PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

Portfolio is a meaningful collection of learners' work over a particular period of time. Portfolio assessment is a systematic and organized collection of evidence used by educators and students to monitor growth of the students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes in a specific subject area (Vavrus, 1990). Portfolio assessment is more authentic and performance-based than traditional methods of assessment. It helps teachers identify the needs of all the learners in the classroom and to reflect on the teaching practices and the experiences they are providing for each learner. It provides learners with more opportunities to display their abilities. This paper looks at how portfolio assessment can be used to assess the progress of the learners who are learning the target language, English. It also shows how portfolio assessment can be used to evaluate learners in the best possible way.

Assessment that is performance-based is more authentic and provides more valuable information about the skills of the learners than traditional assessments. Grant Wiggins' view is that "the proof of a person's capacity is found in their ability to perform or produce, not in their ability to answer on cue" (Bruder, 1993). Howard Gardner has opined: "I believe that we should get away altogether from tests and correlations among tests, and look instead at more naturalistic sources of information about how peoples around the world develop skills important to their way of life" (1987, p. 189). He has also suggested that "the school seeks to encourage the unique blend of intelligences in each of its students, assessing their development regularly in intelligence-fairways" (1993, p.75). Portfolios are "a natural and effective means of "intelligence-fair" performance-based assessment" (Georgi and Crowe 74).

In the case of language tests, it is difficult to generalize from a single writing or speaking sample in a test as in real-life test takers write and speak for different purposes and audiences. Test takers also listen and read for diverse purposes. An alternate approach is needed to deal with this limitation of traditional tests that use a few items or tasks to assess the test takers. Portfolio assessment is considered as an alternate approach to assessment that can provide broader inferences about the language ability of the test takers than are possible with the traditional approaches to evaluate learners in the classroom as well as on a large scale.

A portfolio is "a purposeful collection of student works that exhibits to the student (and/or others) the student's efforts, progress and achievement in a given area" (Northwest Evaluation Association, 1991). It is a compilation of work which has been done over a period of time, be they print, non-print, multimedia or Web-based documentation derived from a learner's own daily course-related tasks. "In a pedagogical sense, portfolios are a running record for learners to review, reflect and improve their works-in-progress" (Ricky Lam 2). Most studies "define the portfolio in an essentialist manner; that is, they describe the actual portfolio in use in a particular place and at a particular time" (Hamp-Lyons and Condon 118).

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As portfolio assessment is used in many settings, there is wide variation in how portfolios are assembled, assessed and used. However, portfolio assessment programs have certain common characteristics. Hamp-Lyons and Condon believe that thoughtfully designed portfolios share the following nine characteristics:

1. **Collection**: A portfolio is a collection of texts produced by the learners in more than one genre and for more than one audience and purpose. Collection is a source of portfolio's greater face validity as it represents the abilities of the writer more fully than other forms of assessment.

2. **Range:** It enables the learner to display and the evaluators to evaluate a range of tasks and performances.

3. **Context Richness:** It possesses context richness as it reflects the learning situation and demonstrates the learning that took place within that context.

4. **Delayed Evaluation:** Portfolio programs often use the characteristic of delayed evaluation. It gives students the opportunity and motivation to revise written or spoken products they have to include in the portfolio. It also gives the teacher time to make judgments about effectiveness of their course.

5. **Selection:** A portfolio contains selections of a learner's work. This selection is generally made by the learner based on the requirements laid down by the instructor and their own discretions about the quality of their work.

6. Student-centered Control: The characteristics of portfolio assessment such as delayed evaluation and selection place a large measure of control over success into learners' hands by providing opportunity to select the best works and revise their works before final evaluation.

7. Reflection and Self-assessment: Portfolio designs usually involve some kind of reflective writing written by the learners about their own works that are included in the portfolio and a self-assessment that involves a discussion of the process that led to the spoken or written products and a plan for revision.

8. Growth along specific parameters: Portfolios provide a robust means for measuring growth along specific parameters, such as linguistic accuracy or the ability to write coherently.

9. **Development over time:** Portfolios provide a means for measuring the learners' development over time.

Portfolios have been a standard form of assessment in fields such as architecture and photography. They can be used across various content subjects, namely language arts, mathematics and science. They have a fairly long history in first-language assessment. They are now being used for large-scale assessment as well. At present, portfolio assessment is being used in a variety of first-language settings to assess the linguistic competence of the learners. So, most of the available literature on portfolio assessment has also come from first-language contexts. Portfolio assessment began to be widely used for program-wide assessment in the mid-1980s when Belanoff and Elbow (1986) demonstrated that program-wide portfolio assessment was feasible and also benefitted teachers, learners and program administrators.

Portfolio assessment is becoming very popular in business and technical writing courses. It is also increasingly adopted for teaching foreign languages. Council of Europe's Language Portfolio Project is of particular note in this regard. This project aimed at providing individuals from member states with a record of their language-learning experiences and achievements. Though each member state has developed its own model for portfolios, all portfolios are tied to the levels of proficiency outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference.

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Portfolios can be used for internal and external assessment. The stakes will be quite high for students in the case of external assessment. For instance, in some states in the US portfolios are mandatory for graduation from high school. Portfolios can be used by the teachers for diagnostic purpose, or on a large scale, where someone other than the teacher will evaluate portfolios for purposes like evaluating curriculum or certifying student achievement.

In general, there are three common types of writing portfolio assessment: (i) progress portfolios; (ii) working portfolios and (iii) showcase portfolios. Progress portfolios encourage students to compile a range of language tasks or samples and review their learning improvement in a sustained manner. This approach is mainly formative. Working portfolios are used to track student efforts in portfolio keeping. Working portfolios are also like a running record of student learning history. Showcase portfolios are about a selection of best works representing students' academic achievements and celebrating students' continuous efforts accordingly. This approach is typically summative, yet students can choose graded or non-graded pieces of their best works after reflection and self-assessment.

Benefits of Portfolio Assessment

Portfolio assessment enables teachers to make sound judgments about the learners, syllabus and the course, in general. Portfolio-based pedagogy empowers teachers to monitor and accommodate learning needs of the learners when they are experiencing difficulties in learning. In this type of assessment, teachers are co-participants in teaching and not an authoritative figure who transmits knowledge to students. Students are at the centre of learning in the context of the portfolio construction journey. There is empirical evidence to argue that school-level and university-level students become more motivated and confident while creating portfolios despite their anxiety and initial resistance (Chen 2006). Further, students are allowed to choose the samples they wish to include in their portfolios and are encouraged to make judgments during the portfolio development process. Hence, the use of portfolios leads to increased levels of learner autonomy.

One of the greatest strengths of assessing using portfolios is that they may include samples of tasks that were carried out for some authentic purpose other than for assessment per se. For instance, they may include the report of an event that was conducted at a school or a college for a noble cause. In many language programs, most of the samples of tasks included in the final portfolio for assessment are identical to the tasks done at the target language use domain. This similarity between test tasks and TLU tasks is that which ultimately makes the test tasks authentic.

The whole process of collecting, selecting and arranging the selected contents in the portfolio, encourages a lot of personal involvement from the part of the learners and also engages their metacognitive strategies to a considerable extent. This desirable level of interactiveness on the part of the learners has multiple benefits, as the process of putting together the portfolios help them learn about the process involved in doing a language/test task and may motivate them to do the tasks in better way.

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Drawbacks of Portfolio Assessment

A major limitation of portfolio assessment is the heavy workload, both for students and teachers. Another limitation is the complexity involved in scoring portfolios as the composing processes are hard to be assessed systematically. There is also the issue of fairness as teachers cannot discern whether students have done their work without assistance from others because they are given time to construct their portfolios. Portfolio assessment may not work in contexts were students are too much used to product-based approach to learning as such students may not have the reflective skills necessary to construct their own portfolios. The last drawback is student's improper use of learning evidence in portfolios. Without analyzing and interpreting the learning evidence appropriately, students may not improve their writing successfully.

Using Technology for Portfolio Assessment

Elizabeth Gellerman (1994, p. 14) has stated that portfolio "assessment is greatly assisted by multimedia. Instructors can scan images of student's written work or art, capture audio of students reading, and include word processing and hypermedia files.... instructors can digitize video of students' performances via computer". With the use of technological tools, students also achieve a wider audience and support system for their work. Kevin Bushweller (1995) describes a school in Vermont that found using digital portfolios really helpful in keeping a developmental record of reading skills as audio and video recordings of students' reading could be saved from grade to grade. Digital storage eliminated the problems that were inherent in tapes, such as storing them safely and of cuing them to the correct spot.

Conclusion

Teachers may face a numerous challenges while using performance-based portfolio assessment for assessing learners. These challenges can be minimized by using technology while designing and implementing this form of assessment. Despite the potential drawbacks of portfolio assessment, it is now used for program-wide as well as large-scale assessment due to its potential benefits for both the takers and users of the this form of assessment. Portfolio assessment is particularly useful for second language and foreign language learners as they are trying to learn a language and a lot of exposure to the language through different tasks is needed to attain competence in that target language.

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