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Portfolio-Based Teaching and Learning: The Portfolio as Critical Praxis with Social Work Students

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Abstract

The portfolio and its use have been widely documented across various disciplines and at different levels in education. The portfolio is a useful assessment tool for evaluating student learning and a process-oriented approach that encourages critical reflexive thought and self-directed learning. More recent social work education literature discusses the portfolio as a synthesis of theory, practice, and critical self-reflection. In our program, students were expected to focus on the context of power, privilege, social location, and identity within their critical self-reflections. In this paper, the authors reflect on the launch of the first portfolio course as an alternative to the field placement for undergraduate students of social work on-campus at a large urban university. This alternative course was launched within an anti-oppressive social work program and we discuss the opportunities and challenges that arise.

Keywords: portfolio, social work education, anti-oppression, critical reflection

Schools of social work are continuously looking for ways to provide exciting curriculum and new pedagogical approaches that respond to the diverse needs of students. In our undergraduate social work program at a large university in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, we strive to create meaningful educational experiences by listening to the needs and concerns of students. The design and implementation of the portfolio course as an alternative to a traditional placement is one way of meeting the learning objectives for the field credit in a flexible way.

In the field placement course, the portfolio was designed as a documented form to illustrate students' learning in their workplaces, based on the learning objectives of the field education course. As such, students identified their current knowledge, skills, and values, and developed learning goals for themselves within the objectives of the course. The successful meeting of these goals was documented and reflected on by students in their own portfolio.

This paper discusses the launch of the on-campus portfolio course as an alternative format for the field credit. Students with extensive paid work experience in the human and social services sectors and who were currently employed on a full-time basis (or equivalent) were eligible to apply to the portfolio section of the field placement course. Students submitted an application package that included confirmation of past and present job responsibilities, as a means to assess prior and potential learning in their current workplace to meet the learning objectives of the field education placement credit. Applications were reviewed and approved by a faculty committee, chaired by the Associate Director of Field Education. Students who were selected for the portfolio course participated in the practice seminar course which met weekly, similar with students doing regular placements for the field education credit. However, instead of completing field placement hours, they were required to develop a self-directed portfolio assignment grounded in their employment experiences, which documented in various ways students' learning and critical reflections as outlined in the course objectives.

Discussions and reflections on the pedagogical, administrative, and course development processes occurred prior to the course being taught this past year. For further discussion on these processes, see Preston, Clarke, and Ajandi (2012). The portfolio course was first taught off-campus to First Nations students and was then redesigned for on-campus students (see Clarke, Ajandi, & Preston, 2012). For the purpose of this paper, the focus is on the implementation of the first portfolio course delivered on-campus in our social work program. We will discuss how the portfolio course complemented the critical anti-oppressive curricula and even challenged traditional pedagogies and norms in higher education. The possibilities for deep and critical reflexivity, attention to power and subject position, and alternative ways of learning and knowing offered by portfolios are also explored in this paper. Observations on the challenges and limitations of the course will also be discussed.

The Emerging Portfolio

The portfolio has been a component of curricula across several disciplines throughout the last few decades (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004; Coleman, Rogers, & King, 2002; Franklin, 1996; Schatz, 2004; Sidell, 2003; Swigonski, Ward, Mama, Rodgers, & Belicose, 2006; Taylor, Thomas, & Sage, 1999). It serves an important purpose in demonstrating students' knowledge, values, and skills and can be used upon completion to enhance post-secondary, graduate, or work

applications. Portfolios have been used across various disciplines to show diverse expressions of students' work. The portfolio offers an opportunity for students to be introspective, to reflect upon their strengths and learning needs, and to select the pieces they want to include in their portfolios and understand the meaning of those choices. Traditional documents commonly included in portfolios are a student's resume, training certificates, workplace programs and policies, lesson plans, and so forth; these are written documents or statements that demonstrate and synthesize students' accomplishments in their fields (Sidell, 2003). Additionally, the documents chosen for a portfolio can be visually expressive through arts-based methods and/or technologically influenced through such media as photography, painting, and web-based expressions.

More recently, the portfolio as a component of a course, or as a course itself, has been emerging in the literature in social work education (Clarke et al., 2012; Schatz, 2004; Sidell, 2003; Swigonski et al., 2006). Portfolios are used to integrate social work theory and practice, demonstrate skill sets, and support critical self-reflection for students as current and future practitioners (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004; Coleman et al., 2002; Schatz, 2004). Within an anti-oppression curricula and perspective, it is important to emphasize structural barriers (Barnoff & Moffatt, 2007) and intersecting privileges and oppressions (Barnoff & Moffatt, 2007; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005), and pay attention to power and dominant discourses (Fook, 2002; Foucault, 1977; Rossiter, 2005; Sinclair & Albert, 2008), to explore where each student and their practice fits within these discussions. Within this approach, some of the key questions in the portfolio course that we designed include: How do we participate in and contribute to or challenge and transform structural inequalities due to racism, colonialism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, ageism, and family status? How do our subject positions influence these power dynamics?

The following sections outline an overview of the portfolio course in our bachelor of social work program, including the process, structure, and content. The authors contend that the portfolio can be viewed as critical pedagogy that challenges some of the dominant expectations found in the university in terms of teaching and learning (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004; Antone, 03; hooks, 1994; Swigonski, et al., 2006) and is a creative alternative to field placement. Limitations and challenges are also explored, including instructor workload and time management.

The Portfolio: An Overview

The portfolio assignment is an alternative way to think about evaluating knowledge of practice and theory. Some of us have taught portfolio as a component of a course to students in other universities and in other programs, such as, child and youth studies, women and gender studies, and education. Given that some students have found the exercise of developing a professional portfolio practical for ongoing learning, further education and applications to workplaces, we wanted to explore the possibility within social work education.

In our Bachelor of Social Work program, students were approved for the portfolio section of the field education credit if they had extensive paid social work experience and were currently working full-time in the field. Each section of portfolio class typically has 22-25 students which is similar to our other sections of field education. The overarching framework of our curriculum

flows from the anti-oppressive values of our school, as outlined in our mission: Ryerson University School of Social Work (2012),

We affirm the human dignity and value the social equality of all people. We educate about the barriers to equality and seek to address the causes of oppression. We are committed to learning environments that respect human and cultural diversity and to the implementation of social work values in our curriculum and in the delivery of our program. We stand with populations that experience poverty, exploitation and domination, and seek to work with all those committed to the advancement of human dignity, social equality, and social care.

Given that these values frame our curriculum, students in any section of the field course must interrogate issues of social inequalities, power, marginalization, subject positioning, and anti-oppression, which are at the crux of our program. However, unlike other field education course sections, it is important to note that in the portfolio section the focus is not solely about placement but rather on the workplace as a complex institution and the contexts in which students practice. In the portfolio course, students are then required to engage in a process of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action about their current and previous learning and growth, which allows the curriculum to more closely match the experiences of the active practitioner (Fejes, 2006; Schön, 1983).

Early in the first semester of this two semester portfolio course, students submitted a proposal for their portfolio, outlining all the specific areas they planned to include, a structured time-line for themselves, and explanations on how their knowledge, experience, and supporting documents met the learning objectives of the course. Students were encouraged to use different ways of presenting their documents to support different ways of knowing and learning.

Students typically used a large binder or scrapbooking model and included documents that demonstrated their educational and professional development. These documents included in-service, workshop and achievement certificates, practice model statements, degrees, lists of and/or materials from trainings that were either developed or attended, descriptions of programs and policies developed in response to gaps in their workplaces, community activism or development projects, and research they were engaged with either as participants or investigator and collaborator. Some students took their reflections further when they critically analyzed earlier journal entries they made in their professional roles in order to see how their perspectives have changed and if there were areas for improvement. Students were still expected to complete the assignments required in the placement course including a learning plan, mid-term evaluation, and final evaluation. However, instead of using examples from placement settings to complete the above assignments, the portfolio assignment was substituted in these assignments. Other more visually artistic representations were sometimes included such as paintings, collages, photographs, and web or video documentaries.

Since one of the main characteristics of the portfolio is self-directed learning (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004; Schatz, 2004), students were able to design their portfolios in ways that made sense to their experiences. Typically, portfolios contained 4 or 5 chapters of approximately 20 pages each with supporting documents and reflective writing pieces that were integrated throughout or kept in separate sections. While some students used the portfolio as an opportunity

to present their practice and education in a summative manner, others chose to create separate sections that did not necessarily connect with each other or flow in a linear way. Some students did not use separate sections at all but rather presented a more circuitous narrative of their learning. As a way to decrease anxiety for students who felt intimidated by this process, suggestions were shared on how portfolios have been done in the past but in no way was this structure imposed upon them.

Compared to other disciplines, in social work, the portfolio course goes beyond a typical dossier format by focusing on a critical anti-oppressive perspective. Students were encouraged to include their voice or narrative (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004), their reflections on the documents they were including in their portfolio, and transformative moments in their practice and in their learning of what could be done differently. A focus on power, privilege, and oppression both systemically and from their subject positions was at the crux of this assignment. While for many students it was an opportunity to be introspective and reflexive about power in the social service sector, they were encouraged to analyze this power within the ever-changing social context of their own subject positions (Heron, 2005), the political climate, and the increasing neoliberal and managerialist frameworks that many of their agencies were subjected to and operated within (Baines, 2006; Fook, 2002; Ife, 1997; Razack, 2002).

A Challenge to Traditional Pedagogy

A single standardized way of knowing and doing often excludes marginalized groups, voices, and experiences from the education system (Ajandi, 2011; Baskin, 2008; Mojab, 2002; Smith, 1999). The portfolio course presents opportunities to support, create, and sustain multiple knowledge within academia and more specifically, within social work education. We have found that the portfolio option provides flexibility for students who already have experience in the field, community, work, and school. For these students who already have extensive paid social work experience and are currently working full-time, doing an additional 2 or 3 days of placement each week is overwhelming and in many cases not possible. The portfolio provides these students an opportunity to meet the learning objectives of the field education credit in a way that fits their learning needs and other commitments, and honours their experience.

While the portfolio assignment creates a space that meets the needs of students and honours their experience in a different way, there may be students who still benefit from completing placements as a way to further enhance their practice skills, particularly in unknown or unfamiliar areas of the field. These sections of field are still available to those who wish to enroll in them. However, the portfolio assignment also enhances students' practice by having them complete an in-depth, critical reflection on their praxis skills within the curriculum of the program. We are not suggesting an either-or approach to field education – only that we strive to value different ways of knowing and acknowledge the work and life experiences students bring with them to the program by creating alternate formats of our courses.

The purpose of this assignment is to synthesize educational, practical, personal, and professional knowledge. As such, students are challenged to reflect upon the practice approaches, type of education, values, and personal and professional experiences that inform the way they engage in their everyday work, and reflect upon and analyze their work. This

assignment centres and values lived experience and critical reflection (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004; Swigonski et al., 2006).

The portfolio course, like the field/practice component of the social work program, is graded as a pass or fail. Given the intense reflective writing and document-style format of portfolio learning, some students began to shift their thinking back to traditional grading scales common with essays and other written assignments rather than the pass/fail approach. It is our opinion that the pass/fail grading system challenges dominant practices in university that support competition. While we observed this was challenging for some students since they had been socialized to compete for grades, many students found the experience rewarding. Once they were released from the need to get a particular grade, students were then able to enjoy the exercise and learn for the sake of wanting to learn; the evaluation became more of a learning process and a qualitative dialogue rather than a quest for a quantitative end product. The self-directed learning style, more prevalent in the portfolio than in traditional field placements, also enhanced this experience.

As Alvarez and Moxley (2004) and Taylor, Thomas, and Sage (1999) contend, themes of disclosure were prominent in the portfolio process. The portfolios highlighted transformative and emotional moments of reflection and disclosures of racism, homophobia, colonialism, and ableism were common. As we reflect on the process, the portfolio journey became a place of healing for some students and it was enriching as instructors to be a part of this process with them. The assignment provided a space for students to connect various ways of knowing and learning within “engaged pedagogy” (hooks, 1994, p. 15). In keeping with engaged pedagogy, students were not the only ones asked to learn, grow, and be vulnerable – the instructors were also intimately involved in the learning process. Locating one’s self in the classroom in terms of oppression, privilege, and power was important; knowing that we are not the experts but rather contributors to collective knowledge creation helped to build trust throughout the process (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2000). While this may occur to some degree in any classroom, including classes associated with traditional field placements, the portfolio process itself fostered a more intimate shared experience as students sought individual guidance in various steps of the process.

Students were encouraged to be introspective yet communicate with others in separate meetings designed specifically for the portfolio component of the course. These meetings were scheduled during their different stages of learning so this assignment was designed with a balance between group and independent learning. They were responsible for self-directed learning but they were not alone. They acted with others in the classroom and had opportunities to directly impact each other’s learning. Students were not passive consumers of what Freire termed the “banking system of education” wherein the instructor infuses knowledge into the unknowing student (as cited in hooks, 1994, p. 40); rather students were active participants in their own learning with the instructor in both a facilitating and learning role. For example, our role as instructors was to facilitate knowledge being created and shared in the classroom and discuss how these moments can be incorporated into the portfolio. Our role was not that of an expert who imparts knowledge onto students. There was no right or wrong way of designing portfolio assignments, rather students had the opportunity to design the structure and components of the portfolio to meet their own learning needs and values, with the overall learning objectives

of the course as a guiding framework. Moreover, as instructors, we also learned throughout this process and felt honoured to share in the experiences students brought with them in the process of creating their portfolios and discussions in the classroom. The structure of self-directed learning also challenged our own position as instructors in terms of the power we typically hold in designing the process, structure, and thereby, outcomes of the assignment. We were able to recognize and reflect upon how we were socialized in education to appreciate and feel comfortable with order, structure, and known, prescribed outcomes. This course pushed our own boundaries to sit with the discomfort of not knowing and instead be mindfully present with students throughout the process (Wong, 2004). While still recognizing power in the classroom, the pedagogical aim of the course was to disrupt the traditional instructor-student power dynamic in terms of epistemology. While this occurs to some degree in any of our field education experience, it was especially evident in the portfolio classroom, likely given the self-directed learning focus of the course.

Although portfolios serve as an end product, they also remain as living and emerging documents that are useful for students both reflectively and practically well after the course is completed. The fluid and timeless nature of the assignment became apparent. This observation is reflected in the literature which finds that portfolios focus on process (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004; Elliott, 2003; Franklin, 1996; Schatz, 2004; Swigonski et al., 2006) and are a more holistic approach to education than traditional assignments. As Alvarez & Moxley (2004) note, “portfolios are process, product, and tool” (p. 92).

The Process of Portfolio

In the beginning stages, students were anxious about the assignment because it was a new and unfamiliar format. Amidst this anxiety, many students returned to more traditional understandings of course work and grades, and focused on quantity rather than quality. Their ideas were limited at the beginning because they felt overwhelmed by the amount of work the portfolio assignment appeared to present. These experiences were also mentioned in previous literature and explained as discomfort that occurs within students when they start to shift from a place of passive learning into more active, self-directed learning (Coleman et al., 2002; Schatz, 2004). The relevant literature was included in the course outlines at the beginning so when students started to read about it they were able to identify that it was a part of the process. This normalized the experience for them. One of the observations we have made was that many students were concerned with confidentiality since they were all working in the social work field and some knew each other within a referral context. Individual meetings with the instructor, as opposed to the larger group of students, were instrumental in alleviating some of this concern.

Nearing the end of the first semester students were struggling with time management and self-discipline. It was important to discuss this throughout the course to prepare students for these challenges and the need to carve out time and space to complete this assignment. Discussing how we have managed the unstructured self-directed experience of academia within the demands of productivity was beneficial as an exemplar; additionally, self-disclosure and acknowledgement of the challenge of the work promoted trust within the classroom and our relationships. While some students continued to have self-doubt and needed to check in quite often, at this point they generally gained confidence and a sense of direction.

Near the end of the course, the first author observed that students were overwhelmingly positive about the course. Many seemed to appreciate the opportunity to be part of the first on-campus cohort and to have this assignment as an integral part of their learning experience. Portfolios seemed instrumental to their learning processes as social workers, as they would not likely have had the time or motivation to develop a portfolio if it had not been included in a required course. The portfolios were a valuable tool for use in their current and future workplaces, graduate school applications, and in improving their own critical social work practice.

The portfolio assignment was an accumulation of students' life experiences, practice approaches, educations, and research, which fit particularly well with their final year of undergraduate studies. At this point in their education, this was either their last course in the program or they were very close to completing their degrees. They were able to synthesize their learning and reflect in critical ways that focused on power, oppression, and privilege; such reflection lead to transformative learning moments and critical consciousness (Alvarez & Moxley, 2004; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005), which also came through in their portfolios. Students have the opportunity to continue to use this assignment and build upon it after the course. The portfolio was also a great assignment to use as a point of closure in terms of reflecting upon their journey in the undergraduate education system. This assignment was designed in ways that value students' knowledge and experience across many aspects of their lives.

Instructor's Engagement and Workload

As instructors, it was important for us to provide many examples of how previous portfolios had been done, possible structures for the assignment and requirements for what to include, while balancing the need for students to engage in self-directed learning, reflexivity, and creativity. Even though some students needed support in terms of structured guidelines, in order to meet all the diverse learning and cultural needs of students, the structure must be flexible in order to encompass a wide array of formats. Group discussions and meetings were also beneficial, particularly near the beginning of the course so that students could share their ideas and concerns. What we did not anticipate, however, was the overwhelming amount of time that was required to support students in a thoughtful way. Schatz (2004) who notes,

The time needed by the instructor to examine the portfolios is often a concern. For this author and for those who have joined in adopting portfolio as assessment tools, the time and effort is worth the outcome. Students are so pleased to have a tangible product that illustrates the many tasks and responsibilities they undertake in their education and field experience. Faculty should not shy away from this teaching tool because of time requirements (p. 116-117).

However, that discussion ignores how power plays out in the university setting, and this became an important factor with respect to faculty workload.

It has been our experience that field education can be marginalized within the social work curriculum and within the university course structure overall. There are some inherent, and we argue, inaccurate assumptions about the rigour of the course and the volume and type of work

involved for faculty. These concerns became very clear within the portfolio experience. The process to have the course approved was extensive (Preston et al., 2012) and the workload for faculty was both time consuming and laborious. Even within those realms where field education was valued, the portfolio approach was sometimes devalued through assumptions about it having less rigour, practical applicability and learning, and being less work for faculty compared to the traditional design of the field education credit. The time involved in facilitating the portfolio course on the part of the instructor and the student is mentioned in previous literature (Coleman et al., 2002; Schatz, 2004). Within our context, this time commitment was problematic given the recent shift towards devaluing the field education coursework as less than that of other course work – in effect, with the portfolio, it meant increased work with less workload credit. This was further complicated with one of us as a contract sessional instructor. While the time issue is acknowledged as noted above by Schatz (2004), it has not been discussed within the context of precarious employment. Conversely, the course did provide some design and time flexibility for facilitator and students alike in that the work involved in the portfolio was set within students' own schedules in collaboration with the instructor.

Our social work program was privileged to have so many students with rewarding personal and professional life experiences. Within this context, it seemed critical to reflect upon how we could support students inside and outside of the classroom in meaningful ways. Many students had complex needs, responsibilities, and schedules. Many of our students, and particularly those who qualified to enter the portfolio course, worked full time in the paid labour market (and sometimes working 2-3 jobs combining full- and part-time work), actively participated in the community, and had family responsibilities either in Canada or in other countries where their families were living. Given the complex lives of both the students and faculty, combined with the original design and structure of the course, it soon became clear that the course would be labour-intensive. There were more one-to-one meetings and on-going email and phone communication (many times from home) as well as extended time to review and provide feedback on the assignments as they were in progress. This time commitment was something entered into willingly, and it was an extremely rewarding experience to work so closely with students over the year. However, within a broader university context, while all faculty are experiencing pressure within academia to do more with less, more part-time employees are being hired. These contract faculty work at a fraction of the cost of full-time professors and their workloads are increasing while resources are decreasing (Rajagopal, 2002); such faculty are working in precarious employment and with less institutional support overall. We must be mindful to provide meaningful educational experiences for students while also supporting faculty in these endeavours. It is also imperative that the portfolio course be acknowledged for the work that it is and that faculty and institutional support be arranged for its inclusion (Swigonski et al., 2006).

Reflections on Learning

This inaugural academic year was an exciting learning experience in terms of implementing the portfolio course option for students. We were able to grow, learn, and challenge ourselves alongside others in the classroom. Many students appreciated the opportunity to participate in the course since it provided more flexibility and self-directed learning than the traditional placement option. Initially, as with any new course, there was some discomfort with the unfamiliar, which

challenged our patience and our abilities to stay in the moment (Wong, 2004). Once this discomfort was worked through, the portfolio course offered an alternative format for the expression of different ways of knowing and learning within a critical social work context.

Given the importance of critical self-reflection and attention to student empowerment, multiple ways of knowing, and power in anti-oppressive practice (Barnoff & Moffatt, 2007; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005), the underlying components of the portfolio proved to be a good fit with our curriculum. Students were able to synthesize and reflect upon their educational, personal and practical knowledge and that, in turn, contributed to supporting critical social work practice. While an open space was created in the classroom wherein the joys and concerns presented by students were significant, a more formal evaluation process of the portfolio course is needed in order to strengthen it as we move forward in the coming years.

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