

Portfolios and practice-based learning: A student perspective

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Summary: Whilst the practice placement is widely regarded as an integral component of social work qualifying courses there is less agreement about the most effective way of assessing student learning during this period on the course. This study explored students' perceptions of a portfolio that was linked to the practice placement. The findings suggest the portfolio contributes positively to the learning process; however, this may be determined more by the separate parts of work than the compilation of an integrated or 'holistic' portfolio. If the portfolio is to be an effective assessment tool, it needs to complement fully students' experience on placement rather than detract attention from it. Improvements in design will have to be mirrored by effective communication between tutors and practice teachers if the portfolio is to maximise practice learning.

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Background

Over the past two decades there has been growing interest across Higher Education (HE) in the UK in developing better better-engineered assessments (Yorke, 2003). For social work, as with other professions such as nursing, assessment tools have to include academic rigor and practice relevance. The practice placement remains a core element of social work qualifying courses in the UK (e.g. Parker, 2006) and the way in which assessments are linked to this aspect of the learning process may be of particular importance. Devising an assessment tool that incorporates theory and practice is, however, less than straightforward. As Risler (1999: 900) reminds us, 'the translation of practice theory into practice activity is a sophisticated, dynamic, and complicated process'. An effective assessment tool must integrate with the course aims and outcomes, which will inform the appropriate teaching methods. Within social work a variety of assessment tools (e.g. essay, presentation, exam, journal, portfolio, report, viva) are used to facilitate and evaluate students' learning and practice. Despite the widespread use of such assessments, a review of the literature by Crisp and Lister (2002: 267) concluded that the evidence to support their effectiveness tends to be 'scant or nonexistent'. The need to improve the evidence base and quality of assessment practices is not restricted to social work. In an investigation of a range of methods of assessment tools, which included the portfolio, Katrien *et al.* (2006) point to an ongoing 'lack of research-based evidence' between assessment and the effects on student learning. This issue has been given particular prominence by the succession of National Student Surveys in the UK which have shown high levels of student dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback practices. These findings are not necessarily new to many academics and for Shay (2008: 595) 'It has become a fairly common refrain in the educational development literature to acknowledge that there is a crisis in higher education assessment practice'.

Recent strategies to ensure a more integrated approach to assessment in the UK and across Europe indicate that effectiveness depends on student-tutor dialogue being localised. According to Dahlgren *et al.* (2009) the main difficulty with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is the matching of local dialogue and knowledge with more general criteria which has wider applicability. This raises interesting and

challenging issues for practice teachers who often supervise overseas students, including those participating on international exchange schemes. The cultural differences that exist between many domestic and overseas students are amongst the most important to experience, yet difficult to assess. For example, Heron and Pilkington's (2009: 397) study on racism examined social work practice-based assignments produced by students in Scotland and the USA and found 'the existing terminology of 'race' issues within assignments may not be serving students' best interests, either by allowing racism to be marginalized from practice or located in a discourse of avoidance or description'. Universities, funding bodies and organisations such as the Higher Education Academy are under increased pressure to ensure domestic and overseas students receive a more positive assessment experience when studying in the UK. This study aimed to contribute to existing research by exploring social work students' perceptions of a portfolio which was linked to the practice placement.

Portfolio, assessment and learning

The portfolio has been used as an assessment tool in a wide range of professional disciplines (Sidell, 2003). Within social work it has been used at pre-qualifying and post qualifying levels (Slater, 2007). Whilst there is no consensus about what constitutes a good portfolio, Doel and Shardlow (1995) emphasise the need for a dynamic interaction between knowledge, values and skills in the learning process. For Arter *et al.* (1995), the two central purposes of the portfolio are 'instruction' to promote learning and 'assessment' of that learning. Unlike more traditional assignments produced towards the end of a module or practice placement, portfolios consist of a range of materials collected over time that demonstrate achievement and preparedness for practice (e.g. Williams, 2001; Gathercoal *et al.*, 2002).

The way in which the materials for the portfolio are embedded within the assessment and feedback processes has generated considerable debate. According to Brew (1995), the portfolio is designed for formative and summative assessment and feedback. Alternatively, Boud (1995) believes the portfolio is a record of evidence that only the student should read; however, it is appropriate to extrapolate evidence from the portfolio

and use for assessment purposes. The complexities surrounding such conflicting perspectives are compounded by the limited knowledge of how assessment of the portfolio links to practice. For Taylor *et al.* (1999: 148/9), 'portfolios have moved from focussing on the formative to including the summative, from processes to outcomes, and from the private to the public arena' and despite 'its widespread use, there is surprisingly little critical analysis of its application in social work'. For these authors, the individualised nature of an assessment process, which often takes several months to compile, represents conditions that can 'defy standardisation'. Whilst an integrated set of different materials may be a desirable aspect of a portfolio, it can generate overly complicated guidance and lead to a situation whereby even experienced practitioners find it difficult not to 'throw in everything but the kitchen sink' (Slater, 2007: 756). These problems have generated concerns about the assessment of portfolios and the reliability of feedback (Wolfe & Miller, 1997).

Despite such difficulties there are growing expectations for tutors to devise assignments that incorporate both formative and summative feedback. For example, The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2007) stated that assessment 'of' learning (summative) is limited without corresponding input to assessment 'for' learning (formative). Whilst the portfolio fits with this approach, gaining a balance between formative and summative feedback might be less than straightforward. Limited resources and risk of creating a culture of tutor-dependency when students have engaged in formative activities are reasons for Carless (2007: 64), to 'speculate' about curtailing summative feedback to 'a few concise points for further development'. This process is further complicated when students receive feedback from the tutor and practice teacher. A study by Heron (2008) found considerable inconsistencies in the feedback provided between some practice teachers and tutors. These findings suggest that whilst portfolios may have desirable qualities the complexities integral to assessment and learning remain unclear.

The portfolio used in this study was linked to a practice placement and designed to 'give a holistic demonstration of students meeting all the Learning Outcomes' (Practice Learning Handbook: 32). The main parts of the final portfolio included:

- pen picture of age, gender, ethnicity

- statement about range of work undertaken by student
- students self-assessment of learning needs
- practice learning contract
- evidence of assessed practice x3
- six week review of portfolio of practice learning
- twelve week review of portfolio of practice learning
- final portfolio submission
- evidence of meeting all learning outcomes indexed and cross-referenced
- bibliography
- authentication by practice teacher of evidence within portfolio and evaluation of the student's demonstration of the learning outcomes in practice (signed by student and practice teacher).

The final portfolio included all of these materials; however, only the following parts were summatively assessed:

- review of learning demonstrating reflection and analysis, taking account of all learning outcomes
- one critical incident analysis write-up
- one/two direct observation write-up(s)
- three reflective journal entries demonstrating all learning outcomes
- additional evidence relating to learning outcomes.

The portfolio included material submitted at three stages during an 80-day placement. Stages one and two were part of the formative assessment which involved the student's personal tutor giving feedback. Stage three comprised of the summative assessment where the portfolio was assessed by two tutors other than the student's personal tutor. The rationale was to provide students with an opportunity to have dialogue with their personal tutor at the formative stage whilst ensuring anonymity of marking at the summative stage. At each of the three stages the practice teacher was to authenticate the student's work and provide a written report on the extent to which the learning outcomes were met. Tutors have sole responsibility for summatively assessing the portfolios. This structure was to ensure 'assessment and feedback is continuous throughout the Assessed Practice Module' (Practice Learning Handbook: 33). The review of learning and reflective journals was each to demonstrate all six learning outcomes. The other parts

of the portfolio were not linked to specific learning outcomes. The intention was to give students greater autonomy in deciding which learning outcomes might be met by a particular part. There were no word limits for any individual parts or the final portfolio. This was to give students greater discretion in compiling the different parts of the portfolio and reflect the fact that written tasks specific to practice (e.g. Social Background Reports) do not have word limits. Whilst this study focused on a portfolio used on one social work qualifying course, its design and implementation reflects key themes in the literature and will therefore have relevance for those interested in portfolios and assessment of student learning.

Method

The importance of understanding a student's perspective of the assessment and learning process is well established (e.g. Biggs, 2000; Prosser & Trigwell, 2001). This study aimed to explore students' perceptions of their experiences when undertaking the portfolio. The portfolio is the assessment tool for both placements which occur on years two and four of the four-year qualifying course in Scotland (the qualifying course is three years in England, Wales and Northern Ireland). The study focussed on year two students: this was considered a useful point in the learning process as the submission of the portfolio occurred midway through the course. Prior to the placement, students had undergone a range of classroom-based teaching in social work and social sciences. The literature suggests portfolios can have a positive effect on a broad range of areas:

- help students to explore the context of learning
- provide greater diversity in organising the practice placement
- offer a dynamic account of the learning process and practice
- facilitate self-assessment, reflection, critical thinking and feedback.

Rather than attempt to explore all of these areas, it was considered more feasible to focus on key aspects. An interview schedule comprising of 28 questions was devised in order to explore students' perceptions of the portfolio in relation to:

- Motivation and interest
- Application of self
- Learning process
- Teaching input and feedback.

The questionnaire was also used to prompt discussion during the interview rather than be perceived as an exhaustive or definitive list of questions. This would give students an opportunity to discuss those aspects which they considered most relevant. Students were to rate responses to each question on a ten-point scale and provide justifications for their answers. A bi-polar scale was used to rate positive and negative experiences of learning. Twenty-six of the 28 questions were devised on a negative-positive continuum whereby a higher rating indicated a more positive experience and a lower score indicated a more negative experience. Two questions (21 & 25) focussed on students' 'anxiety' and 'feeling pressurised', respectively, were slightly different. In these questions options at either end of the scales may be viewed negatively, that is, too much or too little pressure may be perceived as obstructive. A typical question was:

To what extent would you consider yourself a more effective learner following the completion of the portfolio?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
negligible change							significant change		

Twenty-eight year two social work students at a university in Scotland were interviewed. Participants were selected from a cohort of 51 students. The students were selected at random and all agreed to participate in the study. Limited resources and time constraints prevented the full student cohort from being interviewed. In an attempt to minimise bias or unduly influence student responses (e.g. acquiescence bias, social desirability bias) two researchers who were not involved in the delivery of the course conducted the interviews. Both researchers were white and female. Of the 28 students interviewed, 27 provided details of their ethnicity and gender. Seventeen participants were female and 10 male. All students described themselves as white Scottish/British (there were three minority ethnic students in the cohort). Students participating in the study were given a book voucher in recognition of the time taken for the interviews. The duration of interviews ranged from 55

minutes to one hour and 45 minutes. Transcripts were produced from the audio recordings. Students gave permission to be interviewed and data was anonymised to ensure confidentiality. The department's ethics committee sanctioned the research.

Results

The mean scores for 23 of the 28 questions were rated between five and eight on a ten-point scale, which suggests that students have a positive learning experience when undertaking the portfolio (Appendix A). Justifications by students, however, indicate that the positive experiences might be attributed more to the separate parts of work than any process or activities associated with compiling the portfolio as an integrated assignment. The justifications provided by students were organized into three themes:

- compilation and writing for practice
- communication and clarity
- learning and assessment.

The themes are presented separately in order to enhance clarity; however, comments often encapsulated more than one theme. Extracts from transcripts are indicative of the comments expressed by students.

Compilation and writing for practice

The portfolio presented students with a range of positive learning activities which were considered relevant and interesting. Placements were overwhelmingly viewed in a positive way. When asked about what enhanced motivation, the following response was not atypical:

Doing the work on the placement did, but not the portfolio. I think the portfolio got in the way. It took the enjoyment out of my placement because it was always at the back of your mind that you had to do it.

The portfolio was often experienced as being quite separate from the

activities undertaken on placement, yet students recognized the value of the learning activities generated by the individual parts. For example, compiling a critical incident analysis, reflective journal or undertaking a direct observation were all considered relevant. Unfortunately, the time and effort spent writing the numerous parts of work to meet the learning outcomes detracted too much attention from practice.

It was definitely a good thing for reflection. The problem with the portfolio was more or less housekeeping problems rather than the actual method of the portfolio. It was a bit too much paperwork and sometimes that conflicted with your actual learning because you were getting caught up on the housekeeping tasks. . . . I think the balance was actually pushed more towards the portfolio and I was definitely preoccupied with the portfolio during my placement.

The task of organizing and compiling the component parts created an imbalance between the portfolio and practice. Essentially, the portfolio tended to get in the way of practice rather than be informed by it. The frustration was exacerbated by the realisation that the effort required to compile the portfolio was not commensurate with its credit weighting.

I think my portfolio was over 100 pages and was well over 20,000 words. I just can't equate that to a 60-credit module when a 20-credit module is a 3000-word essay. I expected the portfolio to be about 9000 words.

Many portfolios were disproportionately lengthy, a feature that is unlikely to be conducive to developing concise writing skills. Designing the portfolio to exclude a word limit might be well-intentioned, but it served to compound some of the difficulties students had when constructing the various parts of the portfolio.

Rather than be selective and prioritise key aspects of written work there was a tendency to write 'more' in an attempt to have a better chance of meeting the learning outcomes. To some extent this scattergun approach is self-imposed as students have responsibility for how much they write in each of the sections. The problem, however, may be exacerbated by some practice teachers.

I got a lot of supervision from my tutor and practice teacher. I had everything going for me, but the supervision sessions were taken up with clarification of the portfolio. . . . Working with these young people and how I could do it better- it was never mentioned. It was the portfolio.

Practice teachers and students are likely to benefit from clearer guidelines about the purpose of writing. This would include greater clarity about the relationship between the portfolio and use as an assessment and learning tool. Written work was often considered only to be of real value if it was to be assessed by the tutor or practice teacher.

Originally we were told to write a reflective journal everyday and in week six [first of the two formative submissions of the portfolio] that was 30 reflective journals. But they [tutors] only read three of them so 27 have to be discounted, yet they all have to be logged. I think motivation just quickly dwindled away.

The perceived futility in writing reflective journals is based on the premise that most would not to be summatively assessed. Any learning that might be gained from the personal reflection generated by the writing task appears to be marginalised. The problem is not simply that students were engaged in excessive writing, but that they did not recognise fully the benefits of writing for learning and practice, irrespective of whether or not it was summatively assessed.

Communication and clarity

Confusion over the content and structure of the portfolio was the most common factor adversely affecting learning. Guidance from practice teachers and tutors was often considered to be inconsistent.

The confusion around the portfolio was off-putting. No one ever seemed to know what was going on. Personal tutors and the practice teachers would say different things and they themselves didn't really admit that there was a lot of confusion around. It [the guidance] changed a few times.

Expectations about the volume of written work generated particular confusion. Written work included daily accounts of personal experiences (e.g. reflective journals) as well as more substantial parts that were produced much less frequently (e.g. review of learning).

There was a lack of clarity on what were to do. For example, [at a briefing session by a tutor in the university] we got a reflective log handout and it was a couple of lines long. I was doing half a page and was told [by the practice teacher] it wasn't long enough.

Students were also unclear about what was expected in terms of different styles of writing (e.g. whether to include academic references in reflective journals, extent to which writing in the first or third person was appropriate). Whilst such confusion may be extremely frustrating for students, it did not appear to detract from the high level of effort put into compiling the portfolio.

Feedback provided by tutors and practice teachers formed a key aspect of communication. Students received a total of five separate pieces of feedback (two formative from the practice teacher, two formative from the personal tutor and one summative from a different tutor) at different stages in the compilation of the portfolio. The varying input from practice teachers for the final submission generated anxiety for some students. Some practice teachers read a final draft of the portfolio and provided feedback whereas other students had to submit the portfolio without such input. This raises issues of equity and fairness in terms of the appropriate level of support from practice teachers. There were no such criticisms in relation to the summative grade provided by tutors; however, students often wanted more feedback about ways in which the portfolio might be improved.

I didn't get that much feedback. The amount of work put in it wasn't a great deal. There was no real guidance on how I could improve it the next time.

The problem was not simply volume *per se*, but rather an imbalance of feedback between the different sections of the portfolio. Students were confused as to why some parts of the portfolio were given feedback whereas others received little or no comment from tutors. The absence or imbalance of feedback between the different parts added to the confusion over the rationale and purpose of the portfolio and how it was assessed.

The actual standard of my feedback was quite poor because they had focused on a part I'd written as a Reflective Journal entry and nothing on my Critical Incident Analysis, which I thought was the main part of the portfolio. I still don't know. I wanted more information on why and how I met the criteria.

The lack of clarity was compounded when differences existed between the practice teacher and tutor. For example, differences in the quality of feedback given at the formative stages seemed to exacerbate levels of confusion.

My practice teacher was kind of vague. The less he could write the better. In the first two stages his feedback to me was just 'yeah, this is fine'. He wrote about two lines. The final feedback I didn't actually see until I got the portfolio back and I thought he could have written a bit more. My tutor's feedback was very good.

Given that tutors and practice teachers have different roles, it may be inevitable and perhaps appropriate that differences in feedback exist. However, inconsistencies in the quality and timing of feedback might limit its effectiveness.

Learning and assessment

The portfolio helped most students to develop an understanding of new ideas, concepts and theories. This involved revisiting classroom-based teaching as well as current experiences on placement.

The whole point of the portfolio was to allow us to start thinking theoretically in terms of practice. I think I did that because the reflective side of it really benefited me. You could step back and think about what you were actually practising and you could take elements from different modules that you had completed and incorporate that into the portfolio.

Enabling students to revisit previous teaching is clearly a positive aspect of the portfolio. Classroom-based teaching on ethics and values was most commonly cited as being useful to the placement.

We [student and practice teacher] concentrated a lot on the ethical side of it because we spoke about the care and control from a social work point of view. They are battling against each other all the time because you have the courts you are working for and you also have the young person, so you have to try and balance that.

The role of practice teacher was deemed to be particularly crucial in assisting students to make links between classroom-based teaching and practice. The learning opportunities provided by practice teachers had the potential to create considerable personal growth.

I've got a lot of experience [in social care settings]. I was quite confident in my

abilities as a team member and with the practical elements, but I soon got the rug pulled from under my feet. The hardest bit for me was the reflective practice element. I just thought it was a nightmare. You know 'why did you do this, how did you do this'? You are usually just going into your job and doing it.

Whilst such experiences might feel uncomfortable, the student reflects on important changes to the way she perceives practice. Enabling personal insight and development is integral to learning and practice teachers are well positioned to encourage this aspect. However, not all students were presented with opportunities for self-development within a supportive environment.

I didn't get supervision in the final six weeks and you are supposed to get it every week. She had seven students and was a full-time practice teacher. She was very unhelpful.

If accurate, this account has implications for a range of academic and practice issues. In particular, it suggests that the level of support provided by practice teachers varies quite substantially. The potential for disparity may increase when the portfolio includes multiple parts and is designed as an assessment of learning and for learning. A difficulty for practice teachers is that they have to ensure the appropriate learning opportunities align with the portfolio whilst not being overly involved in its compilation and/or assisting with those aspects that are summatively assessed.

Ensuring greater consistency by practice teachers is further complicated when there are gaps in student learning which may not necessarily be filled during the placement. Comments about anti-discriminatory and anti-racist practice help to illustrate the complex role of the practice teacher and the difficulties in providing appropriate learning opportunities. Anti-discriminatory practice was frequently viewed as an aspect where students recognised personal change.

My practice teacher emphasised the importance of anti-discriminatory practice. I was working with the elderly and there is a lot of research on how abuse of the elderly goes unnoticed and unseen, so that was a constant theme throughout. She encouraged me to talk about it in every single piece of work that was handed in because it is such an important aspect of social work. There were also particular incidents which she encouraged me to use within the portfolio.

Such facilitation by practice teachers was less evident in relation to anti-racism.

When asked about their understanding of anti-racist practice, the following response was not atypical.

Not that much because I wasn't working with any ethnic minority groups. It was covered in the general heading of anti-discriminatory practice, but I wouldn't say it was really relevant to my placement.

Where anti-racist practice was considered to have more relevance, it was usually accompanied by comments about the limitations of classroom-based teaching and the practice placement.

I don't really think there is adequate learning on anti-racist practice. I don't understand it as much as I probably should and even in my placement every time I asked questions about ethnic minorities it seems it just wasn't even in existence, as if racism never ever occurred.

This student appears to be aware of the limitations in classroom-based teaching and the learning opportunities available on placement in relation to 'race' issues. Such deficits are likely to limit the potential benefits of using a portfolio or indeed any other assessment tool. Achieving greater consistency in helping students to understand the learning outcomes will require practice teachers and tutors to be more explicit about the course content, practice opportunities and the most effective means of assessing students' knowledge and practice.

Discussion

The majority of questions in this study were rated between five and eight on a ten-point scale which suggests that students' learning experiences were relatively positive when undertaking the portfolio. The positive experiences of students however, appear to be determined more by the separate parts of work than the compilation of an integrated or 'holistic' portfolio. The main findings to emerge from students' justifications when answering questions were:

- a major motivational factor often stemmed from the expectations

and excitement of undertaking the practice placement rather than compiling the portfolio

- students put considerable effort into compiling the portfolio
- most students believed they had become more effective learners following completion of the portfolio (e.g. better understanding of theory, more able to reflect on practice and better equipped to understand the relevance of teaching material)
- the confusing nature of the portfolio was attributed primarily to its structure and/or poor guidance from tutors and practice teachers.

Despite being designed as a tool to integrate theory and practice, the process of compiling the portfolio often had an adverse affect on learning, especially in detracting attention from the placement. Better alignment with practice may require greater consideration of how the separate parts of the portfolio are integrated to create a 'holistic' assignment. Integrating, for example, the review of learning and reflective journals when each was to meet the same learning outcomes was confusing in terms of purpose and writing style. The extent to which these parts are separate or linked is complicated further when 'additional evidence' specific to the learning outcomes is required. Many students were unclear about what they had to add, and such uncertainty, in the absence of a word limit, might explain the disproportionately long submissions at the formative and summative stages. Edwards and Kinsey (1999) highlight the overly complicated and unwieldy guidance that can arise from portfolios. Findings in this study suggest the confusing guidance may be a product of inadequate alignment between the component parts. Perhaps the starting point is greater clarity in terms of how each of the separate parts fits to make the portfolio a holistic entity that enhances students' understanding of theory and practice.

Resolving this aspect gets to the core of whether or not portfolios have any additional value compared to alternative assessment tools. Designing a portfolio with too many parts might reflect a temptation or desire by tutors to over-assess and might explain, at least to some extent, why some studies (e.g. Slater, 2007) found that students 'throw in everything' when compiling a portfolio. Tutors have to prioritise what exactly they can assess with accuracy at the formative and summative stages. Underpinning this is the issue of whether or not it is possible to assess the portfolio as a holistic entity rather than a collection of separate

parts compiled at different periods over an 80-day placement. Achieving this requires some consideration of the way strengths in one part might compensate for weaknesses in another part of the portfolio. Whilst a process of weighting or compensation applies to other assessment tools, it may be more complex when the intention is to assess separate parts in a holistic way. For example, if a student did not identify child protection issues in the review of learning but addressed them in the reflective journal, should the portfolio be graded a fail? When all learning outcomes have to be met by both parts of the assignment it should be graded a fail. If however, only the review of learning is to be resubmitted, the holistic nature of the portfolio is eroded as it becomes a compilation of separate parts of work that is physically bound together. Conversely, there seems little value in resubmitting parts of work that have a pass grade. Concerns by Taylor *et al.* (1999, p. 148/9) that the portfolio represents conditions which can 'defy standardisation' may reflect difficulties in assessing the portfolio in a way that is different from the sum of the separate parts.

Issues of integration may be further complicated when feedback is provided both by the tutor and practice teacher and for a tool that is an assessment for learning and of learning. Students tended to agree with the grade and quality of feedback from tutors, but were often disappointed because the different parts of work did not merit a proportionate volume of feedback. The most plausible reasons are: (1) tutor feedback focussed on the holistic portfolio rather than commenting on each individual part of work; and, (2) the excessive and varied length of the different parts of the portfolio created difficulties in feeding back with sufficient consistency. Validity of the tutors' summative assessment and grade is, however, questionable given the varying levels of support from practice teachers specific to the compilation of the portfolio. This raises issues of equity and fairness, as standards can only be meaningful when the assessment is a judgment of the student's own work and where external influences are relatively similar across the cohort. Risler (1999) identified the need for greater reliability of portfolio feedback, but attaining it may be particularly difficult when this type of assessment tool is linked to the practice placement. Providing feedback both from tutors and practice teachers might appear a robust approach when an academic assignment is linked to the student's direct practice; however, findings by Heron (2008) suggest it is unlikely to be conducive to student learning when there

are considerable inconsistencies in the feedback between professionals. A portfolio may compound the potential for inconsistency because the boundaries between appropriate levels of support and over-involvement by practice teachers are quite blurred with a tool that is designed as an assessment of learning and for learning. Involving practice teachers at different stages in the assessment may be desirable, but unless there is consistency with tutors, the feedback designed to help students may actually act as a barrier to learning.

A holistic portfolio could be achieved if students were better equipped to understand its purpose within the learning process. Tutors and practice teachers might have to allow for greater student involvement in the design and application of a portfolio as an assessment tool. A 'community of practice' as suggested by O'Donovan *et al.* (2008) could enable dialogue between students, practice teachers and tutors about the tacit and explicit knowledge in the assessment process. Greater involvement in the design of the portfolio at the early stages might also help students to understand better the fit between the constituent parts and their relevance for practice. A community of practice that encouraged dialogue and constructivism might be uncomfortable for tutors who would have to justify their own contribution at the design stage of the portfolio, especially in terms of how the portfolio is more effective than other assessment tools for key areas of learning. This will require more openness and transparency in working with students not least of all in analysing the supporting evidence. A recent study by Collins & Wilkie (2010), for example, suggests students are rarely able to evidence critical thinking within portfolios and attention to issues of racism and anti-racism is depressingly poor, similar to that found in other assessment tools. Sharing these findings with students could generate discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of including different parts within the portfolio and the most effective use of formative and summative assessment. It might also allow students to recognise some of the wider influences on assessment.

Power cannot be shared equally between tutors and students in the assessment process, but neither is it shared equally among social work professionals. For example, with regards to 'race' issues a 'colour blind' approach to ethnicity persists among social workers across Europe (Williams & Soydan, 2005) and social workers of colour remain on the margins of North American society (Razack & Badwall, 2006). Creating a dialogue at the design stage of the portfolio might encourage students

to recognise: (1) that assessment tools are not value free or immune to wider inequalities; and, (2) they have a responsibility in the selection of the parts for the portfolio because it will influence their learning and extent to which they are equipped to engage in practice. Future research that included the views of practice teachers and tutors across different qualifying courses and countries could add to the limited evidence base surrounding portfolios. Until there is evidence to the contrary, the real value of portfolios may, as Boud (1995) suggests, be as a private tool that helps the individual to reflect on the processes of formative learning. Shifting it to the public domain and incorporating a summative assessment with the associated ethos of 'measurable outcomes', might undermine the formative component of the portfolio and result in it being less unique than alternative assessment tools.

Conclusion

The portfolio has gained increasing recognition as a tool for assessing practice and contributing to student learning. Findings in this study suggest that the portfolio contributes positively to the learning process; however, this may be determined more by the separate parts of work than the compilation of an integrated or 'holistic' portfolio. Whilst students put considerable effort into compiling the portfolio, much of the motivation stemmed from the expectation and excitement from undertaking the practice placement. If the portfolio is to be an effective assessment tool, it needs to compliment fully students' experience on placement rather than detract attention from it. Better communication between tutors and practice teachers and clearer guidelines is crucial in this respect. However, this will only have real effect if the separate parts of the portfolio are integrated in a holistic way. Debates about how the portfolio should be constructed and linked to formative and summative assessments are likely to continue. Until there is clear evidence to the contrary, the maxim of 'less is more' may apply when designing the separate parts that make up the portfolio.

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Appendix A

Table 1 Mean score for each question in relation to portfolio

Questions	Portfolio , n 28,
1 How confident were you in integrating the range of material required for the portfolio?	5.9643
2 Did you memorise information solely for the portfolio?	6.1786
3 To what extent did you do more than enough to meet the assessment criteria?	6.8214
4 To what extent did the portfolio enhance your overall understanding of social work?	6.1786
5 How effective were you in managing study time when compiling the portfolio?	6.1786
6 How would you describe your motivation for undertaking the portfolio?	5.7143
7 How much effort did you give to compiling and writing the portfolio?	8.0357
8 Were you effective in highlighting key social work values and principles in the portfolio?	7.1786
9 How relevant was the teaching to the placement?	7.3929
10 How focussed were you in ensuring the portfolio matched the assessment criteria?	7.2143
11 When studying, to what extent did you reflect on the purpose of the portfolio?	6.0357
12 How well did you make sense of new ideas/concepts arising from the placement?	6.7500
13 To what extent did you analyse the key aspects of the portfolio?	6.1923
14 Were you able to monitor your studying/preparation for the portfolio?	7.2143
15 How interesting was the written material (e.g. books, journals, internet sites) you accessed when compiling the portfolio?	8.0714
16 To what extent did the portfolio enhance your understanding of anti-discriminatory practice?	6.5714

17 How confident would you be in verbally explaining some of the more complex aspects of the portfolio to your tutor 6 months after completing it	6.4643
18 How well did the main theories and practice issues relate to the conclusion of the portfolio?	7.7143
19 To what extent did you enjoy undertaking the portfolio?	3.9643
20 To what extent would you consider yourself a more effective learner following the completion of the portfolio?	6.3571
21 How anxious were you whilst waiting for the portfolio to be assessed?	5.4643
22 To what extent did the portfolio enhance your understanding of anti-racist practice?	4.6071
23 How confident are you in applying the knowledge gained from the portfolio to the next placement?	6.2857
24 Did the process of undertaking and completing the portfolio increase your interest in social work?	4.9643
25 Did you feel pressurised in completing the portfolio for the submission date?	6.6071
26 To what extent has the portfolio improved your ability to think critically?	6.7857
27 Did you agree with your grade and feedback for the portfolio?	7.5714
28 Did the feedback from your tutor and practice teacher make sense?	8.2143