance, no financial sanctions and financial sanctions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Consequences of a negatively evaluated teaching portfolio</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Categories of consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible sanctions concerning career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking refreshers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased motivation to change</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obligatory flexibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase in workload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reflection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constructive appraisals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bureaucracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of concrete assistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>No financial sanctions</td>
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<td>Financial sanctions</td>
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</table>
10. Effects experienced due to the use of teaching portfolios

Since 77.9% of the respondents were not using a teaching portfolio, the vast majority (80.6%) of the respondents were not able to answer the questions concerning experienced effects. Those who were using a teaching portfolio mainly reported personal benefits (16.7%). Examples of effects noticed by teachers themselves include: “improved course materials”, “more student centred approach”, “a stimulus for myself to actualise and renew the course content in a constructive way, if necessary”, “rethink how you dealt with a particular situation: which are the minus points in it and how can you prevent those minus points?”, “stimulates reflection about your own educational approach”, etc.

A small part of the respondents (7.8%) experienced effects on their colleagues due to the use of teaching portfolios. A few examples of how those effects are verbalised are: “colleagues talk about what is in our portfolio”, “you get more respect for the approach of other colleagues and there is the possibility to adopt those approaches”.

Furthermore, 8.9% of the respondents using a teaching portfolio reported effects on their students. Examples of these are: “students show their appreciation for the efforts of the teacher”, “there is more clarity for students because you as a teacher have thought about possible pitfalls in advance”, “students are satisfied because of the fact they can and may show their own opinion and furthermore because consideration about it is shown (normally)”, “students are stimulated to co-operate on innovations and they evaluate those innovations very seriously and dutifully”.

Finally, effects by persons other than themselves, students or colleagues, were only experienced by 2% of the respondents. An example of an answer here is: “a teaching portfolio can be used by a superior during an appraisal”.

It must be noticed that respondents could choose more than one experienced effect.

11. Attitude of teachers towards the realisation of teaching portfolios in their educational organisations

Our research data show that 22.1% of the respondents were using a teaching portfolio. Nevertheless, it is interesting to find out what the attitudes of all the subjects are to the use of teaching portfolios in their educational organisations.

More than half of the respondents (53.3%) had a positive attitude towards the use of teaching portfolios in their educational organisations, if this is introduced gradually in the long term. Respondents gave a few reasons for this: for example “there is already so much administrative work”, “it must be adjusted to the working of the organisation”, “because we are in the middle of an innovation and as a novice teacher I’m still trying out some things (searching for the role of a teacher)”, “first we have to be acquainted with the contents, goals, usefulness and possibilities”. Some respondents (18.7%) shared the opinion that teaching portfolios should be introduced into their organisation as soon as possible. Those respondents specified why they were in favour of a quick introduction: “this is how they form an idea about what tasks I perform and their quality”, “it can give a large contribution to self evaluation and feedback, and it has a direct benefit for students”, “as a personal aid, not in the sense of evaluation; then you can do it by yourself and so it must not be enforced by the educational organisation”. Our research also showed that a substantial percentage of the respondents (28%) were set against the use of a teaching portfolio in their educational organisation. A few of the respondents clarified their opinions: “I do not believe in such paper and administrative work”, “it is not a guarantee of good work”, “they say that they have sympathy for the huge work pressure which we are under, but in psychological and material ways, we are loaded up more and more! Leave us alone!”, “it seems useful for younger colleagues, but I have a lot of experience and daily I reflect on the quality of education and therefore I do not need a teaching portfolio”, “because I believe that improving your education is a personal or collective aspiration, but it does not have to be documented”, “it increases bureaucracy and is patronizing”, etc.

12. Attitude of teachers depending on gender, age and educational organisation

In order to investigate the relationship between ‘gender’ and ‘attitude’, a t-test was performed.

No significant differences were found between male and female teachers regarding attitudes towards the realisation of a teaching portfolio ($t = -1.34$, $df = 104$, $p = .1843$).

Using an ANOVA we investigated whether there is a connection between the attitude of teachers
towards the realisation of a teaching portfolio and the variables age and educational organisation. 

The results show that there is no significant difference among these research groups concerning age ($F(3,108) = .15$ and $p = .9306$). The ANOVA also shows that there were no significant differences between the four different educational institutions involving the attitudes of the respondents ($F(3,106) = .39$ and $p = .7607$). We can conclude that there is no evidence to show that the attitude of teachers towards the realisation of teaching portfolios in their educational organisation is dependent on gender, age or educational organisation.

13. Conclusion and discussion

In order to answer the main research question ‘Are teaching portfolios really used in higher education, and if so which effects could they bring about?’, we investigated eight specific research questions and the general comments about teaching portfolios in higher education given by the respondents.

13.1. Are teaching portfolios really used in higher education?

In the current study, 22.1% of the respondents use a teaching portfolio. Some respondents are keeping a teaching portfolio by themselves (13.3%) and for others their institution is keeping a teaching portfolio centrally (8.8%). Most of the respondents keep a paper version or a partial paper, partial electronic version of a teaching portfolio. The majority of the respondents have started a teaching portfolio on their own initiative, but more than 1/4 of the respondents were obliged to do so by their employers. The majority of the respondents stated that a teaching portfolio is a form of evaluation (see also Davies & Le Mahieu, 2003), but they also see the instrument as a means to reflect on one’s own education and educational skills (Schön, 1987; Taylor, 1994; Wade & Yarbrough, 1996). It is seen as a way to improve the quality of their own education and also the quality of the educational institution.

13.2. Which effects could teaching portfolios bring about?

To a large extent, the respondents reported effects regarding themselves. If a portfolio is positively valued, most of the respondents expect an increasing quality of education or personal merits. These finding are in line with the findings of Wright, Knight, and Pomerleau (1999) and the work of Barrett (2000). If a portfolio is negatively valued, respondents share the opinion that a process of change, freedom and sanctions could be a possible effect. Respondents acknowledge the supportive function of a portfolio (see also Bird, 1990; Collins, 1993; Knight & Gallaro, 1994). The majority think that teaching portfolios are too time consuming and they worry about the extra administrative work portfolios will bring (see also Barton & Collins, 1993; Taylor, 1997). The majority of the respondents share the opinion that teaching portfolios contribute to the quality of education and believe that portfolios give judgements on the efforts of teachers (see also Green & O’Sullivan Smyser, 1996). Most of the respondents are in favour of the use of teaching portfolios, but 26% of the respondents in this study are against their use.

The results of this survey show that teachers in higher education are working with teaching portfolios, though only 1/5th of the research population were doing so. The majority of the respondents did not know about the concept of ‘teaching portfolios’ at all, or didn’t know about them in an adequate way. Furthermore, the reactions of the respondents tell us that teachers often have different ideas about teaching portfolios as found by Grover (1991) earlier. Some of them see them as curriculum vitae, others as instruments for reflection, others as instruments for evaluation, and still others see them as instruments to improve teaching quality. This fits with the view that there are different kinds of teaching portfolios: for example employment portfolios (Lally, 2000; Wolf & Dietz, 1998), evaluation portfolios (Lally, 2000; Smith & Tillema, 2001), and development portfolios (Lally, 2000; Smith & Tillema, 2001). Moreover, earlier research shows that teachers give highly personal interpretations to teaching portfolios (Doolittle, 1994; Wolf, 1991). Those remarks from the literature illustrate the findings from this research; namely that teachers cannot identify every type of portfolio with themselves.

Furthermore, this study shows that the use of portfolios can lead to certain effects. It seems that the use of portfolios can optimise the quality of education. The respondents explained that, due to the use of portfolios, they were stimulated to reflect on their own teaching, to actualise the learning
content, to improve course materials, to search for alternative educational methods, etc. Additionally, teaching portfolios are very useful for appraisals and make clear what the efforts of the teacher are. Teachers have certain benefits from the use of portfolios. These findings were also discovered in the literature (Berk, 1999; Järvinen & Kohonen, 1995; Murray, 1995; Wolf, 1996). Järvinen and Kohonen (1995) state that, thanks to the use of teaching portfolios, the efforts, improvements and achievements of a teacher are demonstrated. Berk (1999) and Wolf (1996) find reflection a typical feature of a teaching portfolio. Murray (1995) states that the use of teaching portfolios can improve the teaching quality of individual teachers and of the educational institution.

Further, this research shows that not all teachers experience the same effects from the use of teaching portfolios. It is important to realise that the use of teaching portfolios does not only have positive effects for teachers. Respondents point out that a negatively valued teaching portfolio could demotivate. Moreover, making a teaching portfolio is time consuming. Such less positive effects of teaching portfolios can also be found in the literature. Centra (1993) concludes from research that teachers who had a negative summative evaluation could feel discriminated. Smith and Tillema (1998) stress the fact that producing a teaching portfolio is a time consuming and laborious process.

In conclusion, this research shows that a teaching portfolio is an assessment instrument that could bring about some important positive effects. This instrument could also give rise to a lot of questions, especially in the initial phase. This means that teaching portfolios are not the ideal assessment instrument for all teachers. It is possible that some teachers are more stimulated to reflect on their professional actions and competences, and optimise their teaching more effectively, with other assessment instruments (see also Baratz-Snowden, 1991; Haertel, 1992). When teachers are using teaching portfolios it is important that, besides the negative effects, they also experience positive effects. If this is not the case, teachers will see the teaching portfolio only as an extra administrative inconvenience.

Finally, a formative use of a teaching portfolio seems to be obvious. After all, teachers want to have a clearer view of their own teaching, an improvement in their reflection on their own professional practices, a rethinking of the effectiveness of their own educational skills, etc. due to the use of a teaching portfolio (see also Mathers, Challis, Howe, & Field, 1999). Such a portfolio can give form and content to the process of growth that teachers go through during their educational career (Weeks, 1996). Portfolios can also be used for summative goals. The correct application of portfolios is essential; teachers must know in advance which aspects of their portfolio will be evaluated.

References


