

Emphasis on formative feedback: how clinicians develop an understanding of medical students' reflective learning portfolios.

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Summary

An important part of socializing students into medical professionals is to foster their ability to reflect on their experiences in clinical practice, and give them constructive criticism, which may be supported by learning portfolios and mentors. Undergraduate students are stimulated to reflect upon what they have and have not yet accomplished and receive formative feedback from personal mentors. The challenge for us as educational developers is to present the learning portfolio as a formative learning tool to mentors.

Learning portfolios for personal and professional development in medical education:

The role of the Medical Doctor, and thus, the view on medical professionalism, has changed. There is a shift toward patient-centeredness, collaboration with other professional health care workers, and the ability of the Doctor to feel empathy and emotional engagement in patients (Borgstrom et al., 2010). To meet these changes, Medical Schools need to train their students to become competent 'Tomorrow's Doctors' (General Medical Council, UK, 2009). A person's competency may be seen as the ability to integrate knowledge, skills and attitudes to be able to cope with demanding work situations. Consequently, medical education has shifted towards a greater emphasis on students' ability to critically reflect upon their actions, to identify areas of improvement, and to set up individual goals. The ability of this kind of self-reflection is considered essential in continuing personal and professional development (Law, 2011). In modern medical curricula, early clinical contact is seen as important for the students in their process of socialization into their future profession (Goldie et al., 2007). Among other things, students learn to deal with uncertainty during practice, when exposed to problems they haven't met before. An important part of the socialization process, is to foster students in to a climate of constructive criticism, when their reflections on their experiences in clinical practice are discussed by professional physicians.

During the past 10-15 years, portfolio has been growingly advocated as a tool for stimulating reflective skills as well as for assessment of professional skills in medical education (van Tartwijk & Driessen, 2009). A portfolio may be used as a personal development plan, a learning portfolio or an assessment portfolio, or a mix of the three purposes. Students working with portfolios are stimulated to reflect upon what they have and have not yet accomplished. This reflection may also be used as the starting point for the students to set up goals for their near future, and is thus in line with the view of students as active learners, taking responsibility for their own personal and professional development (Driessen et al., 2008). It is well established that mentors (professional physicians) may guide and support students, reading their portfolios and providing feedback. It is important to carefully implement the purpose of the portfolio in the student group as well as for faculty, to fully utilize the potential of this learning tool (van Tartwijk & Driessen, 2009).

Learning portfolios and mentors at Medical School, Örebro University Sweden: The learning and assessment portfolio at Örebro Medical School is used throughout the programme, from semester 1-11. At the end of each semester, students compile their show case portfolios containing i) reflections on their progression, ii) identified areas for further development, as well as iii) specific learning goals for the coming semester. Students include artifacts in the form of completed tasks, personal reflections on encounters with patients, after e. g. ethics seminars, or other documentation of importance for them, to support their reflections. Students receive written feedback on their personal portfolios from tutors the two first semesters, and from personal mentors from semester 3.

Educational development of clinicians to develop their understanding of reflective learning portfolios, and how to provide formative feedback: The mentors in our programme are physicians with a broad experience of clinical work, with an interest in supporting students' personal and professional development. Mentors are recruited either from the university hospital, smaller hospitals or from a primary care setting. Most of the mentors graduated from Medical Schools decades ago, and very few of them have earlier experiences of learning portfolios. The challenge for us as educational developers is to present the underlying thoughts of the learning portfolio, and to make the mentors realize that it is the personal reflection of the student that is in focus. Furthermore, mentors need to reflect on their use of feedback, and how to use it to enhance students learning (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). A supportive formative feedback should be grounded in the important aspects from the student's point of view. In our programme, we provide introductory meetings for new mentors, workshops focusing on the meaning of learning portfolios and feedback, as well as mentor meetings each semester. During mentor meetings, our attempt is to provide arenas for peer reflection. We also problematize the dual role of mentors as being supporting, future colleagues, as well as assessors. We face a situation where many clinicians are unable to join the meetings aimed for educational development and peer support.

Practical implications: Formative feedback on portfolios is seen as crucial for valid and durable learning. A sustainable educational development frame, providing and maintaining arenas for discussions of formative feedback on students' reflections is important for the outcome of student learning. Furthermore, mentors need to focus their feedback on what the students expose in their portfolios, and not on what the mentors themselves, as experienced clinicians, think is important for the students to know. Since students' reflective portfolios are used as a learning as well as an assessment tool, mentors need to recognize the personal dimension of portfolios, and the concept of assessment for learning.

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