

Portfolio Assessment as an Alternate Appraisal Method: A Faculty Perspective

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Performance appraisal continues to be an area of research within Human Resource Development. This case study explores the impact of promotion portfolios upon the performance and professional development of university professors. Specific themes from data analysis indicated that portfolios are viewed as a performance appraisal measure/learning tool and have a varying effect on teaching, scholarship, and service. Study findings relate to theory, practice, and research within performance appraisal, training/development, and adult learning/professional development.

Keywords: Performance appraisal, Portfolios, Professional development

The performance appraisal and assessment process is one of the critical methods by which employees are evaluated in terms of their current functioning on the job relative to a specific set of standards. It is often considered a function of the Human Resource Development Department, and therefore, has received attention within the HRD literature.

The purpose of performance appraisal, as discussed within research studies, may include (a) the identification of performance gaps in employee functioning on the job (Bernardin, Hagan, & Villanova, 1998), and (b) to develop learning opportunities for the employee that will positively or productively impact knowledge, skills, and abilities (Squires & Adler, 1998). In this sense, performance appraisal serves as a systematic process for employee and organizational growth (Roberts, 2002). The process has been examined in research studies and found to be most effective when the employee is actively involved and participates in the identification of goals for professional development (Mayfield, 1960; Roberts, 2002), and when it is conducted in a supportive environment with employee involvement (Martin & Bartol, 1998).

Despite these findings, research related to actual performance appraisal systems has provided evidence that although 90% of organizations use a performance appraisal system, less than 20% consider it effective (Cummings & Worley, 2001; Longenecker & Goff, 1990). Furthermore, employees have reported their performance appraisal process as unfair and counterproductive (Finn & Fontaine, 1984; Gilliland & Langdon, 1998) to the development of actual learning objectives and goals for performance improvement. This may also relate to the argument by Swanson (1999), that the concept of 'performance' is difficult to define and measure. This position may explain the additional concern of employees that performance appraisal measures may not accurately document or illustrate the many duties and responsibilities they have relative to a specific job or assignment within an organization.

Problem Statement

Such research regarding the challenges of performance appraisal has led to increased attention regarding the role of alternate forms of assessment and how they may serve to address many of these recognized problems, including the ability to capture the many responsibilities that employees have on the job. Given these recognized problems within performance appraisal, it is important to examine the possible impact of alternate assessment forms upon employees. Within education, portfolios have been used to assess student performance as a course requirement or an indicator of clinical training and personal development (Athanases, 1994; Jarvinen & Kohonen, 1995; Kneale, 2002; Stuessy & Naizer, 1996; Winsor, Butt, & Reeves, 1999). However, portfolios are also used in post-secondary education as a performance appraisal measure of university faculty for contract renewal, promotion, or tenure. Thus, research regarding professors' perceptions and experiences of the portfolio development process as a performance appraisal measure of their teaching, scholarship, and service, may prove useful in identifying its effectiveness as an alternate assessment form.

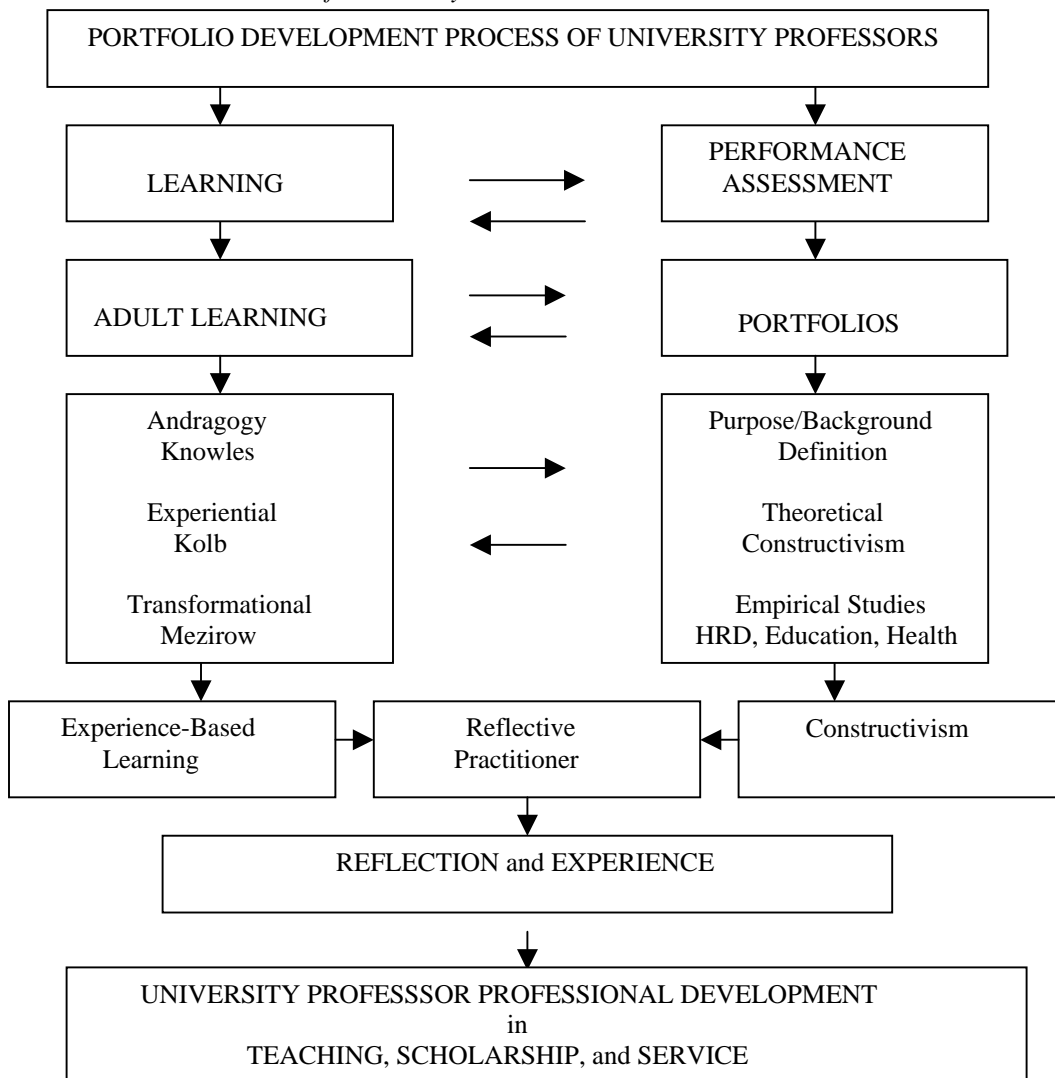
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Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework developed for this case study explored the relationship between learning (adult learning theories) and performance assessment (portfolios) as components that support the process of self-reflection. It is this self-reflection which occurs as part of the portfolio development process that impacts the performance appraisal and professional development of university professors.

The adult learning theories that were included within this framework were andragogy, experiential learning theory, and transformational learning theory: each of these theories advance the importance of adult learning through reflection (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 1998; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991). Additionally, the performance assessment components included the purpose of portfolios, their theoretical background, and the empirical studies that support their use, all of which also provide support for the self-reflection that occurs during the development of portfolios. Thus, the framework provided support for the process of self-reflection that occurs through portfolio development and then influences individual performance and professional development in the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service. The framework that was developed for this study is presented below.

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework for the Study



Research Questions

The primary research question within this case study was: “*How does performance appraisal impact the behavior of university professors, in the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service, as examined through the portfolio development process?*”

Methodology/Research Design with Limitations

The theoretical framework was the rationale for using a qualitative case study in which eight university professors volunteered to participate as study subjects. The case study was selected as the most appropriate method for this research investigation because it would allow the researcher to explore the perceptions and experiences of university professors in order to understand how portfolios impacted their performance and professional development (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995). The study was also modeled after research that was conducted by Brown (1999) on the use of reflective portfolios by adult learners.

The data collection methods that were used included demographic data sheets, audio-taped interviews, document review of portfolios, a reflective researcher journal, and field notes. Data confirmation was enhanced through triangulation by the use of these multiple forms of data collection, which were obtained in different formats (interviews, documents, reflective writing) and from different individuals (participants and the researcher). Furthermore, member checking, in which participants were asked to review interview transcripts and document review notes, was used to increase data accuracy.

Specific limitations within this study include the voluntary participation of eight professors from the same university in Southwest Florida. The use of volunteers for this study introduced possible bias, as individuals may have participated for a variety of different reasons, and will differ from those individuals who decided not to participate. Individuals who volunteer may have very specific experiences and perceptions regarding the use of portfolios as a performance appraisal measure and their impact upon the aspects of teaching, scholarship, and service. Therefore, their participation and the findings that result from their interviews and document reviews will be different from the data that would be obtained through the use of a random sample.

Results and Findings

Data obtained from participant interviews was transcribed and examined through content analysis in order to identify specific categories and themes that could then be applied to the primary research question (Creswell, 1998; 2003; Stake, 1995).

Identified Themes and Their Components/Categories

This section will provide a summary of the themes that were identified following content analysis in which subject responses from interview transcripts were placed into categories (pre-existing or created) that were then collapsed into a common theme. Each category is presented in this section as a component of the identified theme.

Theme #1

(1) Professors reported that the role of portfolios could be both positive and negative within the performance appraisal process. This theme was illustrated through four components, the first two, which were positive, included: (a) portfolios could be used to document participant involvement in activities and (b) portfolios could enhance or positively impact professional development. The next two components of this theme, which were negative, included: (c) the role of portfolios as largely determined by their definition and (d) the role of portfolios could be limited by specific problems.

Professors reported that one of the roles of portfolios was to serve as documentation of the activities in which they were involved. These usually included prior activities or duties at other universities or organizations, as well as those activities they were currently involved in at the university. Additionally, they also reported that portfolios could increase or positively impact their professional development largely through self-reflection and by comparing their own activities with those of other professors. Portfolios in this sense seemed to serve as a ‘gauge’ for determining the professors’ progress within the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service.

Although the role of portfolios was viewed as positive in terms of documentation and examination of activities and professional development, professors reported that their role was largely determined by how portfolios were defined, which was not always clear or specific. Subsequently, some professors explained their understanding of the

role of portfolios through a discussion of their historical purpose and use at the university, which was originally for contract renewal and promotion.

Additionally, many noted that the role of portfolios, even when clearly defined, was often limited by very specific problems and challenges. For example, professors often mentioned that portfolios were not always well organized or clear in their presentation and that reviewers needed to be very objective in their evaluation of the promotion portfolio. This component of organization and definition, in terms of materials to be included, also appeared in the theme regarding portfolio advantages.

Theme #2

(2) Professors reported that portfolios related to their job as both a performance assessment measure and a learning tool. This theme had four components, the first two included: (a) portfolios were viewed as a way to assess performance and get feedback from others and (b) portfolios served as a learning tool for self-reflection. The next two components included (c) portfolio content should show growth and progression over time and (d) portfolios provide documentation of different jobs and responsibilities.

Specifically, portfolios were viewed as a way to assess performance and get feedback from others, including peers, students, and supervisors. Portfolios were also viewed in relation to the job as a learning tool for self-reflection, so that professors were able to look through the content of their portfolio, which included peer, student, and supervisor performance evaluations, and reflect upon their activities. This process was viewed as a form of learning, in that professors were able to review their performance in terms of specific strengths and weaknesses, and identify areas for improvement through participation in professional development activities or other coursework. This learning piece was related to the third component, which was that portfolio content should show growth and progression over time, in the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service, in order to enhance current performance and impact future learning.

The final component that was identified in relation to the theme of portfolios as a performance appraisal measure and a learning tool was that portfolios provide documentation of professors' different jobs and responsibilities. The existence of a promotion portfolio would essentially serve as an indicator and illustrator of the many activities that professors were involved in related to the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service.

Theme #3

(3) Professors reported that portfolios had a varying effect upon their teaching scholarship, and service. This theme had four components, the first two included: (a) the portfolio development process positively impacted teaching effectiveness through self-reflection and examination of instructional techniques for improvement and (b) the portfolio development process did not increase professors' scholarship or service. The next two components included: (c) the portfolio development process provides the opportunity to illustrate teaching, scholarship, and service and (d) the portfolio development process helps to target which of these areas should receive more attention.

Professors explained that the portfolio development process positively impacted their teaching effectiveness through self-reflection and the examination of instructional techniques for improvement. This positive impact was related to the time they spent examining the activities and feedback within their portfolios, which allowed them to identify areas for improvement and assess their own personal strengths and weaknesses as indicated in such feedback.

However, they noted that the portfolio development process did not actually increase or specifically impact their amount of scholarship or commitment to college, university, or community forms of service. Many professors reported that they would be involved in scholarship or service activities whether or not they had to develop or maintain a portfolio. Professors noted that their actual participation in activities reflected their own identity and individual pursuits as separate from the university.

Although the portfolio development process may not have increased their participation in scholarship and service activities, professors did report that portfolios specifically provided the opportunity to illustrate their teaching, scholarship, and service. This was central to their perception of how portfolios related to these three areas: as a method for documenting their involvement in and commitment to certain activities that evidenced achievement in teaching, scholarship, and service. In those instances where the portfolio did effect these three aspects, it was reported that the portfolio development process helped to target on which of these areas the professor should work.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study examined one type of alternate performance appraisal measure, the promotion portfolio, and its potential impact upon the behaviors of university professors in the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service. The theoretical

framework that was created for this study provided support for the expectation that developing a portfolio would impact professors' teaching, scholarship, and service through its facilitation of reflection and the process of continued self-examination which shapes professional performance and effects individual learning.

In fact, these were the findings of the study: the portfolio development process did impact professors' behaviors in teaching, scholarship, and service through their reflection upon these activities. These findings also were supported by the adult learning theories of the framework. These theories maintained that learning occurs through the application of knowledge to the everyday world (andragogy), the reflection upon individual experience (experiential learning theory), and the modification of mental schemas (transformational learning theory).

The findings of this case study provide insight into the way in which an alternate form of performance appraisal, the portfolio development process, impacts specific behaviors of university professors that are considered the central components of their professional lives in higher education. Although the portfolio enhanced their self-reflection and was considered both a performance assessment measure and a learning tool, its impact upon their activities was both immediate, in the form of improved teaching, and long-term, in the identification of future goals for professional development in scholarship and service. These findings are supported by the literature regarding portfolios: that they help to provide documentation of different responsibilities and help to illustrate personal and professional growth. These findings have implications within the areas of theory, practice, and future research in HRD related to performance appraisal, training/development, and adult learning/professional development.

Contribution to New Knowledge in HRD

Recommendations for Theory in HRD

The findings from this case study may be applied to the theoretical literature in the areas of (a) performance appraisal, (b) training and development, and (c) adult learning and continuing professional development. This study provides information regarding how the portfolio development process impacts the teaching, scholarship, and service of university professors. Additionally, it identifies portfolios as a performance appraisal measure that has merit as a method for self-reflection that may lead to adjustments in performance within teaching and the development of professional goals within scholarship and service. Such information regarding the use of portfolios as a performance appraisal measure provides insight regarding how their use as an appraisal method relates to the current activities of professors, through their illustration, and their future goals, through their identification and development.

In the area of training and development, the findings of this study indicate that professors reported varied training experiences regarding the development of their portfolios. Thus, professors explained that both informal and formal training interventions were useful in guiding them through the portfolio development process. These findings are important for the training and development literature because they provide evidence that such interventions are helpful and that it may be purposeful to examine what aspects about informal and formal training strategies are more helpful compared to others.

The study findings also apply to adult learning and professional development because they provide evidence that promotion portfolios enhance self-reflection on the job and the application of strategies to improve performance. This learning is largely impacted through the feedback from students and colleagues, as well as through an examination of personal strengths and weaknesses that are shaped to effect performance, specifically in the area of teaching.

Recommendations for Practice in HRD

In the area of practice, the results of this study provide valuable information regarding the use of portfolios as a performance appraisal measure. The findings highlight their specific use as a tool for self-reflection and the development of goals for professional development within the areas of scholarship and service. As a matter of practice, it may be more useful for professors to review their portfolios on a more regular basis so that they are continuously aware of the components within scholarship and service that they are interested in working on for future development. Such continuous reflection within these two areas would help to improve their work in them and strengthen their efforts at connecting them to their teaching.

The study findings apply to training and development through the identification of the perceived role of portfolios and their relationship to performance and learning, which may be addressed within specific university based programs that are provided to faculty regarding promotion portfolios. For example, a consistent finding was that portfolios should be well organized and have clear content that illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of the promotion candidate, which could be addressed or emphasized during a portfolio promotion program at the university.

In the area of adult learning and professional development, the findings again indicate that portfolios enhanced self-reflection upon the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service and helped professors target areas they wanted to work on for future professional development, specifically in scholarship and service. As this issue of self-reflection was a central theme within this study, it may be helpful for professors to not only reflect on their portfolios more frequently, but also to create opportunities in which they receive feedback from students and peers on a more continual basis.

Recommendations for Future Research in HRD

The recommendations for future research are shaped largely by the limitations of the study, which should be addressed through additional investigative efforts. First, future research should be directed toward adjusting the sample that was used for this study. Specifically, this study involved the participation of eight university professors who volunteered to serve as subjects. The findings may be vastly different if a larger random sample were used to examine the primary and secondary research questions.

A second consideration for future research efforts would be to also include full professors as possible participants. This study limited subjects to Assistant and Associate Professors, which effectively eliminated a whole group of professionals who may have been able to share additional perspectives related to their last promotion (terminal) to full professor. Moreover, the sample should include a greater level of diversity related to gender and most specifically to college affiliation, as those variables may similarly impact the perceptions and experiences regarding the performance appraisal process.

A third recommendation for future research would include a possible follow-up with professors to determine if they worked on scholarship and service as a professional goal. In that sense, a study could determine the actual long-term impact of portfolios on these two activities and whether or not professors did, over time, increase their level of participation in them.

A fourth recommendation would be to examine the perceptions and experiences of professors who were unsuccessful in their attempt to be promoted. These professionals would certainly provide invaluable information regarding their thoughts on the role of portfolios in performance appraisal, its relation to their job, and any advantages or disadvantages.

A final recommendation would be to follow a group of randomly selected professors over the course of developing their portfolios so that the process could be illustrated over time up to the actual determination of whether the candidate was promoted or not. Such a research study would help to further illuminate the many experiences that professors may have while working on their portfolios and how they address the possible struggles and concerns that occur throughout the process.

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