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## The learning portfolio as a tool for stimulating reflection by student teachers

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### Citation

Mansvelder-Longayroux, D. D. (2006, December 6). *The learning portfolio as a tool for stimulating reflection by student teachers*. ICLON PhD Dissertation Series. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/5430>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/5430>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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## **Introduction**

This dissertation reports on the nature of reflection in student teachers' learning portfolios. Reflection is seen as an important principle for the training of teachers. The learning portfolio recently made its entrance as an instrument to stimulate reflection by student teachers on their development as teachers. The study of the learning portfolio as a tool for stimulating reflection by student teachers is central to this dissertation. This first chapter deals with the background to the study, the research questions, and the context of the study. We also describe the relevance of the study and the nature of the research. We conclude the chapter with an overview of the chapters that follow.

### **1.1 Background to the study**

#### **Reflection in teacher education**

It is almost impossible to imagine teacher education today without the concept of reflection as one of the guiding principles for professional development. For different but related reasons, reflection has become an important concept in the training of teachers. Firstly, teacher education institutes increasingly focus on the experiences of the student teachers themselves because of the gap student teachers perceive between the theory offered by the university and their teaching practice. In particular, attention is paid to the perception of these experiences by student teachers and the related conceptions about teaching and learning of student teachers. Reflection is seen as an important way to make explicit these often tacit conceptions, also called 'subjective theories', and to restructure them, if necessary, using 'objective theories' from scientific insights (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Korthagen, 2001). Secondly, the view on the teaching profession has changed. Teaching is no longer seen

as an application of separate teaching skills, but as a complex whole of thinking and acting together in which practical experiences and theoretical knowledge both play a role (see Verloop & Wubbels, 1994). Schön (1983) has often been cited within this framework. He was of the opinion that a professional makes decisions in each situation on the basis of various unique aspects of the situation. The changed view on teaching as being complex has enlarged the importance of reflection in teacher education. Thirdly, it is impossible to prepare student teachers for all situations that can possibly occur in teaching. Korthagen (2001) sees reflection as a condition for 'growth competence', the ability to steer one's own development as a teacher after initial teacher education. This ability to further develop oneself is important not only for teachers themselves, but also for the possibilities for change in school reforms. Griffiths (2000) writes that "*an emphasis on reflection as part of initial teacher education can be seen as only a limited aspect of its wider role. In particular, reflection in and on action can form an important part of all teachers' professional development, with possible benefits to the school, community and beyond*" (p.553). Finally, it is assumed that reflection plays an important role in the construction and integration of the personal practical knowledge of teachers (Meijer, 1999; Beijaard & De Vries, 1997).

### **The learning portfolio**

Several techniques are used in teacher education to stimulate reflection by student teachers. Examples are exchange of experiences with others (interview), journal writing, action research into one's own teaching practice, evaluation of one's own teaching using checklists or questionnaires, and the examination of cases (see Airasian, Gullickson, Hahn, & Farland, 1995; Zeichner & Liston, 1987). Teaching portfolios are used more and more for this purpose. The recent introduction of the use of portfolios in teaching and teacher education is grounded in a new vision of teacher assessment and professional development (Wolf & Dietz, 1998). New assessment methods have been developed recently that do justice to the complexity of teaching and learning to teach, and that offer insights into both the behaviour and the knowledge acquisition of teachers, contribute to professional development, and fit into a constructivist view of learning (Mabry, 1999; Uhlenbeck, Verloop, & Beijaard, 2002). The portfolio is one of these relatively new assessment methods, and it is intended to give a picture of both teachers' practical knowledge and their behaviour, and to encourage them to engage in professional self-development by reflecting on the way they function in their own teaching practice. In the learning portfolio (also known as the

professional development or process portfolio), reflection on one's own thinking and performance is a central component. The main focus of this type of portfolio is the student teacher's reflection on his or her own learning process with a view to advancing learning. Working on a learning portfolio should enable student teachers to concretize their learning process using information about their teaching practice and their course, and to think about their functioning in teaching practice in a structured way (Wolf & Dietz, 1998).

## **1.2 Purpose, research questions, and context of the study**

The first articles that reported the use of the portfolio in teacher education were very positive about the possibilities that the portfolio offers to stimulate reflection (Barton & Collins, 1993). It was assumed that by working on their portfolios student teachers are incited automatically to reflect on their own learning process and to reach a better understanding of teaching. Results from recent research into the portfolio as a tool for reflection indicate that student teachers do not automatically reflect on their experiences as a result of working on a portfolio (Borko, Michalec, Timmons, & Siddle, 1997; Krause, 1996; Lyons, 1998<sup>b</sup>; Meyer & Tusin, 1999; Wade & Yarbrough, 1996). In the portfolio literature, it is mentioned more and more often that the quality and value of the portfolio should be brought up for debate (Breault, 2004; Delandshere & Arens, 2003). Research on portfolios as a tool for reflection has especially focused on the experiences of student teachers with the portfolio. The content of the portfolio itself is not often an object of research. Zeichner and Wray (2001) write that systematic research must be done on the portfolio as a tool for stimulating reflection: "*We need to learn more about the nature and quality of reflection under different conditions of portfolio use*" (p. 619).

This study was aimed at describing the nature of reflection in the learning portfolios of student teachers. We explored the use of the learning portfolio among 21 student teachers during their one-year postgraduate teacher-training course at Leiden University in the Netherlands. The concept of reflection was operationalised in terms of learning activities (Vermunt & Verloop, 1999) that student teachers undertake while producing their portfolios. The general problem of the study was whether student teachers reflect in their learning portfolios and in what way. This general problem was divided into three research questions:

1. What is student teachers' understanding of working on a learning portfolio?
  - a. What functions in their learning process do student teachers ascribe to the learning portfolio?
  - b. How do the functions of the learning portfolio distinguished by the student teachers relate to each other?
2. How do student teachers reflect in their portfolios?
  - a. What learning activities do student teachers undertake as they compile their portfolios?
3. When and how do meaning-oriented learning activities manifest themselves in a portfolio theme?
  - a. What themes do student teachers include in their portfolios?
  - b. Which portfolio themes show meaning-oriented learning activities?
  - c. How do meaning-oriented learning activities manifest themselves within a portfolio theme in relation to the other learning activities in the theme?

### **1.3 Relevance of the study**

The study was undertaken in order to contribute to a better understanding of the operation of the learning portfolio. A description framework was developed to describe the nature of reflection in the learning portfolios of student teachers that can be used to explain the concept of reflection in relation to working on a portfolio. Such a framework for reflection had not been developed earlier, as a result of which it is difficult to compare results from portfolio research. To be able to judge the value of the portfolio as a tool for reflection, it is important that a comparison of results can be made. Insight into the nature of reflection in the portfolio can help the designers of teacher education courses to formulate the purpose of making a portfolio more specifically and to fine-tune the use of the portfolio and the portfolio supervision to that.

### **1.4 Nature of the research**

The study is of a descriptive nature. At the moment that this study was

started, little research had been done into the portfolio itself. Portfolio research tended to concentrate on the experiences of student teachers with the portfolio (Borko et al., 1997; Wade & Yarbrough, 1996). For this reason we chose to conduct a qualitative, small-scale, in-depth study. This enabled us extensively and profoundly to describe the nature of reflection in the portfolios, so that justice could be done to the portfolio data as they occur in the practice of the teacher education course. We used retrospective in-depth interviews with student teachers, and their portfolio evaluation reports, to get a picture of how the portfolio had functioned in the course from the perspective of the students. The main method used in the study was content analysis of the portfolios of the student teachers.

The content analysis of the portfolios was an iterative process between theory and data. Theory from educational psychology, in particular the learning activities distinguished by Vermunt and Verloop (1999), was used in the process of developing the system of categories. The data were examined on the basis of Vermunt and Verloop's descriptions of learning activities. The categories of learning activities were adjusted and the descriptions were adapted to the data. This process led to the final system of categories for the analysis of the data. This system of categories was also used for the analysis of the interviews and portfolio-evaluation reports.

To monitor the validity and reliability of the study, following Denzin and Lincoln (1994) and Miles and Huberman (1994), in reporting the results of the study we paid explicit attention to the description of the use of the portfolio in the training course and the context in which the portfolio functioned. During the analysis and coding of the data, we also used peer debriefing with other researchers and coding checks. We described the procedure for analysis and coding extensively and we illustrated the results using concrete data.

## **1.5 Overview of the study**

In Chapter 2, we answer the first research question: what is student teachers' understanding of working on a learning portfolio? We examined the perceptions of the student teachers of the functions of the learning portfolio in their learning process. Based on the results of content analyses of retrospective interviews with the student teachers and their portfolio-evaluation reports on their experiences of working on a portfolio, we distinguished different functions that the learning portfolio fulfilled in their learning process.

In Chapter 3, we answer the second research question: how do student teachers reflect in their learning portfolios? We describe how we searched for an adequate operationalisation of the concept of reflection. We examined studies on reflection, portfolios, and student learning. The development of the category system for describing reflection in the portfolios is described and illustrated. We report on the variation in reflection we found in the portfolios.

In Chapter 4, we focus on those learning activities that are geared to the understanding of experiences. We refer to these learning activities as meaning-oriented learning activities, as distinguished from action-oriented learning activities. In this chapter we answer the third research question: when and how do these meaning-oriented learning activities manifest themselves in a portfolio theme? The content analysis of the portfolios focused on the content of the portfolio themes to which these learning activities refer and the relation with other learning activities in a theme. We illustrate the structure of these portfolio themes.

Finally, in Chapter 5, we return to the research questions and draw some main conclusions. We look back on the study and raise some points for discussion. We conclude this chapter with suggestions for further research and practical implications of the study for teacher education.