

The head and the heart: The personal portfolio and the development of identity as a tertiary educator

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We are committed to providing conversational learning processes that provide tertiary teachers with spaces that encourage genuine self-stocktaking, opportunities to experiment with possibilities and acknowledge mistakes. Learning contexts like this help tertiary teachers to find their unique personal voices, recognise the emotional dimensions of becoming and being a teacher and build teaching practices which in turn promote students' growth. However the current higher educational context may be inimical to open-ended process-orientated learning opportunities; the focus on production, measurement and outputs does not easily accommodate the slow, often invisible shifts in teacher self-understanding which will eventually translate into enriched learning experiences for students. In the contemporary production model of the university the idea of inviting teachers to explore "who I am as a tertiary educator" may be perceived as an extravagant indulgence, dangerously akin to the terrain of therapy. However, we believe that the primacy of the production model in the tertiary sector makes it even more imperative to preserve a vision which claims that "Universities....are mandated to make or to help to make us human beings in the fullest sense of those words - not just trained workers or knowledgeable citizens but responsible heirs and members of human culture" (Wendell Berry, cited in Palmer and Zajonc, 2010, p.1).

This vision underpins the design of the personal portfolio task, an assessment task in the Postgraduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching, a qualification for university and other tertiary educators. In response to the findings of an earlier research study (Fitzpatrick and Spiller, 2010) the assessment task was changed from one multi-purpose portfolio to two portfolios. These are the Career Portfolio for institutional purposes, and the Personal Portfolio which was designed as a reflective and developmental space. In this, developing teachers are encouraged to explore their own teaching and learning narratives and the evolution of their beliefs and practices. Over time, we have watched teachers unravel their educational histories and evaluate their current beliefs and practices in the light of these histories. Our excitement in watching this learning unfold prompted us to set up a more systematic research inquiry into the way that creating these portfolios impacted on the development of their tertiary education identity. We decided that it was time to go beyond the "feel good" factor and put the portfolio learning experience under the research microscope.

Our research question was to try to identify the nature of the impact of portfolio writing on the formation of tertiary educator identity, teacher engagement with theoretical ideas and the impact on teacher thinking and behaviours. Additionally, we wanted to see if there was any discernible difference in the impact on university educators and on educators from other tertiary institutions. Our findings are based on a thematic analysis of the portfolios themselves, student reflections on the process of compiling the portfolio and semi-structured interviews.

References

- Fitzpatrick, M. & Spiller, D. (2010). The teaching portfolio: institutional imperative or teacher's personal journey? *Journal of Higher Education Research and Development*, 29 (6) 679-692
- Palmer, P. J. & Zajonc, A. (2010). *The Heart of higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass