

The Teaching Portfolio and the University Teacher's Professional Knowledge

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Research Background

The use of portfolios in training for university teachers has had no research devoted to it until recently. In this study, carried out by members of the FODIP research group at the University of Barcelona, we analyze the potential of the portfolio as a strategy for reflecting on, analyzing and developing teaching practice. For this purpose we have taken a qualitative research approach, more specifically a multiple case study. The participants in the study were ten novice teachers who, when the data was gathered, had already completed an initial training course at the University of Barcelona. This was a blended learning course which included mentoring from experienced teachers, and one of the essential features of the course was the completion of a portfolio, shared with and supervised by the mentor. Likewise, to proceed to select the ten key informants, we set off from an initial sample comprising 30 university teachers who completed postgraduate studies in 2006/07. Besides, we count on the opinion of the coordinator of this course on other possible participants to be chosen among beginners from previous editions.

Methodology

Our main information gathering strategies were in-depth interviews and documentary analysis (the teaching portfolio). Teaching portfolios were analyzed according to two general dimensions which were subsequently detached into several inductive analysis categories:

Use of the teaching portfolio: the way to get to know, understand and tackle the task of elaborating a teaching portfolio (reflection on the teaching practice, training contents, certification, the working tool shared between mentor and beginner, teaching-improvement certification, innovation strategy, etc.)

The contents of teaching portfolio: the dimensions of the teaching activity and areas for professional teaching development included in the portfolio.

Initial Findings

Prior to putting forward the main findings drawn from our research, we would like to mention that the present work is based —from a theoretical and epistemological viewpoint— on current literature on this issue, which provides multiple theories on teaching portfolio conceptualization and the possibilities offered by its elaboration and use (Shulman, L., 1999; Corominas, E., 2000; Fernández March, 2004; Klenowski, V., 2005; Zubizarreta, J., 2009; Seldin, P., Miller, E. & Seldin, C., 2010). A brief review of these theoretical contributions reveals, to sum up, two different perspectives on the teaching portfolio —the training or

procedural, and the teaching-product— which interrelate to and supplement one another within the same sense.

On the other hand, the results of our research show that the portfolio is an extremely valuable tool in the initial stages of a teaching professionalism oriented towards reflective practice. The portfolio involves an experience of narration which triggers processes of learning about practice and affords an opportunity to theorize about education. Thus almost all the teachers interviewed agreed that the portfolio, as a training strategy, is a useful space for recording, exploring, and evaluating experiences and interpretations of teaching. Looking into the contributions of the teachers interviewed and analyzing their teaching portfolios, we were able to establish that, for those with backgrounds in disciplines other than education, compiling the portfolio afforded an opportunity to work on questions of pedagogy and educational methodology of which they had not been previously aware. The portfolio, accompanied by the mentor's guidance and within the framework of a teacher training course, functioned as a nexus between the specialized knowledge these teachers already had as experts in a particular field, and those pedagogical and methodological principles necessary to put their knowledge across in the classroom.

Finally, we highlight the articulation of different forms of professional knowledge around the work on the portfolio. The reflection processes set in motion by the completion of the portfolio allow us to rearticulate, in an integrated fashion, diverse fields of teaching knowledge. As these novice teachers commented, taking part in the experience of the portfolio helped them to acquire general pedagogical knowledge, to acquire greater mastery of their subjects, to devise new ways of teaching their disciplines, and to reach a more accurate understanding of university students' real learning needs and styles.

References

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