

Belgium: The Portrait Method

Introduction

Title: The Portrait Method. Developed by Ilse Geerinck and Sabine Dierick from UCLL

Country: Belgium, Flanders

Type of tool: Formative evaluation tool for pre-service teachers or student-teachers (in Higher Education). It assesses the students' experience of teaching and the way the student gives form to the idea of teaching. Portraits are used both for coaching and for assessment purposes of learners.

Target group: Now it is used in an HEI, but it is particularly useful for people in a vulnerable context since it provides a total "holistic" view on the learner's knowledge and competences as it is not based on one assessment at a certain time.

Potential transferability: It can be transferred to other learners, especially for assessing practical skills, but the researchers believe it can also be applied in a more theoretical context.

Organisation and description of the tool

The portrait aims to create an image of a learner that provides information on what the learner needs in order to grow. For the portrait everybody is equal. There is no norm. Learners are not confronted to others but to him/herself. This method allows forming an image of a learner which makes it easier to decide what the learner's further needs are. The portrait also allows the learner to give input. The learner has a voice by working on a self-portrait, in other words, a portrait is an attempt to pull out or portray the teacher standing on him/herself by focusing on his/her ethos (the way s/he relates to him/herself, the other and the world) that are, his/her style, his/her way of behaviour, his/her mannerism and concerns.

So far, it is mainly used to assess 'practical skills' (understood as 'ethos'), thus it allows to evaluate what we experience as teaching (called "pixels") over a long period of time and to discover patterns in the schools in which students of the teacher education department of the UCLL do their internships. The portrait as a way of capturing the experience of teaching gives an image of how the learner 'put teaching into practice'. Current assessment practices often make a judgement on the acquired competences at the end of the learning experience, which is too late for remedial actions. The portrait is being created from the beginning of the year and is a tool for giving feedback during the year.

Implementation

The portrait method is not the same as observing a learner according to so-called objective formal criteria (cfr. competences). The purpose is to get more in-depth insight on the interaction of the learner with others, vision, beliefs and personal drivers. These insights or "pixels" are describing in an empathic and concrete way what the assessor sees and why a learner (re-)acts the way s/he does. Hereby the assessor also takes into account the expression of the learner, the body language, the effect of his/her behaviour. It is a type of observation but not as distant as classical observations. Sample sentences describing a student of the teacher training institution are "The student puts something on the table and the children immediately go to it and take the stuff ..." "the students sit at the same height of the children when talking to them.". It is describing how the learner works towards a goal, how the idea of

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teaching has been given form and put in practice. It is not a checklist of indicators. Different from making a composition or list of qualities and competences to identify teachers, a portrait brings to the foreground (the experience of) teaching itself. By making a portrait, the assessor really has to “look” at the learner - he has to silence his own voice, to be open to what is at work at that moment. This aspect demands from the assessor to look differently at learning and developing. The portrait is built by a combination of input (“pixels”) from the mentor, the teacher and the learner him/herself. It is important that a portrait is composed by all the people affected by the work of the learner, not just by one teacher/assessor. Also other stakeholders in the learning process, e.g. the director, etc. could be involved, as an equal voice. Therefore it is also crucial that there are exchanges between all these different persons and that one person collects all the input from these people to make the final portrait.

Working on the portrait happens over time. It is not a snapshot. This continuous evaluation method allows recognising patterns and links with behaviour in other courses and contexts. The portrait reveals these patterns. Whatever is not written there is not visible in the behaviour of the learners and thus needs to be worked on. Apart from evaluative and coaching, it is thus also an awareness-raising instrument of one’s own behaviour.

Description of the target group

It is a holistic method by starting from the learner in his/her context. The starting point of this method is not the differences between learners but an individual learner. It can be applied to any learner in any educational context, from compulsory education to higher education and adult learning. It is very effective for any type of learner because it looks at the learner in its context

Policy context

Higher Education institutions decide themselves on the assessment procedures, so it depends on the institutional policy whether this method can be easily implemented.

Impact for assesseees

The learner can recognise himself better in the portrait in comparison to classical evaluation methods. It also becomes clear very quickly whether a learner has a good view on him/herself (who am I, what is important to me, this is me, I want to be that teacher). You can see this through the self-portraits.

The portrait gives a more complete and holistic image of the learner. The learner becomes more conscious of how s/he is doing. It reveals insights to the learner such as “what type of worker am I?”, “What are my beliefs”, “How is this reflected in my practice?” and “what do I stand for?” The portrait is appreciative. It reveals the strengths of a learner, what works well and what the improvement areas are. It moves the learner to growth. Thanks to the portrait, the learner takes ownership of and responsibility in the learning process. As opposed to more traditional assessment methods, the learner recognises him/herself more in the portrait. A positive consequence is that there are less complaint procedures from learners in comparison with the past.

For assessors/teachers to use this method, it is important they get familiar with it gradually in order to remove prejudices and fear. Teachers who are starting with the method tend to talk to each other about applying the method and exchange their challenges in using it. The main challenge for some teachers is to abandon their own interpretations but to describe what is seen, with examples that demonstrate this.

Personal comments

In short, the assessment is more than judging competences: it fits into a complete programme of feedback and coaching. The learner needs chances to grow and to develop without judging on the basis of one moment (a one shot assessment). The learner and teacher have a shared responsibility in the assessment process. The validity of the assessment is enforced if it is based on information of the student's behaviour and way of acting/doing that is as rich as possible.

However, there are some challenges in implementing this method. At the moment the portrait is not yet replacing the classic bulletin but this is a dream that the UCLL is working towards. Currently, at the end of the year, a grade is put on the portrait, because for the HEI grades this is necessary. This does not always seem congruent with the portrait in the sense that the portrait is describing the whole learning process of the learner and the way s/he reveals the idea of teaching at a certain moment of time. Someone can have a really good learning curve and can have grown more than someone else, who already had a good starting position. Despite the fact that the person with the most important growth has made more progress than the other one, the system obliges to give higher grades to the latter, because in the grading system, learners are compared with each other and not with "themselves".

Link

Literature: Geerinck, I. (2011). The Teacher as a Public Figure. Three Portraits. [onuitgevend doctoraatsverhandeling], Leuven.

(See also video with Ilse Geerinck and Sabine Dierick who developed the method)

