Variations in higher education portfolio assessment
Discussion of quality issues based on a survey in Norway across institutions and disciplines

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Aim of this presentation

- Present findings from a Norwegian survey of portfolio use
- Raise the issues:
  - How much variation in portfolio concept and practices is it possible to sustain?
  - To what extent are differences discipline dependent?
  - What are some of the crucial quality issues involved in portfolio assessment seen from different stakeholders (students, teachers, administration, governing bodies)?

The context?

- **Sudden increase in the use of portfolios in Norwegian higher education**

- **WHY?**
  - **The Quality Reform of Higher Education**

- A survey conducted in 4 HE institutions after the Quality Reform showed great variations in
    - Portfolio concept
    - Portfolio practice

Background …

The Quality Reform of HE in Norway 2002…

– related to the Bologna process

- Some consequences
  - New study structure 3-2-2
  - New grading system
  - All courses modularized 10-15 ETCS
  - Pedagogical changes expected
    - More student active teaching
    - Closer follow up of students
    - Assessment and instruction closer aligned
      - **Alternative assessment forms, i.e. portfolios, project ass ..**

Methods

- Electronic survey
- Sites:
  - 1 major university (Bergen) 3 university colleges
- Identification and selection of respondents:
  - Professors responsible for topics within a subject-field

- Response rate:
  - University: 58%
  - University Colleges: 76%

Research questions

- How is the portfolio conceptualized and practiced?
  - Working portfolio – assessment portfolio
  - Types of work
  - Feedback practices
  - Grading practices and use of criteria
- Are there disciplinary differences?
  - Hard and soft disciplines
  - Professional – non professional
- What quality issues are involved?
  - Reflection
  - Feedback
  - Criteria

? Do you differenciate between
working portfolio and
assessment portfolio?

Findings

Big difference betw.
Univ. and Univ.
colleges

Big difference between
"hard" and "soft"
disciplines

	Yes
Institution	
University in Bergen	28 %
University colleges	57 %
Disciplinary field	
Math /sciences	16 %
Hum, Social Science and Law	35 %
Teacher and preschool teacher ed	63 %
Health and social worker ed	47 %
Engineers	35 %
Total	**46 %**

Type of work (entries)

	Soc+ Hu	Math+ Sci	Engin.	Teacher	Health	Tot.
Expository& argumentative texts	**78**	25	28	**73**	59	62
Reflection texts	18	4	22	**67**	47	40
Case,project assignments	10	36	**67**	50	35	38
Factual tests	20	21	**56**	9	6	18
Practice related assign.	14	46	44	**67**	59	48

Findings:
Big difference "hard" and "soft" disciplines

Who gives feedback?

Feedback	Soc +Hu	Math+ sci	Engin.	Teacher	Health	Total
Teacher	90	79	94	**95**	88	91
Peers	53	11	33	48	**59**	43
Are comments made available for other students?	**58**	30	20	40	**50**	42
Are students asked to document how they have used the feedback?	14	6	14	25	**46**	21

Findings:

"Soft" disciplines use peer-feedback to a greater extent than "hard" diciplines

? Are written criteria used for assessing the portfolio?

Are written criteria used?	Soc+ Hu	Math+ Sci	Engin.	Teacher	Health	Total
Yes	56	35	65	55	**87**	56
No	44	65	35	45	13	44
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Findings:
Written criteria not common practice except in Health ed.

Summary of findings

- Pf-practices are diverse and a common understanding of pf seems lacking

- Differences dependent on type of education (professional-non-professional) and discipline

- Feedback (teacher and student) is a common element in pf-practice

- Written criteria not common practice except in Health ed.

Discussion

- How much variation in pf concept and practice is acceptable in order to still call it a portfolio?

    - Reflection:
        - Yancey: "It is reflection (= reflective text?) that transforms a collection of papers to a portfolio"

    - Issues influencing the necessity of reflection:
        - The purpose of the pf
        - The time frame for the pf
        - The writing of metacognitive texts very foreign to many university disciplines (regarded with suspicion)

How do we deal with this?

Stakeholder's views of quality and portfolio variations

- **Students**
  - Variations problematic – importance of mastering assessment forms?
- **Teachers**
  - Flexible pf increase learning quality?
  - Flexible pf give higher validity?

- **Administrators and governing bodies**
  - Standardization necessary to ensure reliability of assessment

- **post Bologna**
  - Standardization for mobility?

Quality issues regarding feedback

- Feedback crucial to learning quality (Black & Wiliams)
- Teacher feedback
  - no information about quality of teacher feedback in survey
- Peer feedback
  - widely used
  - only 29 % of students get instruction or training in giving feedback
  - 80 % of students' comments given in public fora
- Public feedback (accessible in VLE)
  - Higher quality feedback if public? (Dysthe/Tolo)
  - Students learn from reading comments given to other students

Quality issues related to feedback

Different stakeholders' views:

- Students:
    - good feedback a major quality issue in portfolios
- Teachers:
    - Ambivalence: Increased quality for students', but workload an important issue
- Administrative/governing bodies:
    - feedback contaminates assessment results: "Whose work is it anyway?"

How do we deal with these quality dilemmas?

Some practical recommendations

- Discuss to what extent the portfolio concept and practice is a result of disciplinary characteristics and reflect the overarching goals of the study programme. Confront superficial notions of pf

- DIscuss how metacognitive and/or critical reflection on course contents can enhance the quality of the portfolios: Is a reflective letter useful or not? (related to course aims)

- Discuss criteria for good feedback among faculty

- Introduce students to crucial elements of good feedback practices and design effective training for them at different levels.

- Focus on the development of explicit criteria and scoring guides as a means to higher reliability and more transparency in the grading process.

Teachers' attitude towards pf as a tool for learning

Consequences in relation to passing exam?

Sign. less failure	Less failure	No change	More failure	Don't know
16 %	35 %	22 %	1 %	27 %

Consequences in relation to the students' overview of subjects?

Much better	Better	No change	Poorer	Don' know
12 %	46 %	20 %	5 %	16 %

Effect on the students' general writing competence

Much better	Better	No change	Poorer	Don' know
12 %	48 %	28 %	0 %	12 %

Teachers' attitude towards pf as tool for learning

All taken into account portfolio assessment demands too much work for me in relation to students' learning benefit!

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither nor	Disagree	Strongly disagree
9 %	28 %	22 %	34 %	8 %

All taken into account portfolio assessment demands too much work for the students in relation to their learning benefit!

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither nor	Disagree	Strongly disagree
4 %	9 %	21 %	46 %	20 %

Pf-assessment gives a better foundation for assessing the students

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither nor	Disagree	Strongly disagree
10 %	58 %	23 %	6 %	3 %

Plagiarism has been a problem in relation to pf-assessment in our subject

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither nor	Disagree	Strongly disagree
5 %	13 %	27 %	41 %	14 %