

USING A 'PORTFOLIO' AS AN ASSESSMENT TOOL FOR CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING IN THE MAURITIAN CIVIL SERVICE

INTRODUCTION

The Mauritius College of the Air (MCA) developed a 60-hour open distance learning course entitled '*Customer Care and Quality Management*' at the request of the Ministry of Civil Service and Administrative Reforms (MCSAR). The course was designed for public officers of the different Ministries/Government Departments. Over 2000 participants have enrolled this course already.

Each of the participants developed a portfolio for the purpose of both participant assessment as well as course assessment. This paper describes and analyses the assessment through the portfolio development.

WHAT IS PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT?

It is the assessment of a systematically organised collection of samples of work used to demonstrate knowledge acquisition, skills development, growth and learning. When properly developed, portfolio assessment can provide valuable information about a learner's background and the learning contexts, the process (how learning has progressed) and ability to apply and extend learning.

Thus portfolios are collections of learner's work that demonstrates the learner's progress and achievement in a programme or course of study. A portfolio used for assessment purposes can include examples of learner's work, projects, improvements, self-evaluations, journals and case studies among others.

The objectives of the course/programme dictate the criteria for portfolio assessment. The portfolio is an assessment tool that can provide to all stakeholders information pertaining to accountability. Here the stakeholders include the learners, the employers, the sponsors, the course provider and the tutors. The process of developing the portfolio rests on an on-going interaction between the participants, tutors and the employer.

Portfolio assessment of a learning programme or participants provides a means of conducting assessments throughout the duration of the programme. Various items pertaining to the work situation and the learning outcomes are carefully selected for inclusion in the portfolio as evidence of learning progress towards learning outcomes.

The portfolio serves as a tool for programme evaluation as well. In fact, one of the strengths of portfolio assessment in programme/course evaluation can be its ability to communicate the impact of the programme/course to all those concerned. It can provide a visually clear description of evidence of achievement. This is more appealing to many employers, policy makers and funders find visual or descriptive evidence of successes of individuals or programs to be very persuasive.

For the '**Customer Care and Quality Management**' Course, a portfolio is used as an innovative assessment tool – both at the level of the course and the individual participants. The portfolio is developed by the learner as a document according to guidelines provided and with regular interactions with the tutor. The portfolio development starts on day 1 of the course till the end of the course. It is then submitted to the tutor for assessment.

The portfolio aimed at assessing the knowledge, skills and the various activities during the learning processes including the critical self-reflections. The emphasis is on learning rather than on teaching. **Klenowski's** (2000) work demonstrates that *“the use of portfolios leads to the development of skills such as independent learning, self-evaluation, reflective practice, organisation and meta-cognition.”*

In fact, the portfolio assessment is used to illustrate learning in progress. It is often considered an “autobiography of the learner.”

USING PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

Design and Development

According to Barton & Collins (1997) – [quoted by Meg Sewell, Mary Marczak, & Melanie Horn, in the 'Use of Portfolio Assessment in Evaluation'
<http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/cyfernet/cyfar/Portfo~3.htm> (21 August 2008)]

the key factors that guide the design and development of a portfolio include the

- purpose;
- assessment criteria;
- evidence.

What is the purpose of the assessment portfolio?

The primary concern in getting started is being clear about the purpose of the portfolio. The first question is 'What purpose is it expected to serve?' This will define the operational guidelines for developing the assessment portfolio. For example,

- Will the portfolio be used just as data to inform programme development?
- Will it report learning/development progress?
- Is it just as an assessment tool?
- Is it meant to identify any special need?
- Is it meant to initiate innovation and change?
- Is it part of the accountability mechanism?
- Is it for a combination of the above?

What assessment criteria will be used?

Now that the purpose of the assessment portfolio is clear, the next step is to agree on the assessment criteria. It is also important to select appropriate strategies in line with the purpose of the portfolio. Relevant elements are then identified to constitute the portfolio. This is necessary because they provide evidence of meeting criteria, or progressing in line with the purpose of the assessment portfolio.

What sorts of evidence are required?

While developing a successful portfolio, careful attention is required to a number of questions:

- What sources of evidence should be used?
- How much evidence do we need to make good decisions and determinations?
- How often should we collect evidence?
- Who should certify the elements collected as evidence?
- How congruent should the sources of evidence be?
- How can we make sense of the evidence that is collected?
- How should evidence be used to modify programme and evaluation?

Evidence can relate to knowledge and skills development through understanding; critical self-reflection and application of knowledge and skills developed. The evidences include

- Identification of weaknesses in the normal current work activities following observations, surveys and collection of feedback from customers – These weaknesses can relate to the job structures/system including the processes and procedures, the various tools used and how these weaknesses impact on the vision, mission and objectives of the organization;
- Identification of gaps in personal knowledge, skills/competencies following a self-assessment;
- Actions taken towards elimination of the weaknesses – suggestions for modification of the processes, procedures and tools that are currently being used;
- Actions to initiate new projects, innovative solutions and change;
- Gaps identified and bridging the gap identified in terms of knowledge, skills/competencies – through the self-learning and development processes;
- Self-reflections on the participants choices and learning outcomes – this includes critical reflection regarding the work environment, current practices and learning outcomes pertaining to the learning programme;
- Attestations from employer, supervisor/mentor and external customers – these attestations provide further evidence for putting into practice what is learnt and customer satisfaction;
- Decrease in customer complaints.

DEVELOPING THE PORTFOLIO

It is useful to note that the objectives of the portfolio are

- provide evidence of participant's self-directed learning and development of the required skills;
- promote active learning and focus more on the learning process systematically to show progress over time;
- encourage participant's development as a critical and reflective practitioner;
- enhance participant's skills for life-long learning and continuous professional development;

- provide for quality formative assessment, ie assessment which assists participant to plan future learning experiences.

Thus portfolio assessment emphasizes the learning process. The first step is therefore to work out “portfolio pathway”. This documents growth over time towards goal(s) identified.

The documentation can relate to statements of the

- end goals;
- criteria and learning/development plans for the future.

This should include baseline information, or items describing the participant's work environment and self-assessment of performance at the start of the learning programme.

Other items include aspects of "works in progress", selected during the learning programme to demonstrate learning progress. Thus at this point, the portfolio is a formative evaluation tool. It is no doubt most useful for the internal information of the participant(s), tutor, supervisor/mentor and employer as they plan forward.

The subsequent step involves developing a collection of the best pieces of participant's work. This includes examples of the best efforts of a participant during the learning/development process for putting into practice the knowledge and skills developed. These also include evidences that demonstrate achievement of programme goals and objectives. The best pieces of participant's work encourage reflection about change or learning. For the participant this provides opportunities for a sense of ownership and strength. It helps to show-case or communicates the accomplishments of the participant in the learning/development programme. Now the portfolio serves as summative evaluation tool. This may be particularly useful for the providers of training, the sponsors and the employers.

WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS?

Effective assessment portfolios are associated with a six characteristics as identified by Barton and Collins (1997) - [quoted by Meg Sewell, Mary Marczak, & Melanie Horn, in the '*Use of Portfolio Assessment in Evaluation*'

The portfolio needs to be

- **multi-sourced** - This allows for the opportunity to evaluate a variety of specific evidences.
- **authentic** - The context and evidence are directly linked. The items selected or produced for evidence should be related to learning/development programme activities, as well as the programme purpose and criteria.
- **dynamic** – It must capture both the learning and the learning process, capturing growth and change. Evidence is added at many points in time, not just as "before and after" the programme. Thus in addition to the best work, the portfolio includes examples of different stages of learning/development.
- **explicit** - the purpose and goals are clearly defined and understood by all concerned. The participants should know in advance what is expected of them, so that they can take responsibility for developing their evidence.
- **integrated** - (evidence should establish a correspondence between programme activities and life/work experiences. Participants are required to demonstrate how they can apply their skills or knowledge to real-life situations.
- **based on ownership** - the participant helps determine evidence to be included and goals to be met. The portfolio assessment process requires that the participants engage in some critical reflection and self-evaluation as they select the evidence to include and set or modify their goals.
- **multi-purposed** –This allows assessment of the effectiveness of the programme while assessing performance of the participant. A well-designed portfolio assessment process evaluates the effectiveness of the learning/development programme at the same time that it evaluates the

growth of the participants. It also serves as a communication tool when shared with the sponsors, employers, tutors, supervisors/mentors and course provider.

LIKELY SUCCESS FACTORS

Effective portfolio assessment relies on a number of critical considerations:

- Careful planning;
- Matching the design of the assessment portfolio with the programme objectives;
- Providing all the necessary information and guidelines to the participants and tutors in advance;
- Indicating clearly the usefulness of the assessment portfolio to the participants and the employers;
- Motivating and sustaining the motivation of the participants;
- Adequate briefing/training of all those who would be involved in the development and assessment of the portfolio during the training period;
- The mechanisms by which the assessment portfolios are developed must be established in a manner that all the learners, tutors, employers, peers, etc are comfortable with the types of evidence, the confidentiality of the evidence and the control over that evidence.
- Assessment criteria need to BE as transparent/clear as possible;
- A clear set of acceptable types of work/creation or evidence of learning outcomes must be established more objectivity.
- In addition to the range of acceptable evidence, it is important to identify quality benchmarks that determine the quality of learner performance.
- Nature of acceptable evidences must be clear;
- Support and collaboration of employers, providers of training, supervisors/mentors;
- Adequate logistics and resources to support and sustain the learning and development process;
- Commitment, openness and flexibility of employers, supervisors/mentors for innovation and change;

- Monitoring and addressing problems during the learning and development process. A systematic review of the process must be developed and implemented, to ensure that the process meets all needs.

THE CUSTOMER CARE AND QUALITY MANAGEMENT COURSE

This programme is associated with three new elements:

- **Flexible open distance learning** compared to traditional face to face teaching and learning;
- **CDROM-based for e-learning** with occasional face to face tutorials compared to print-based learning materials;
- **Assessment through portfolio development** compared to traditional assessment in terms of marks/grades resulting from assignments/tests and/or examinations.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PROGRAMME

At the end of the programme, participants are expected to:

- ✚ Explain the importance of customers and customer care in the public sector;
- ✚ Explain the rationale behind customer service excellence;
- ✚ Identify customers needs and expectations in terms of public services;
- ✚ Explain the factors that determine customer service excellence;
- ✚ Identify the features of customer service excellence;
- ✚ Deliver & maintain customer service excellence;
- ✚ Build and enhance customer relationship;
- ✚ Respond to customer services problems effectively;
- ✚ Handle customer complaints effectively;
- ✚ Demonstrate effective communication skills;
- ✚ Practise customer care skills;
- ✚ Devise a plan for customer service excellence;
- ✚ Monitor and assess the effectiveness of customer service excellence.

WHAT AREAS ARE CONSIDERED IN THE PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT?

The portfolio developed by the learner needs to demonstrate three key elements. These are

- **understanding** - Learners have to complete a number of tasks or answer a number of questions related to the course and their current work practices;
- **self-reflection** – Learners have to summarise their learning experience and reflect critically on what is being learnt; the current work practices and the learning outcomes for the course;
- **application of knowledge and skills developed** – Learners have to explain how they are putting into practice the knowledge and skills developed and how these are contributing to improving quality, efficiency and effectiveness of services provided. This is where they have to provide evidence to demonstrate application of the knowledge and skills.

BRIEFING OF PARTICIPANTS/TUTORS

The tutors were trained for the delivery of the course and the provision of learner support. The areas covered during the training included

- Tutoring for open distance learning;
- Supporting open distance learners;
- Assessment portfolio.

All participants were briefed at the induction sessions regarding the

- Rationale for the course;
- Course structure & contents;
- Course assessment;
- Portfolio development.

Clear instructions and guidelines were provided to the participants concerning the development of the portfolio. Opportunities for regular interaction between participants and the tutors were incorporated in the course delivery plan.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE PORTFOLIO

Cover Note: To start with the learner prepares a brief about him/her and his/her work context/practices. This provides sufficient details that enable the tutor to situate the contexts under which the learner is operating.

A pre-course and post course self-assessment of competencies: The learner undertakes a self-assessment of skills/competencies related to the course using a scale 1 – 5 as follows:

1	2	3	4	5
Very Poor	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Excellent

The self-assessment is done before the course and then after the course. This helps the learner to assess the learning that has taken place. Learner self-assessments and goals demonstrate how learning is taking place and how progress is being made.

Summary of the Learning Process: As the learner progresses with the course, he/she records the essential details that help him/her to prepare the summary of the learning process. This includes the general feeling; what has been learnt; what has been put into practice; what improvement has been noted; what cannot be applied at the workplace; what are the constraints; what is irrelevant, etc.

Self-reflection: The self-reflection process starts on day 1. The self-reflection pertains to learning outcomes of the course, the learning content, the current work practices and possible improvements. Learners have to write down these self-reflections according to guidelines provided. This part is important in promoting reflective practices. As defined by Schon (1996), “*reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering one's own experiences in applying knowledge to practice while being coached by professionals in the discipline.*”

Completion of Tasks/Answering questions to demonstrate understanding: Here the learner answers a number of questions related to the learning contents and the current practical work problems. Through this part the learner demonstrates understanding of knowledge, key concepts and principles.

Compiling evidence to demonstrate application of knowledge and skills to improve work practices in terms of quality, efficiency and effectiveness: In this part the learner explains how he/she is applying what has been learnt. Evidences must also be furnished by the learner to support what is claimed.

The reliability of the portfolio as an assessment tool can be improved when the evidences are derived from various sources, such as identification of weaknesses in the delivery of services, initiatives taken towards improvement, customers, peers and the boss. Reliability is also increased when participants create evidences for the portfolio. This is possible and tends to be credible when the participants are actually putting into practice what has been learnt.

The evidences compiled by participants included the:

- Critical analysis of the tools, means and methods used in service delivery;
- Identification and assessment of weaknesses in the delivery of services;
- Development of new/innovative ideas to address the problems identified;
- Initiation of change for improvement;
- Creation of new service delivery tools;
- Attestations from customers;
- Confirmation note from the superiors.

Sometimes journal entries can be used to demonstrate writing skills and/or a self-assessment tool. The purpose of the journal and the goals of the portfolio determine how the entries are included in the portfolio.

LEARNER FEEDBACK

Feedback collected from the 181 participants out a group of 225 through a questionnaire demonstrated the following:

Course outcomes

Most respondents agreed that the course outcomes related to knowledge recall, understanding, application and critical thinking. They agree that the course lived up to their expectations, they accomplished the objectives of the course and they are applying what they have learnt. 2.76% did not agree to the above.

Course assessment

Most respondents found the mode of assessment for the course satisfactory. 16.6% of respondents claim that the opportunities for them to assess their own progress were not sufficient.

How learners View a Portfolio?

Most learners stated that the portfolio development had a positive impact. Part of the results sheet of the evaluation exercise is reproduced below:

The portfolio development helped me to	%
reflect on what I learnt during the course	85.6
reflect on my experience	89.5
apply the customer care principles in my work	89.5

There was also an open ended question regarding the portfolio in the questionnaire. The question was related to the relevance and validity of the Portfolio as an assessment tool. - ***What is your opinion about the assessment through your portfolio development? How far does it help reflective practice – that is reflecting on what you learn and putting into practice what is learnt?***

A few learners were initially worried about the development of the portfolio. This was because it was a new assessment tool different from the traditional one. Although a few complained about the fact that the development of the portfolio takes much time, most of them acknowledged that it is a relevant and valid form of assessment for this course.

Some typical responses include:

- *Good means of assessment and helps reflective practice*
- *Is appropriate - It is pragmatic*
- *This is new to me -A rich experience. A good experience*
- *It is very good, well guided and useful*
- *Good but difficult to produce evidence*
- *It is a good way to help us reflect on how we should practice what we have learnt. The portfolio has helped me to develop and reflect what I have learnt –reflective practice*
- *It helps to apply what I learn. The portfolio has benefited me and improved my skills to put into practice what I learnt*
- *Practical - It is a good exercise*
- *Is a good method of assessment – it enlarges our horizon. Objective way of assessment. Very good way of assessing understanding and progress*
- *Portfolio is appropriate for this type of course*
- *It brings more consciousness and helps to apply what is learnt*
- *The portfolio has compelled me to reflect and apply what is learnt*
- *Helped to realise the improvements that can be made – The portfolio encourages reflective practice and deep thinking. It helped me to analyse my weaknesses and strengths*
- *The portfolio helps to insert our own reflective part*
- *It is an opportunity to use the experience - I can express what I have learnt in the portfolio*
- *Testing the understanding capabilities*
- *The portfolio has helped me to better understand customer care course, its principles and application in everyday life*
- *It is most appropriate mode of assessment – the portfolio is well worked one - It's a new way of self-assessment*
- *A good practice as it helps to reflect on our behaviours*
- *Very good – helps us to correct our bad habits, perform better and serve better*
- *The Portfolio has helped us go through our past experiences, reflect and to deal with similar situations with better attitudes*

- *Reflective practice helps in self assessment and improvement*
- *It is well planned and - Quite demanding*
- *Allows me to ponder over the realities surrounding my work*
- *It is an essential element of the course*
- *Preparing the portfolio helps to learn more about your strengths and what can be done to improve work practices*
- *Quite good – motivates us to put into practice what is learnt*
- *The portfolio enables the tutor to judge the extent the participant has engaged with the course*
- *You get the practical aspect when you do the portfolio*
- *Helps to assess exactly what has been learnt*
- *It helps to assess our own weaknesses and strengths*
- *Ensuring that objectives of the course are attained*

LESSONS LEARNT

Portfolio assessment is a reliable assessment tool for continuous professional development programmes through open distance learning. It provides useful information both for the employer and the employee (learner).

The strengths - Portfolio assessment

- Enables the assessors/tutors to see the learner as an individual, each unique with his/her own characteristics, strengths and diverse needs.
- Provides a basis for future analysis and planning. By viewing the total pattern of individual participants, one can identify areas of strengths and weaknesses and barriers to excellence.
- Serves as a powerful means of communication, providing on-going communication or exchanges of information among those involved.
- Promotes a shift in ownership; employers and employees (learners) can take an active role in examining where they are and where they want to go.

- Offers the possibility of addressing shortcomings of traditional assessment. It offers the possibility of assessing the more complex and important aspects of an area or topic with inputs from the participants.
- Covers a broad scope of knowledge and information, from many different people who know the programme or person in different contexts (e.g., participants, colleagues, providers of training, tutors, peers, or employers).
- Personalisation of the assessment.

The weaknesses - Portfolio assessment

- May be seen as less reliable or fair than more quantitative evaluations such as test scores;
- Can be very time consuming for tutors or programme staff to organize and evaluate the contents;
- If goals and criteria are not clear, the portfolio can be just a miscellaneous collection of pieces of work that don't show patterns of growth or achievement.

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