

The Personal Development Portfolio in the First Year of Higher Education: enabling the self-creation of a transition community

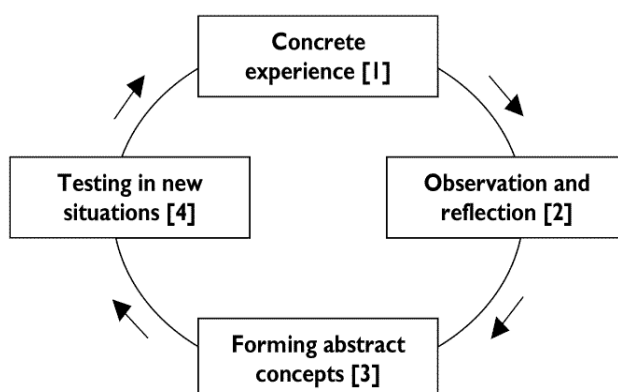
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Introduction

The sector-wide introduction of Personal Development Planning into higher education [HE] during 2005, as recommended by the Dearing Report, has been met with some scepticism from colleagues who have previously encountered other forms of recording achievement. This paper will set out and critique the basic theory of the Personal Development Portfolio (PDP), the mechanism which is used to achieve the enhanced self-awareness in learning that is the aim of this process. With reference to new students in particular, the epistemological foundations of the PDP will be assessed and an alternative way of conceiving of the theoretical basis will be put forward. The fundamental thesis here is that new students are a 'transition community' and need to have an approach in the first year based on information and receiving feedback that helps them to develop their personal notion of self for the new community they are joining.

The PDP is usually described as founded on two principles: constructivism and the Kolb cycle. Constructivists believe that individuals construct their own reality and that there is no truth which exists apart from human beings' attempts to construct an understanding of the world. For the process of Personal Development Planning, therefore, this is a basic tenet. As Paulson and Paulson (1991, p. 5) see it, '[t]he portfolio is a laboratory where students construct meaning from their accumulated experience'. The Kolb cycle is a theory of how such a view of the world is created and developed.



From Kolb (1994)

Critique

Two things need to be added to this much-quoted diagram, however. One is that Kolb believed that learning could be initiated at any point in the cycle despite the numbering. Kolb also held that students will have differing learning styles which correspond to one or other of these stages. The four learning styles are, respectively: converger, diverger, assimilator and accommodator. As Tennant (1997, p. 91) notes: 'In developing this model Kolb and Fry have helped to challenge those models of learning that seek to reduce potential to one dimension such as intelligence'. They also recognize that there are strengths and weaknesses associated with each style, and that being 'locked into' one style can put a learner at a serious disadvantage. If these are construed as different intelligences, then each needs to have an opportunity to flourish. Hartman (1995) took Kolb's learning styles and gave examples of how one might teach to each them:

1. Converger - for the concrete experiencer--offer laboratories, field work, observations or trigger films
2. Diverger - for the reflective observer--use logs, journals or brainstorming
3. Assimilator - for the abstract conceptualizer--lectures, papers and analogies work well
4. Accommodator - for the active experimenter--offer simulations, case studies and homework

The PDP constructed according to the epistemology described above assumes that the user is a reflective observer. Task variation is missing which might enable students with different intelligences to dwell on their strengths. The sequential structure of the paper-based version of the PDP follows the Kolb cycle and only an interactive version could overcome this bias by allowing students to select according to their interests and abilities at any point in the cycle. The sequential versions presuppose a reflective observer rather than creating one. Furthermore, the adoption of the Kolb cycle also perhaps reflects the skills a graduate might be said to possess, but not the abilities which a new entrant could be expected to demonstrate. This cycle might work very well at Honours level but is assuming a considerable range of skills in new students.

The second main objection to an uncritical adoption of the Kolb model is that the student needs to test their conclusions. The Kolb cycle gives the impression that the students make their own world-view and need no feedback on how effective or valid this is. If this were the case, there would be no point at all in giving feedback. If all individualistic world views are unique and do not have to correspond to anything, then no-one can critique them. No test could confirm or disconfirm them. If this were so, we might find it hard to teach first-year students how to relinquish their 'common sense' view of the world and accept the ways that academic study can extend their thinking. As Bruffee (1993) maintains, education is social acculturation and as such it is a process of structuring reality together with others to enable

harmonious co-existence. New students do not yet have a mental structure within which they can assimilate the experience they encounter. Coherence is not the only test. This means that students eventually have to be exposed to ways that challenge their constructions of reality by learning to conform with (not to) those of others. Bruffee (*ibid.*, p. 75) argues as follows:

A close look at what goes on in transition communities suggests that what they really are is translation communities [sic]. They organize students into social relationships... that allow them to relinquish dependence on their fluency in one community-constituting language (their "old" one) and acquire fluency in the language that constitutes the community of which they are now becoming members (their "new" one).

First-year students, then have a significant difficulty to overcome. They are a 'transition community' in a widening-participation university. They are making progress from one culture to another. As such they have to comprehend 'boundary discourse', i.e. context-bound uses of terms. 'Strength', for example, is a word which means something to them, but which has a highly stipulative definition for those of us who teach them. What would we say to the student who identified his strength as 'being able to do without other people', for example? It is most likely that we will tell them that teamwork is what employers value and that they must learn to integrate socially. This may well be an example of the 'loss of self' which can occur as the values of the new community displace the individual's self-respect. When asked in the PDP to nominate their strengths, they may find it difficult to identify their personal attributes as what we as academics would call 'strengths'.

The PDP is a far-reaching form of education which will ask students to search within themselves for the courage, fortitude and motivation to succeed. As the PDP asks them to collect details of informal learning as well as formal education, their entire lives will become material for the creation of this academic self which is capable of facing the criticism that seems to strike at the heart of their own self-respect. As Saven-Baden (2000) wrote, the transitional learning which occurs when current frames of reference are broken can result in a disconcerting loss of self. The new students from a community not imbued with the ethos of HE will not know how to understand new knowledge. Instead, HE will subvert existing structures and, if we are not careful, fail to substitute others. We may be going through a paradigm shift in HE which sees the aim no longer as teaching people to accomplish tasks but as creating a self for the 21st Century which can meet the whole range of challenges it represents. With the advent of the transcript, which replaces the degree classification, it will be the self which is on display and not the degree mark. Interpretations of the transcript will undoubtedly focus on the personality type which it reveals.

An alternative view

The other significant feature of future HE is that it needs to be related to a social world. It could be argued that earlier views of HE strove for abstract educatedness, a set of dispositions which were not related to society directly but were all potentially valuable. The world-picture for our first-year students nowadays must be more directly related to social reality. The phrase which perhaps sums up this epistemology best is the philosopher Heidegger's famous, 'being-in-the-world'. As George Steiner (1992, p. 63) says of this concept, 'Being is being-in-the-world. There "is" nowhere else'. If we can equate selfhood with Heidegger's notion of being, then the self is always involved with the affairs of the world and indistinguishable from the concerns (*besorge*) which the individual has. The implications of this alternative epistemology for the PDP are :

Self

The 'self ' is a description of the individual in a real social situation and not independent of any context. Hence we cannot speak about a student's self being that of an accommodator, for example, whatever the circumstances. In daily life, we switch between the roles as the occasion demands. When I am teaching I am a converger, when I am trying to research, I am an assimilator, when I am trying (unsuccessfully often) to do a practical job in the house, I am an accommodator.

Epistemology

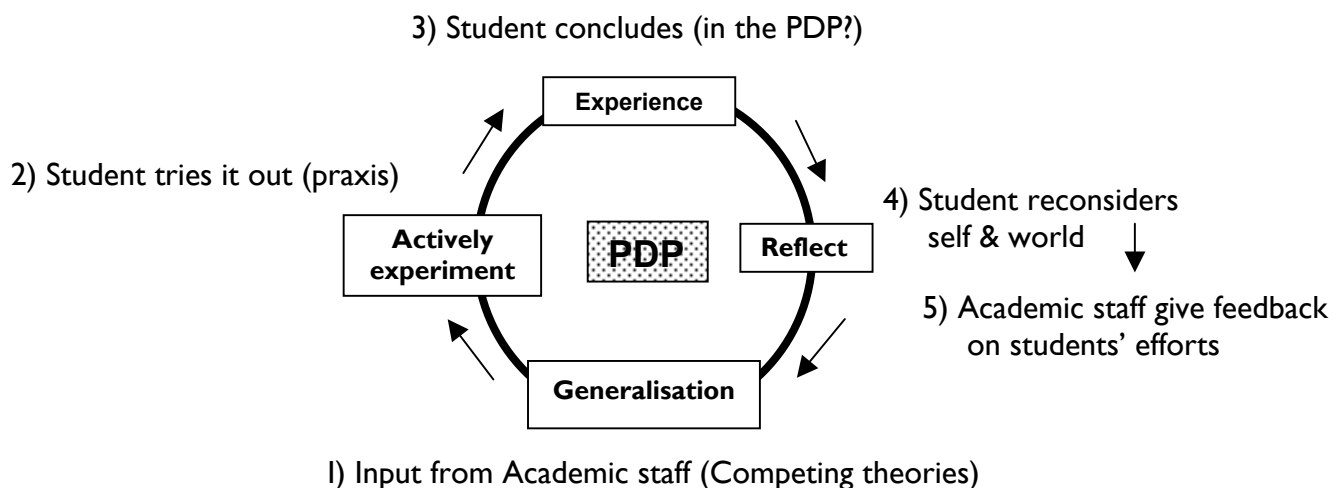
The individual may have a personal view of the world, but it is a view of things as they are: it has to be one which can serve the student as a means of negotiating contemporary realities; it has to face a number of facts and incorporate them effectively.

PDP

The PDP in the first year needs to focus on the immediate practical concerns of the student and provide possible ways of understanding the world through their subject area which incorporate the indisputable elements of social reality. This could focus on the boundary discourse and ideally link the student's experience with their learning.

The PDP also needs to provide the student with some elements of social reality which they can use to construct a picture of their self in relation to the task of study. The attractive implication of Heidegger's position is that the self is open to change and can be modified according to the situation in which the individual finds him or herself. If the old self has to be abandoned, then at least a new self can flourish in its place. Students practice 'praxis' in trying out ideas. By recording their experience in a PDP students can 'see' their self developing. This is the first stage in developing critical skills and acquiring an academic mentality.

The questions to aid them in this development should relate to the course which the student is studying and the life they are leading and not to abstract notions. Cowan (2002) proposes an approach which also involves offering the student guidance and support from peers and tutors, rather than simply allowing the student to construct their world-view in isolation. However, as Cowan admits, the danger of this approach is to deny the student any involvement in the creation of their knowledge. The heavy dependence on input without student effort might actually inhibit the sense of self. Nevertheless, his model could be adapted so that the emphasis is on providing the student with a critical framework, as follows:



Adapted from Cowan (2002)

After stage (4) academic staff must check on the validity of the conclusions which the student has reached and give feedback (e.g. in Personal Statement at the end of each phase of the PDP). They need to make sure that the student's self or being is in the same world. The student here constructs a personal view but within constraints given by academic staff and derived from the social world.

Once they come to realise that meaning may be social and not hidden in writers' minds, students become aware of a different social world in which selfhood is publicly manifested. Perhaps we cannot keep ourselves to ourselves at all, because everything we say and do manifests who and what we are. Experience is therefore used by students to open up a new picture of a world and of the self within it. Used in this way the PDP can be a vehicle for this development of a new and increasingly developed sense of self.

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* Editors' Note – The University of Hertfordshire have now taken this conference proceedings site offline. However, readers may like to use the following link to see a summary of Cowan's paper which appears on P.3 of the linked .pdf document
http://www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/events/keyskills_100702.pdf (accessed 25th January, 2006)

Biographical note

Adrian Page is Academic Leader for the Undergraduate Centres serving Applied Social Sciences, Architecture, Education, Humanities, Law, Government and International Relations and Psychology. After graduating in English and Philosophy, he taught English at degree level until he moved into Media Arts . He was formerly Deputy head of Media Arts at the University of Luton. He has published on Literary Theory, Media Arts , Film and Philosophy. He is part of the PDP Steering Group at University Level in London Metropolitan University. a.page@londonmet.ac.uk