Research Paper   **Education**

Portfolio Writing: An innovative reflective learning strategy in Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

Change is the inevitable phenomena and it is everywhere in the present scenario. Though students are in the receiving end, teachers are expected to make a change in their instructional programme. Today's class rooms expect interactions, questioning, responding and reflecting on both sides. There is synergy of thoughts, ideas, and intellectual expertise. A portfolio is a portable, systematic, purposeful collection of work selected to provide information about attitude, level of development and growth during a given period of time. It is a powerful visual tool that provided evidence of personal reflections, learning growth and development and comprehensive and complex overview of skills. This paper talks about the process and product of portfolio writing practice in higher education classroom.

Keywords : Portfolio writing, Reflection-in-action, Reflection-on- action and Reflective evaluation

Portfolio Writing: An innovative reflective learning strategy in Teacher Education

The word "portfolio" in seventeenth century, recognised by almost all discipline and of late being processed by each and every competent individual towards quality product. In education, portfolio refers to a personal collection of information describing and documenting a person's achievements and learning. There is a variety of portfolios ranging from learning logs to extended collections of achievement evidence. Portfolios are used for many different purposes such as accreditation of prior experience, job search, continuing professional development and certification of competencies. Portfolios are valid measures of literacy. There is evidence that portfolios inform students as well as teachers and parents, and that the results can be used to improve instruction, another major dimension of good assessment (Gomez, Grace & Block, 1991).

The review of researchers shows that studies were both on process portfolio and product portfolio. In the process students reflected the difficulties they encounter. The student-teachers become effective teachers through the use of actual products they developed in classroom situations; portfolio provides a forum for extended and complex learning activities and observation. It becomes a powerful assessment tool in teacher preparation programmes. It promotes collaborative learning, increased students reflection and aided psychologically secure environment in the classroom.

Teachers are accountable for students' growth and development. Right from day one till the day of assessment, teachers are held responsible for documenting lesson plans, evidence of student progress and the like. A well planned documentation in terms of portfolio speaks about the efficiency of a successful teacher. Similarly the learner's individual developmental portfolios, individual learning portfolios reflect the candidate's attitude, interest and level of development and growth in a given period of time. Thus portfolio becomes an essential component in the field of education.

The main focus of portfolio is writing. This writing is in three different dimensions viz. describing, analysing and reflecting. In other words, we describe- what, analyse-so what and reflect-then what. These indicate the ongoing cyclic process of writing for one's development in teaching and learning. These entries will be read both by the individual and by others in the course of assessing. Hence the entries should be organised and structured.

According to Paulson and Mayor (1991) "Portfolio offer a way of assessing student learning that is different than traditional methods. Portfolio assessment provides the teachers and students an opportunity to observe students in a broader context of taking risks, developing creative solutions, and learning to make judgements about their own performance". Portfolio assessment provides thoughtful evaluation to take place. A combined effort of teacher and students is essential in framing criteria for assessment, both formative and summative. Through out the academic year, students and teachers have to work together to identify significant artefacts and processes to be captured in the portfolio. This reflective thinking refines their decision making and evaluation capacity; a thoughtful practice for development.

The researcher as a teacher educator in the University has been practising portfolio writing in her M.Ed instructional programme. This research was conducted by the author who was the then faculty member in University of Madras, Chennai. The intent was to develop portfolio writing practice and set the attitude of student-teachers towards professionalisation. She wanted her students to reflect change and growth in their course period; wanted to encourage self-directed learning; enlarge their view of what is learnt; demonstrate progress towards identified outcomes; create an intersection and assessment; provide a way for students to value themselves as learners; and other opportunities for peer support growth. Although the overall framework was the same for three set of students, the third set had a different approach. The content of the programme was Advanced Educational Psychology in one year and the following year it was Research Methodology. On the basis of SWOT analysis, the programme was skeltoned in three phases. Viz.,

(1) Reflective learning on learning,
(2) Comprehension monitoring and
(3) Reflective evaluation.

In phase 1, students expressions in portfolio writing show their desire to know, their efforts in source finding and their comprehension over their concepts. In phase 2, their monitoring over their comprehension from the analysis of their examination paper reveals their meaning making ability. There is rethinking ie. Reflection-on-action. They have the attention focussed on task accomplishment. It is evident that portfolio writing stand as a framework on students thought processes on learning. In phase 3 they had reflective evaluation. This

reflection on comprehension monitoring stood as self-evaluation scale, measuring their preparation and performance. It also measured their selection of learning strategies and their application. To strengthen their self-assessment a self-evaluation scale had been given. In addition to the empirical analysis on establishing the veracity of the experiment, the learning experiences were expressed in reflective writings. Thus the researcher was able to develop metacognitive thinking and helped the students to move towards improvement with confidence.

The researcher's experiment with the third set of students was on Educational Professionalism. The researcher believes that teacher should internalise the characteristics of a profession. Sketching themselves towards teacher profession is an everyday affair. It is a refrain that teachers should be committed persons. Commitment to the profession in teaching refers how for he is competent in his subject, his scientific temper, his ability in conveying his finding through writing and the concern he has for the society.

The researcher was so assertive that this course paper should make a change in their attitude and behaviour towards professionalistic aspects. Hence she designed her instructional programme, incorporating transaction strategies which are helpful for understanding the concept as well as give experiential learning. The objective and the course content were given to students. Appropriate strategies were oriented to them.

The objective of the programme was to sensitise them on Educational Professionalism, make them to learn from each other and contribute to each other. In other words learning from one another and learning from themselves are mutually reinforcing. Teacher lectures were minimised. Instead Seminars, Group discussions, Panel discussions, Simulation, Paired learning were equally distributed. The basic requirement for a professional teacher is effective communication. For which, 'Say a word' programme was included in everyday programme. These classroom performances need to be assessed for further development. Therefore through brainstorming and group discussion 'assessment criteria' were framed. This is at three levels viz., teacher assessment, peer assessment and self-assessment. Every performance of students was assessed at these three levels. And they worked for improvement in their next performance.

For professional outlook, they were provided opportunities within the campus. They did participate in common functions organised by the university and seminar programmes by other departments in school of social sciences. They were also motivated and guided to present papers in the National Seminar organised by the department. They had the opportunity to be the audience of public viva-voce of candidates in the department.

They had institutional observation as internship for 10 days. They were given frame of reference to observe and collect data for all questions. This provided them first hand experience for a future teacher. When they came back, they were able to identify and name the characteristic features of a professional in the faculty and professionalisation in the organisation.

As dissertation is a part of their course, they were motivated to carry experiments in classroom teaching. They were encouraged to use innovations and find out the difference between the traditional mode and the innovation.

The researcher expected the students to reverberate all these experiences and strongly built in their character before they go out from the university. Therefore, they reflected their thoughts and experiences in journal writing. Every evidence of their performance had a portfolio reflection. They used to submit their journal writing and portfolio writing. Sometimes they were given the opportunity to read others portfolios.

The articulated insight in portfolios stand as a constructive tool for the researcher to clarify their doubts, rectify her teaching and put efforts to enhance their capacity to learn. They had two progressive tests, as internal Sessional tests before their End semester examination. Their test performances were analysed.

Other than the scores in their tests, their learning and performance in everyday matters and it has been assessed through evidences in portfolio writing. These portfolios stand as Behavioural performance measures. It could be FOK (Feeling of knowing) judgements obtained through their reflective writing on how likely students are able to comprehend the concept. The researcher established consensus of standards in evaluation of student work.

The two progressive tests had difference in total scores. While in test 1 they had 55 percentages of score, in test 2 invariably all 24 students scored more than 60 percentages. Therefore the mean score was 72% and there is gain score of 17%.

It proves that self-reflections are mandatory for one to progress. It encourages student creativity and allows for students to emphasize the aspects of concept most relevant to them in meaningful ways. Above all it builds up aspiration and desire to improve.

At the end of the programme, they were given a feedback questionnaire, and they have answered unanimously 'yes' for the question, 'Was portfolio writing useful?' and for 'how?'-

Ø   It erased out fear.
Ø   It helped us to understand ourselves.
Ø   It improved fluency in writing.
Ø   It taught us to change the obstacles into stepping stones.
Ø   It helped us to identify our problems.
Ø   Slowly I am able to rectify my mistakes.
Ø   It gave me the pleasure of writing my thoughts and reading my needs. It helped me to look into the past, and present and do something for the future. It made me to think twice before I do.
Ø   It allows me to think in two or three different dimensions. Now-a-days I find it comfortable to express my thoughts.
Ø   It boosts my self-analysis.
Ø   It made me to get changed in certain aspects regarding listening classes, management of time and it gave an overview of my own ability and the extend to which I was achieving.

Some glimpses from the reflections on Portfolio Writing.

Ø   It made me to be aware of what I lag behind and why I am not able to understand. This made me to look out new strategies. As a result, there is positive improvement in my performances. It also brought out a co-ordination between my tutor and me as I am able to express myself in portfolio writing.
Ø   It developed divergent thinking in me. As a result I am able to find more than two solutions to solve a problem. It motivated me to search for resources and it reflects positively in my performances. I am happy to receive appreciations from my teacher.
Ø   In these days, I only listen to class. It was very difficult to recall during examination. After portfolio writing, I just recall the experience what I had learnt and write down in the paper. It is very helpful in comprehending and getting mastery over the subject.

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