cs 17 ed

Portfolio Evaluation: Kaleidoscopic Insights Into Learning Effectiveness and Change

Michelle LeBaron*

Editors' Note: Like the benchmark approach, portfolio evaluation seeks to distinguish particular elements that have been learned well from those which will require more work from the student, or from the teacher. Unlike the benchmark approach, portfolio evaluation welcomes, indeed encourages, affective and sensory reflection, rather than an exclusive focus on the cognitive. LeBaron has a strong commitment to a broad view of the field, and her particular use of portfolios gives some room to cultural, physical and even aesthetic elements which, she argues, are often underappreciated in our field. Even in more conventional practice, however, LeBaron contends that portfolio evaluation addresses a series of formative and summative assessment needs — particularly fostering double-loop learning — better than standard approaches have.

Introduction

Portfolio evaluation is a multi-faceted gaze into learning; it is a way of gathering nuggets that fall through the cracks in more didactic methods of gauging progress. Because it ranges across affective, sensory and cognitive domains, it is a particularly useful tool for negotiation educators, who must be concerned with all three. I have been using portfolio evaluation for three decades as an educator in negotiation and conflict resolution. In my experience, portfolio evaluation is productive, fair and useful for everyone involved in the learning process. Below is a brief discusion of this form of evaluation, its justifications and outcomes.

^{*} Michelle LeBaron is a professor of law and director of the Dispute Resolution Program at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, and an award-winning teacher. Her email address is lebaron@law.ubc.ca.

What is Portfolio Evaluation?

Portfolio evaluation means requiring a number of different kinds of assignments and artifacts of learning to be assembled, in a coherent format and with a table of contents. These products are designed to document learning, to promote reflection about both content and process, and to reflect synthesis. They reflect attitudinal and perceptual shifts and create a record of learning artifacts that becomes more valuable as time elapses (Anderson and DeMeulle 1998; Barton and Collins 1993).

Evaluation, a vital aspect of negotiation and dispute resolution education, is most sound when it is multimodal and linked to multiple assessment vehicles (see Ebner, Efron, and Kovach, *Evaluating Our Evaluation* and Fuller and Kaur, *A Benchmarking System*, in this volume). Portfolio evaluation satisfies both of these criteria. It also enjoys additional advantages: it stimulates students' imaginations, creative capacities and integrative thinking abilities, and it is arguably more fair than many other modes of evaluation because it taps a wide range of student learning styles and spreads evaluation across modes.

Portfolio evaluation may contain any number of elements, but typically involves a range of documents and products that evidence learning over time including objectives, milestones and turning points; demonstrate students' stake in and responsibility for learning; reflect individual and group progress including observations on learning processes and emergent substantive understandings; document affective and perceptual changes; display competencies and the achievement of learning objectives; and identify learning "edges" or goals for future pursuit.

In classes where practical skills are part of the curriculum, portfolios may also include faculty-prescribed, class-generated learning objectives related to skills; written comments by peers and faculty on performance; individual, practical student learning objectives, reflections and assessments of progress toward goals in specific exercises and over time; individual and group exercises in diverse media including visual and audio compositions; recordings of exercises; and other products limited only by teachers' and participants' imaginations.

Portfolios are particularly useful for documenting the process of learning itself; they gather artifacts in a single, central place that remains a resource after a course, and can also serve to showcase skills and development relevant to future education, practice or employment. They serve as valuable artifacts to anchor insights and rich experiences that might otherwise fade into memory. Because of portfolios' focus on learning, they reinforce encouragement and hope, and can be very useful during times of discouragement, setbacks or personal questioning. In general, portfolios are well-suited to documenting participants' evolving capacities to:

- engage in meaningful collaborative work;
- communicate and negotiate effectively, orally and in writing;
- appreciate, value and respond to differences across cultures;
- exert influence and persuasion in negotiation;
- think critically;
- make effective decisions;
- integrate good habits of reflective practice.

Why Portfolio Evaluation?

Disputing and negotiation are more than "above-the-neck" experiences. It makes sense, therefore, that dispute resolution and negotiation education should consider embodied observation and affective shifts as key elements in learning and evaluation, as LeBaron, MacLeod, and Acland explain in their forthcoming book *Making Movement Matter* (2013). Embodied observation involves recognizing that physical cues are integral to learning. Through our bodies, after all, we receive intuitive signals, experience feelings, sense states and state changes in ourselves and others – all of which are important to effective negotiation. Portfolio evaluation is particularly suited to education in dispute resolution and negotiation given that:

- addressing disputes and negotiating effectively involve creativity and imagination, both of which are welcomed, stimulated and deepened in portfolio evaluation;
- neuroscience findings confirm the potency of using material from diverse standpoints across multi-modal forms for promoting learning (Mayer 2001; Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000; Ginns 2005);
- portfolio evaluation fosters double-loop learning as described by Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (Argyris and Schön 1978). Single-loop learning involves examining discrete issues in linear succession. Double-loop learning involves questioning underlying principles, looking deeper than the presenting problems and corresponding solutions to underlying norms and objectives. A double-loop learning approach to negotiation and dispute resolution encourages learners to acquire skills while simultaneously considering their applicability and effectiveness for diverse populations. Double-loop learning thus fosters increased cultural fluency (LeBaron and Patera 2009);
- this form of evaluation engages learners from a variety of learning preferences, thus facilitating more meaningful engagement and deeper reflection than uni-modal forms of evaluation (Morin 1995).

Which Competencies are Developed via Portfolio Evaluation?

Of course, the short answer is that any number of competencies can be identified and operationalized as learning objectives in portfolio evaluation (Wolf and Siu-Runyan 1996). At the same time, this type of evaluation is particularly useful in creating experiential learning loops that incorporate active experimentation, concrete experience, abstract conceptualization and reflective observation, as described by David Kolb (see Eyler, Giles, and Schmeide 1996). Kolb's four aspects of experiential learning lend themselves well to incorporation in portfolio evaluation in dispute analysis and negotiation education. Here are some examples of how the four aspects may translate into learning objectives:

The ACTIVIST Incorporates Active Experimentation as They

- welcome the challenge of conflict and models this for others;
- accurately analyze disputes and negotiations, with awareness of the relative weight and accent of various factors and cultural dynamics;
- notice interpersonal dynamics and consider how they relate to needed systemic changes;
- demonstrate willingness to try a range of dispute handling and prevention strategies;
- show skill in brainstorming even in the midst of complex disputes.

The PRAGMATIST Works From Concrete Experience and

- develops a range of intervention strategies and tests them carefully, abandoning those that do not yield progress;
- normalizes complexities of disputes to assist others in navigating difficult issues;
- acts effectively in partnership with others during collaborative exercises;
- manages negotiation dynamics by structuring processes effectively;
- notices when things are off track and makes specific suggestions about how to refocus.

The REFLECTOR Uses Abstract Conceptualization as They

- ponder experiences and synthesize learnings to inform future processes;
- seek feedback and respond constructively and non-defensively,

- watches and listens to others, demonstrating attunement rather than acting from personal opinions;
- act effectively within a larger framework after considering all angles;
- articulates purposes of strategies, tools and processes coherently.

The THEORIST Works From Reflective Observation as They

- implement processes in logical, sequential order, while being willing to move laterally to incorporate novel concerns;
- pull together threads from specific cases into useful theories about dispute resolution and negotiation dynamics;
- seek a high standard of performance in accordance with articulated theoretical principles;
- articulate connections among theory, research and practice effectively and link these to phenomenological findings;
- advocate for informed decision-making in negotiation and conflict.

What is Included in a Portfolio?

Portfolios should be well-organized, with a clear focus and sense of purpose. They should balance specificity with overall thematic elements, expressing ideas, concepts and experiences that have characterized the intellectual/practical elements of the course. Portfolios should always have elements of self-assessment, reflecting on what is known and not known, as well as potential applications of knowledge. They should be visually interesting, well-organized and demonstrative of the compiler's ability to integrate ideas and experiences.

Why is it important that products be visually interesting when negotiation learning primarily emphasizes non-visual elements, aside from cursory explorations of "body language?") Just as vibrant language draws readers and listeners, so visually exciting components in a portfolio engender readers' interest, stimulate their imaginations and add dynamism to the project. (For other types of intelligence that might be valued in a portfolio, see Honeyman and Parish 2012.)

When is Portfolio Evaluation Used?

In recent years teaching in a law school, it has sometimes been challenging to require portfolios from students. Cultural norms and law school grading rules tend to preclude substantial deviations from more traditional evaluation practices. At the same time, courses with affective and skills-based learning goals require something more than traditional paper assignments, so I use aspects of portfolio evaluation even

in law school classes. For example, I required students in my intercultural dispute resolution classes to submit a creative project and a cultural autobiography along with more traditional products. An example of a portfolio assignment for this class is attached in the Appendix.

Cultural contexts are always relevant to what is possible with portfolio evaluation (Herman and Winters 1994). Just as law schools tend to traditions of less diverse artifacts of learning, other disciplines have their own conventions. In addition, various national and regional contexts carry assumptions of what is and is not legitimate as evaluative vehicles. Exams and term papers test particular skills and abilities, but do not have the same scope as a multifaceted portfolio. In places where there has been resistance to the use of portfolios, I have adapted the assignment to come closer to local norms, while inviting participants to venture at least in small ways outside "business as usual." In this area as in every instance where cultural fluency is important, adaptation, sensitivity and incremental change are useful watchwords.

What are the Outcomes and Benefits of Using Portfolio Evaluation?

Learners consistently report high levels of satisfaction with this form of evaluation (Carroll, Potthoff and Huber 1996). While they are sometimes challenged by or resistant to stepping outside more traditional forms, they often report high-impact learning from the *process* of composing portfolios. I have in the past stressed to learners that I will not assign grades based on artistic or creative merit, but on the extent to which they have assembled a portfolio that evidences reflective synthesis, originality and thoughtful placement of components.

Of course, there is always a subjective element in assessing portfolios (Wade and Yarbrough 1996), and the distinction between creative merit and originality has not proven easy to maintain. A recent experience of grading was instructive for me, catalyzing reflection on my process of assigning grades. From a class of twenty-four students, several innovative creative pieces were submitted including a recording of an original song about conflict and loss, a video enactment of diverse responses to the same scenario using different body postures and physical settings, and a world map with different textures and colors reflecting conflict histories across regions. One student in the class submitted a photo collage of an Occupy protest in a Canadian city. She presented about twenty photos that had been reduced to about a centimeter square each on a single sheet of paper. The photos were difficult to see and the details nearly impossible to discern. Her grade on this portion of the assignment was markedly lower than other participants' grades. When she challenged me on my decision, I found myself explaining that the extent of effort and originality was substantially less in her work than in others'. As well, the degree of visual interest was lower than in other projects. She protested, arguing that taking dozens of photos, selecting the best ones and composing a collage had involved a substantial outlay of time and ingenuity. While acknowledging her point, I declined to change her grade, confident that I had applied the criteria as fairly as possible.

Yet following this exchange, I realized that aesthetic merit actually does inform my assessment of creative pieces, and so I have changed my grading criteria accordingly. At the same time, I recognize that this is a slippery slope, because I do not want to get into the art critic business! Including aesthetic criteria in the evaluative process means that I field more inquiries from students about how these elements translate into grades. The most successful response I have found is to keep examples of outstanding creative pieces to show students embarking on these projects. In addition, I stress that my assessment of aesthetic merit is not as a critic, but as someone looking for evidence of deep engagement with a medium outside traditional writing. The evaluation criteria that I now use for assessing creative projects are included in the Appendix that follows.

Conclusion

Portfolio evaluation is a process as much as a product. Because it is always changing in form and content, it keeps both students and me engaged in kaleidoscopic investigations of course material that continually evolve and reflect new thinking in the field of negotiation. My use of this form has also led me to think more broadly about class activities that enhance learning. Leading trips to museums, memorials, performances and other community sites and events has become an important way to model the qualities of reflection and synthesis I want to instill in students. While there remains a lot to learn, the ground covered so far has only whetted my appetite for continuing to expand portfolio evaluation as a meaningful evaluative approach.

References

- Anderson, R. S. and L. DeMeulle. 1998. Portfolio use in twenty-four teacher education programs. *Teacher Education Quarterly* 25(1): 23-32.
- Argyris, C. and D. Schön. 1978. *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.
- Barton, J. and A. Collins. 1993. Portfolios in teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education* 44: 200-211.
- Bransford, J., A. Brown, and R. Cocking. 2000. *How people learn*. National Academy Press: Washington, DC.

- Carroll, J. A., D. Potthoff, and T. Huber. 1996. Learnings from three years of portfolio use in teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education* 47(4): 253-262.
- Eyler, J., D. E. Giles, and A. Schmiede (eds). 1996. *A practitioners guide to reflection in service learning: Student voices and reflections*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University.
- Ginns, P. 2005. Meta-analysis of the modality effect. *Learning and Instruction* 15: 313- 331.
- Herman, J. L. and L. Winters. Portfolio research: A slim collection. *Educational Leadership* 52(2): 48-55.
- Honeyman, C. and R. Parish. 2013 forthcoming. Make a move. In *Making movement matter: Conflict, dance and neuroscience* (working title) edited by M. LeBaron, C. MacLeod, and A. Acland. Chicago: American Bar Association.
- LeBaron, M., C. MacLeod, and A. Acland. 2013 forthcoming. *Making movement matter: Conflict, dance and neuroscience* (working title). Chicago: American Bar Association.
- LeBaron, M. and M. Patera. 2009. Reflective practice in the new millennium. In *Rethinking negotiation teaching: Innovations for context and culture*, edited by C. Honeyman, J. Coben, and G. De Palo. St. Paul, MN: DRI Press.
- Mayer, R. 2001. Multi-media learning. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Morin, J. A. 1995. *Portfolios: An effective tool used by prospective teachers to encourage self-evaluation and improvement.* Paper presented at the National Evaluation Institute Annual Meeting, Kalamazoo, MI (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 391 806).
- Wade, R. and D. B. Yarbrough. 1996. Portfolios: A tool for reflective thinking in teacher education? *Teaching and Teacher Education* 12(1): 63-79.
- Wolf, K and Y. Siu-Runyan. 1996. Portfolio purposes and possibilities. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 40(1): 30-37.

Appendix

This portfolio assignment is comprised of

- table of contents;
- creative piece;
- cultural autobiography;
- at least one item from the list I-III below; and
- bibliography of sources cited

Component Descriptions:

The **creative piece** may be an original poem, photograph, recorded song, short story, collage, or other artistic creation. The purpose of this requirement is to invite you to relate to class material in a holistic way. The creative piece will be evaluated according to the degree it demonstrates evidence of

- originality:
- thoughtful reflection;

- synthesis of ideas discussed in class relationship to class themes and readings;
- links to personal or community issues and experiencecombining elements in ways that emphasize complexity, ambiguity and texture;
- attention to aesthetic dimensions of composition such as balance, order, symmetry and particularity.

The **cultural autobiography should** include reflections on your own cultural group membership and turning points or changes in identity. Autobiographies should be 6-8 pages, and may include any of the following:

- a. Formative cultural identity experiences (What did I learn about rules for members of my group?)
- b. Formative experiences relating to meaning-making. What did I learn is important, and how did it connect to what my group values?
- c. Experiences of in and out-group awareness (Who am I and who am I not? Who is "us" and who is "other"?)
- d. Dynamics of privilege and power (How did shame, guilt, pride, inclusion and exclusion relate to my identity?)
- e. Metaphors for home group and others
- f. Rituals that reinforced or shaped identity
- g. Reflections on the development and ongoing evolution of identity.

Choose <u>at least</u> one of the following to comprise the final paper (you may choose more than one if you wish. If you choose more than one, your papers will be shorter than if you choose only one of the following options):

- I. **Case study of a public conflict** including analysis and prospects for resolution. The case study should include some cross-cultural features, and these should be a part of your description and analysis. Case studies may comprise up to one half of the required page limit for the final paper, and may also include any of the following:
 - a. Analysis of history, context, parties, ripeness, and intervention attempts (if any)
 - b. Description of cultural dynamics involved in the conflict, and ways these have been or might be addressed
 - c. Synthesis of course readings and class experiences as these relate to the chosen case
 - d. Suggestions for preventing escalation of similar conflicts in the future.
- II. **Theories of change**, describing ideas from the literature about how change comes about in conflict, and connecting theory to personal or public experiences of change or transformation. You may include any of the following:
 - a. Description of a conflict or conflicts, with analyses of turning points or changes in the conflict dynamics or the relationships of those involved
 - b. Exploration of the precursors of turning points: What makes conflict de-escalation more or less likely?

- c. What can parties and third parties do to create conditions for positive turning points?
- d. What, in your view, are the prerequisites of change when people are in conflict?

III. Analysis of a specific kind of conflict (e.g., religious conflict, ethnic conflict, conflict in post-war contexts, etc.). You may include any of the following:

- a. Dynamics of the chosen kind of conflict what sets it apart from other kinds of conflict?
- b. Discussion of exemplars of this kind of conflict, to illustrate some of its common dynamics
- c. Considerations relevant to intervention in this kind of conflict
- d. Projections for the future evolution of this kind of conflict, and policy or practical suggestions for improving its handling.

The **bibliography** should be in an accepted academic style of your choice.