

The Use of Portfolios in Leadership Education

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Abstract

This paper discusses the benefits of using student portfolios in undergraduate leadership education at Saint Michael's College. There appears to be a natural link between the use of portfolios as a tool to facilitate and document leadership growth and development. The Business Administration and Accounting Department at Saint Michael's College adopted the portfolio concept to provide students with a vehicle for introspection, self-reflection, and to learn from successes and failures as they provide evidence of satisfying the business department's goals for graduating students and document their growth and development as leaders.

Introduction

In 2006 the Business Administration and Accounting Department at Saint Michael's College made a major curriculum change by adding the new capstone course Experiential Portfolio (BU 495) for undergraduate business administration majors. Central to this course is the portfolio, an innovative tool in management and leadership education.

Experiential Portfolio (BU 495) is designed to provide students with the knowledge and skills required to assess their learning experiences and document mastery of the outcomes required of each student. These outcomes include the technical, conceptual, and interpersonal skills needed to lead in an organizational environment. BU 495 is taken primarily by seniors at the end of their undergraduate degree program and is designed to help students integrate the knowledge and skills acquired throughout their four-year degree. The portfolio is the vehicle by which the student documents their learning, professional growth, and development as leaders.

Knowing Oneself

Self-awareness is often seen as key to leadership development. Hughes and Beatty (2005) describe this self-awareness as knowing who you are and where you want to go. Haas and Tamarkin (1992) stress the importance of introspection as a form of self-discovery. Lipman-Blumen (1996) characterizes the search for personal meaning as a time when “we introspect about who we are, what we have done, and the nature and limits of our own worth...we dig into issues of personal authenticity and integrity” (p. 329-330).

After interviews with 125 leaders, George, Sims, McLean, and Mayer (2007) found that leadership emerged from life stories. They note that “the journey of authentic leadership begins with understanding the story of your life” (p. 132). Authentic leaders reframe life events “to discover their passion to lead” (p. 132). Learning from life experiences is central to knowing who you are and your development as a leader. “If people are capable of learning from their experiences, they can acquire leadership,” Northouse (2007, p. 43) concludes.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) suggest that this learning can also come from reflecting on failures. “Life is the leader’s laboratory, and exemplary leaders use it to conduct as many experiments as possible. Try, fail, learn. Try fail, learn. Try, fail, learn. That’s the leader’s mantra” (p. 20). Dreher (1996) agrees concluding: “Remember that any successful political leader, artist, scientist, or Olympic athlete has had many failures. What separates the leaders from the losers is that they learn from their difficulties, make adjustments, and go on. Like bamboo, they bend, but do not break. Persevering, they stay the course to reach the finish line” (p. 25). So how can leadership educators concerned with leadership development provide a vehicle for introspection, self-reflection, and learning from successes and failures? Portfolios may be one answer.

Portfolios

Student portfolios have long been used in teacher education to document learning and assess performance (Wolf, 1996). In addition to education majors, other academic areas including writing and art have used portfolios to “assess and display skills and growth” (Green & Smyser, 1995, p. 44). Portfolios have also been found to be useful in the job search process. “In a sea of résumés and cover letters, a portfolio emphasizes individuality, and the visual nature of a portfolio can make a lasting impression on a prospective employer” (Giuliano, 1997, p. 43). In addition to these practical uses, Giuliano (1997) asserts that the most significant value of portfolios is “as an aid in the self-reflection process” (p. 42).

Portfolios document accomplishments over a period of time (Wolf, 1996) and “allow students to tell the stories of their growth” (Guillaume & Yopp, 1995, p. 94). Portfolio contents generally include a résumé, certificates and awards, course papers, and transcripts (Giuliano, 1997). Student portfolios for BU 495 also provide evidence of satisfying the business department’s goals for graduating seniors. These goals generally deal with ethics, service to others, group dynamics, lifelong learning as well as other technical, conceptual, and interpersonal skills required of leaders (Appendix I h). Each outcome is documented using a reflective paper, which describes the experience, identifies the learning that occurred, and indicates how the information was applied and how it fits into the student’s course of study and development as a leader. Wolf (1996) suggests that finished portfolios contents including artifacts, should be carefully selected “so that it is manageable, both for the person who constructs it and for those who will review it” (p. 35). As such, students in BU 495 include major papers, course projects, presentation videos, and other artifacts to serve as evidence of mastery of each goal.

Results

The structure of the Portfolio was largely outlined by me (Appendix I). Completed portfolios in BU 495 were generally well written and organized.

Response papers documenting attainment of the business department’s learning outcomes were thoughtful. Many reflected on or reframed experiences in required courses like Management and Organizational Behavior, Business Policy and Strategic Management, Financial Policies of Corporations, Marketing Management, Foundations of Business, and minor courses (i.e., Managerial Leadership, Ethical Issues in Business, Labor Relations, Principles of Advertising, Essentials of Investments, and Information and Knowledge Management) when discussing what theories and skills they learned and how they applied them. Not surprisingly, evidence and artifacts included in portfolios came from many of these courses (i.e., leadership case studies, presentation slides, shareholder reports, business plans, memos, and finance assignments) and from activities BU 495 (i.e., Myers Briggs). Where applicable, students also drew heavily from internships, study abroad, athletic, and work experiences.

Students ended their Portfolios with a paper describing their experience creating the portfolio and how it contributed to their development. Selected comments follow:

- The process of completing this portfolio resulted in a better understanding of my growth. It also serves as a guide for future employers. All in all, this business portfolio tells the story of my growth.

- The steps necessary to assemble such an exhaustive account of my accomplishments were as worthwhile as the results they produced.
- This portfolio has given me the means to give a potential employer a more in depth story than simply what is on my resume or transcript.
- Creating the portfolio was a positive experience. Prior to this course I did not think in depth about the goals of the department and did not realize that I had in fact accomplished them.
- The experience of creating the portfolio helped me bring closure to my education at Saint Michael's College and look forward to the future.
- This portfolio exemplifies the work and knowledge I have acquired throughout my four years as a student. Through reflecting on the goals of the business department, I have described the vast amount of knowledge I have gained through both in-class and outside experiences.
- This portfolio does not serve to exhibit all of the work I have done, nor does it show the most important work either. It shows the progression of steps I have taken in achieving my business degree from a liberal arts college.
- This portfolio is a combination of different core competencies demonstrated through my years at Saint Michael's College and in the work world. I hope it gives you a taste of my commitment to lifelong learning and what I was competent in pursuing during my education.

Implications for Leadership Educators

In addition to the successful use of Portfolios at Saint Michael's College, the increasing emphasis on outcomes assessment in education also makes the case for the application of the portfolio concept in leadership education. Portfolios may be easily implemented in leadership training at colleges and universities, in the workplace, or at Assessment Centers after identifying desired learning outcomes.

The use of portfolios in undergraduate leadership education at Saint Michael's College has been successful. As "an aid in the self-reflection process" (Giuliano, 1997, p. 42), portfolios provide a vehicle that facilitates introspection and helps students document and grow from their experiences. Knowing oneself is consistent with Northouse's (2007) assertion that "if people are capable of learning from their experiences, they can acquire leadership" (p. 43). As a result of completing the portfolio, students leave BU 495 with a better understanding of who they are as leaders.

References

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Appendix I

Portfolio Contents

- a. **Title Page:** Include name, major, and date.
- b. **Table of Contents:** List and enable readers to easily find contents.
- c. **Introduction to the Portfolio:** Preview the contents of the portfolio for the reader.
- d. **Transcript or List of Courses:** List of all of the courses taken and are currently enrolled with credit hours. Grades do not need to be listed.
- e. **Résumé:** A one or two-page summary of your educational and professional background.
- f. **Certificates, awards, professional licenses, and trainings** (if applicable).
- g. **Letters of Recommendation:** Employment and/or graduate school recommendation letters from faculty and/or employers.
- h. **Business Department Goals Accomplishment and Application:** Evidence demonstrating the achievement of the goals of the Business Administration major should be discussed. State in what courses or through which experiences you achieved the goal and secondly, what was learned from the courses and/or experiences. Evidence of accomplishment of the goals, which includes research papers, reports, examinations, video presentations and/or slides, and case analyses, should be included in appendices. Address the following goals in this section:
 1. Conduct themselves and their businesses in a way that is informed by the central themes of the mission of the College. This includes an understanding of what it means to lead a moral/ethical life and an ongoing commitment to the service of others.
 2. Possess basic competencies necessary to operate and lead in an organizational environment. This includes the areas of group dynamics and operations, financial and quantitative applications and analysis, technology, and problem solving.
 3. Develop an in-depth understanding of at least one of the core areas of business.
 4. Be able to effectively research, write, present and defend concepts and proposals related to business and administration issues.
 5. Develop a sensitivity for how external factors, such as the global economy, international politics, social, technological, and ecological trends can impact a business' or nonprofit organization's plans and operations.
 6. Develop a commitment to "lifelong learning" and pursue opportunities that contribute to that objective including employment, graduate or professional school and other post-baccalaureate learning opportunities.

- i. **Portfolio Summary:** Present a summary statement of the contents of the portfolio. Include in what ways it reflects experiences in the major and comments about the process of developing the portfolio and how it contributed to your growth and development as a leader.
- j. **References.**
- k. **Appendices:** Evidence and artifacts supporting goal response papers.

Biography

Dr. Paul E. Olsen is an instructor of Business Administration and the Associate Director of the Master of Science in Administration at Saint Michael's College. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in leadership, human resource management, and business writing. Dr. Olsen has degrees from the University of Vermont (B.A., Ed.D.) and Saint Michael's College (M.S.A.).