

Writing your Nursing Portfolio

Writing your Nursing Portfolio A Step-by-Step Guide

Fiona Timmins and Anita Duffy



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PRAISE FOR THIS BOOK

“I am delighted to endorse this practical and accessible guide to writing and developing a portfolio for nurses. Unlike many ‘how-to-do’ approaches to portfolio compilation, this book acknowledges the complexity involved in learning from practice, and recording that learning in a meaningful way. The book respectfully guides the reader through essential elements to be considered if a portfolio is to be more than a depository of paper, yet avoids prescription in acknowledging the individual nature of the portfolio and its necessity to reflect the nurse’s own journey through their career.”

Professor Melanie Jasper, Head of College of Human and Health Sciences, Swansea University, UK

“This book is intended for nurses at all stages of their careers and offers a much-needed step-by-step guide to planning, writing and maintaining a portfolio. I was particularly pleased to see a strong emphasis on reflection and education, as a means of encouraging nurses to think critically and learn from their own practice. All in all, this is a very well-constructed book which I highly recommend.”

Professor Gary Rolfe, Swansea University, UK

Dedication

To all the great teachers that we have come across in our lives, the best of whom are our children, Kerry-Anne and Nathan Timmins, Jack and Robbie Duffy.

'Go raibh maith agaibh as éisteacht linn, ár bpáistí áille. Ba mhaith linn éisteacht níos mó libhse.'

Acknowledgement

We would like to acknowledge Ms. Caroline Ivory for her contributions to the development of reflective pieces included.



Developing your portfolio

1

By the end of this chapter you will:

- Understand the term 'portfolio' and other associated terms such as 'mind-mapping', 'reflective friend', 'reflexivity', 'learning style', 'continuous professional development' (CPD) and 'e-portfolio'.
- Be aware of portfolio development in nursing and the history of nursing portfolios.
- Understand why you need to develop a portfolio.
- Understand where you need to start.

In this introductory chapter we will begin to explore what is meant by a portfolio, and what you might expect a portfolio to contain. The chapter explains the basic requirements for portfolio development, and begins to demonstrate how you can develop and structure your own nursing portfolio.

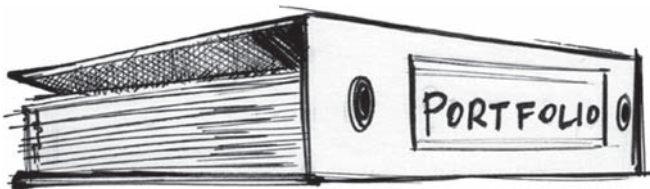
Whether you are working as a healthcare assistant, a student nurse, a newly-qualified nurse or have many years of clinical experience, at some stage of your nursing career you may choose or be required to engage in portfolio development and reflect on your nursing practice. Many nurses feel unsure about beginning a portfolio. However, most say that once they begin the process and engage with a facilitator or group to reflect on their practice, they find it enjoyable and beneficial. The majority of nurses are proud of the learning they have achieved once they have completed their portfolio.

Who is this book for?

This book is written for all nurses wanting to engage in portfolio development regardless of whether or not they are currently undertaking further education. This chapter presents an overview of the crucial elements of getting started on a portfolio and provides a step-by-step approach to help you begin and continue to develop your portfolio. As time goes by you will be able to expand on your portfolio and use it for promotional opportunities, performance appraisal, and personal and professional development. Moreover, during the process of reading this book you should develop self-awareness and self-assessment skills, as you become increasingly aware of your strengths and weaknesses.

The portfolio

The term 'portfolio' comes from the Latin *portare*, meaning 'to carry' and *foglio*, meaning a 'sheet'. So in its most basic interpretation, a 'portfolio' is a *receptacle for information*. In nursing a portfolio is more than just a record of continuous professional development (CPD) containing certificates, diplomas and other relevant documents; rather, it is a collection of *evidence* summarizing what you have learned from prior experience through reflection.



In other words, portfolios are more than simple collections of documents that demonstrate learning achievements. A nursing portfolio provides evidence of previous experience and presents a dynamic record of your growth and professional learning over time. A portfolio is also an *account of learning* based on practice and critical reflection: 'A portfolio is a . . . cohesive account of work-based learning that contains relevant evidence from practice and critical

reflection on this evidence. Its primary purpose is to ‘display achievement of professional competence or learning outcomes and knowledge development’ (Timmins 2008: 115).

It is this more comprehensive interpretation that will be used throughout this book. We will also use the term ‘professional portfolio’ to denote that its function relates to your *professional role* as a nurse. While you may be quite comfortable with the notion of recording your attendance at study events, courses and programmes in your portfolio along with any certificates or awards you have received, you may feel that the prospect of *reflecting on your achievements* is a daunting one. In fact, the demonstration of learning achievements through reflection is often a cause for concern and uncertainty for practising nurses; and yet the skills of reflection and critical thinking are deemed crucial by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC 2004). It is believed that thinking about and reflecting on your practice, and developing a portfolio as a result, makes your learning more explicit as you translate your clinical experiences into documented evidence. You can then learn to critically examine the nature of your learning in relation to specific experiences in your nursing practice and demonstrate that you have learned from those experiences and how you have achieved or maintained your clinical competence as a result. Although undergraduate nursing students are required to develop portfolios in the UK (NMC 2004), your experience in this field may have been insufficient to prepare you to do so.

Portfolios are also very useful for ‘unpacking’ ‘invisible’ learning in the clinical arena, as well as helping you to maintain elements of ongoing clinical competence and accountability in relation to your nursing practice. They have been viewed as a vehicle for demonstrating reflective skills, critical thinking skills, decision-making skills, problem-solving skills and interpersonal communication skills, as well as indicating your array of clinical skills (Twadell and Johnson 2007).

Throughout this book we aim to improve your confidence with portfolio use. We will emphasize the importance of you, as a nurse, developing a portfolio. We will take you through a step-by-step process so that you will be able to showcase your development as a professional nurse in a cohesive and concrete way as you travel from novice to expert in nursing practice.

Pause for Thought

- Consider the drawbacks of using a portfolio just to collect information about your professional experience and accolades. What are the advantages of using a portfolio in this way (just to contain information)?
- Consider the drawbacks of developing a more in-depth portfolio, one that critically reflects upon your professional experience and accolades, and includes more detailed information about you as a professional. What are the advantages of using a portfolio in this way (in-depth portfolio with critical reflection)?

Origins

During the last decade the term 'portfolio' has become very familiar in nursing education and practice. Portfolios were first used in nursing schools in the early 1980s (Cole *et al.* 1995) as a means of demonstrating – and more importantly evaluating – learning through establishing evidence of holistic learning achievements. Professional bodies in nursing practice have embraced the portfolio 'movement' and recommend that nurses maintain and develop a portfolio as part of their professional development. As mentioned earlier, in the UK nurses are expected to maintain a profile as a means of demonstrating CPD and this can form part of your professional profile. CPD is linked to the registration updating process in the UK through the Post-Registration Education and Practice (PREP) standards. The portfolio development process

thereby symbolizes an important part of work-based learning (NMC 2008). The concept of ‘work-based’ or ‘practice-based’ learning is one that is well documented in the educational and nursing literature (see e.g. Quinn 1998; Gopee 2005) and can be demonstrated through the development of a professional portfolio.

Getting started

Pause for Thought

- Consider what you think you might need to include in your portfolio. Write everything down in a list.

- What aspects of your nursing practice do you think will inform the development of your portfolio?

- What other aspects of nursing practice might you need to think about before embarking on portfolio development?

Considering there is no correct way to organize and develop your portfolio you may find yourself overwhelmed before you have even begun. Some authors argue that portfolios do not conform to templates and any attempt

to standardize your portfolio would not do you or your portfolio any justice and may even curtail your creativity (Hughes and Moore 2007). However, we hold the view that, especially for the novice portfolio developer, it is critically important that you have a framework to help you structure your portfolio in a logical and coherent manner. We will include more discussion about this as the book progresses. However, for the moment, a little brainstorming is needed. Take a moment to consider everything that you think your portfolio *should* contain.

You may have provided a vast range of responses to the earlier exercise, and it is important to consider your own personal views of the portfolio – after all it is a very individualized document, with no set format. The important elements that we think need to be considered are outlined in the ‘mind-map’ shown in Figure 1.1.

In order to successfully begin to develop your portfolio you will need to spend some time considering what nursing means to you, and some pointers are shown in Figure 1.1. You may wish to consider your *philosophy of nursing*, or that of the department or organization within which you work. You may think about including some of your CV (your whole CV is unlikely to be appropriate for a nursing portfolio as it will include non-relevant items such as sporting interests and other activities, such as your proficiency at the piano and so on: the portfolio must focus clearly on your learning achievements as a *nurse*).

Reflection (discussed in detail in Chapter 2) is paramount to the portfolio development process. Specifically, *critical reflection* is a conscious and deliberate strategy aimed at understanding and learning from clinical practice. Critically learning from and evaluating your nursing experience is one of the implicit aims of critical reflection. The lessons you learn from reflection can then be applied to your practice, providing a tangible link between theory and practice. In Chapter 2 we discuss the process of reflection and explain why it is such an important element of your portfolio. We describe a simple model of reflection that will guide you through your reflection on practice; and following this we hope that you will be in a good position to choose a model of reflection that suits you best for use in your portfolio.

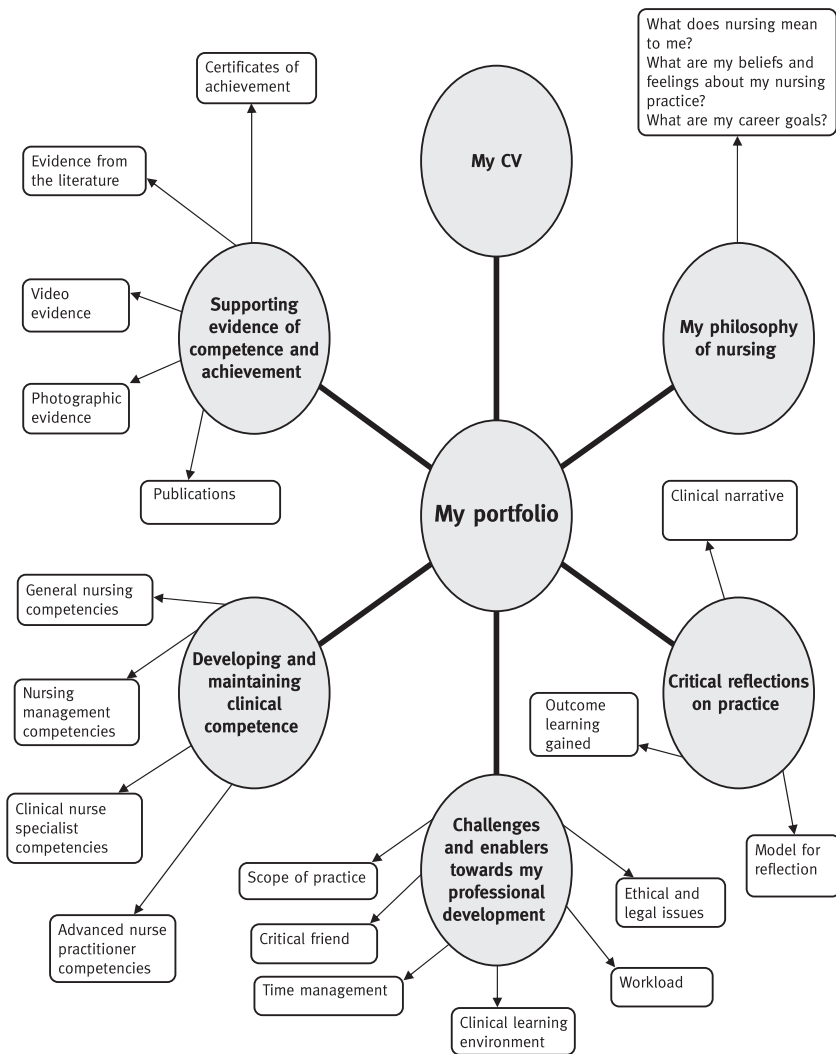


Figure 1.1 A mind-map of the important elements to consider when embarking upon portfolio development.

During your initial brainstorming session you may also consider what challenges and enablers there are in terms of your portfolio of professional development. For example:

- Does your workload seem to prevent you from getting started on a portfolio?
- Are there ways that you could plan your time better?
- Could you approach your manager to get some protected time within your duty to work specifically on your portfolio?
- Can you engage a reflective friend to assist you?

All these questions (and others) are worth considering and writing down. You also need to consider how you are currently developing and maintaining your clinical competence. Your choice of methods for this will ultimately affect the way in which your portfolio is presented. If, for example, you are attending a programme of study, your learning within this programme and your achievements (grades, certificates, diplomas) may be an important element in your portfolio. On the other hand, if you are attending a random range of locally or nationally run courses, relevant to your area, you might examine how you could link the learning you have gained from attending these to your reflection on the development of your ongoing competence, knowledge and skill acquisition, within your portfolio.

Finally, consideration of what constitutes *evidence* within a portfolio is extremely important. It is not the intention of the portfolio to merely house everything that you own; rather, you should be selective in the evidence you collect or retain. Evidence must be relevant and must fit with your portfolio's themes. For the most part evidence should be *objective*. For example, an attendance certificate for a training day on managing aggression and violence in the workplace is objective evidence that you attended. Your simply reporting that you attended (without the certificate) is not. On the other hand, evidence generated from your reflections will, by its very nature, be *subjective*. However, you can support your reflections with objective evidence (such as certificates of achievement and so on) to further strengthen your conclusions.

All of this initial brainstorming may take a little time, and it is worth noting your thoughts down in a notebook or journal. This phase is designed

to get you thinking about important elements that may form part of your portfolio.

Brainstorming over, you need to consider whether your portfolio is for professional and personal development purposes or for academic purposes. If your portfolio is part of a programme of study it may have different requirements to the professional portfolio of the type we describe in this book. In an academic setting you will usually receive detailed instructions for your portfolio. However, there will still be many common elements between your academic portfolio and a professional one, so it is still worth reading on!

A step-by-step approach

It is important that when embarking on a major task, such as developing a portfolio, you break the task down into *manageable steps*. This section describes taking a step-by-step approach to your professional portfolio and a summary of these steps is outlined in the list below.

- 1 *Decide to engage in the process*: the first and most vital step!
- 2 *Commit*: a good way to do this is to declare your intention to a chosen ‘reflective friend’ (see below).
- 3 *Explore*: use this book to consider different types of portfolio and methods of reflection.
- 4 *Identify*: pinpoint the approach that works best for you, along with potential barriers to success. Consider how you will overcome such barriers.
- 5 *Negotiate*: group discussions and reflection are very useful. Discuss your thoughts and decisions so far with colleagues or a reflective friend. Always be open to ideas and suggestions others make for improvement.
- 6 *Plan*: now plan your strategy based on *realistic targets*.
- 7 *Implement*: begin to implement your strategy in a disciplined manner.
- 8 *Re-examine*: as you progress, periodically question and examine your personal attitudes and values.
- 9 *Persist*: no matter what barriers fall in your way, stay determined, persist, and you will succeed.



Decide to engage in the process

You may be required to develop a nursing portfolio as part of a nursing programme or perhaps you need to develop one for registration purposes or for personal and professional development reasons. Whatever the reason, when starting a portfolio it is important to plan how you will approach the process in a methodical manner.

A portfolio has a beginning and a middle, but may have no end. As you engage in the process you will find yourself on a journey of self-development and discovery and furthermore, as you continue to evaluate and learn from your practice, your personal and professional development and your portfolio will develop as a result. The 'end', therefore, will be the *product*. However, even after you've reached the 'end', your journey will continue, especially if your aim is to develop both personally and professionally.

In order to get started you might consider using a framework or a 'mind-map' (All and Havens 1997; Baugh and Mellott 1998), as shown in Figure 1.1. This should help you to structure your portfolio, decide what information you need to gather and include, and consider how you intend to present the portfolio. Mind-maps are a useful tool to develop critical thinking, challenge your thinking process and enable you to bridge the theory–practice gap. Furthermore, they are useful in helping you think critically about your clinical practice and synthesize your ideas, thereby facilitating meaningful learning.

Commit

Declaring your intention to develop a portfolio to a friend early on in the process not only helps you to visualize your goal, it also demonstrates self-determination. Having a ‘reflective friend’ (Bond and Holland 1998; Duffy 2008) is extremely useful because we are often so close to our own actions that we cannot see things clearly. For example, what is familiar and obvious to you may appear quite unique and unusual to a friend, and perhaps worthy of special attention in your portfolio. A reflective friend can assist you by supporting your reflections and interpretations of actions, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs in order to develop your portfolio entries.

A reflective friend can help you visualize alternative perspectives that you may not have realized on your own, and can change both you and your practice positively. However, you do need to choose this person carefully. You will be divulging very personal information and thus the wrong choice could lead to you ending up feeling self-critical, under-confident and defensive about your practice. What type of person makes a good reflective friend? A harmonious relationship is essential, therefore there needs to be a good ‘match’ between your personalities. You need to feel at ease with one another and have a mutual respect, both as nurses and as individuals. Carl Rogers (1961) considered the types of personal characteristic required of a facilitator. While the focus of the reflective friend is not necessary to facilitate your learning, these personal attributes, when present in the facilitator, bring out the best in the other person. For this reason they are useful to consider in the context of choosing your reflective friend. They are:

- Openness
- Curiosity
- Flexibility
- Supportiveness
- Consistency
- Self-disclosure
- Attentiveness
- Non-defensiveness
- Reliability

- Approachability
- Concern
- Trustworthiness
- Self-awareness
- Congruency
- Empathy

Pause for Thought

- Using Rogers' characteristics listed above, consider what personal characteristics you might wish to find in your reflective friend.
- What is the most critical personal characteristic that your reflective friend should have?
- Who would you consider being a suitable friend for you to choose?
- Why would you choose this person?
- Does this friend have all the personal characteristics in your list?

The scenario below examines this part of the process a little further. Josephine has decided to develop her professional portfolio, and needs to choose a reflective friend to assist her through the process.

Scenario: Josephine

Josephine is a 34-year-old staff nurse with six years' clinical experience in surgical nursing. The position of Junior Nurse Manager (F Grade) on the unit has been advertised and Josephine would like to apply for the position. She decides to develop her professional portfolio to demonstrate her clinical competence and ability to manage the unit in the absence of a more senior manager. She recalls a number of incidents that she could potentially reflect on to highlight her clinical competence in nursing management, writes about these and decides that she would benefit from the help of a reflective friend. She wants to develop her listening skills but is in a dilemma regarding the most suitable person to assist her in critiquing her practice. She narrows her choice down to two people:

- *Jane is a 45-year-old registered nurse working part-time on the unit. She has over 15 years' experience in nursing, has worked in two hospitals in the UK and has substantial life experience. Her husband died in a motorbike accident seven years before and her responsibilities include twin sons and a daughter, all attending secondary school. Jane has not advanced her nursing education since qualifying as a registered nurse because she feels she is too busy with life. Josephine often asks Jane's opinion on issues relating to her personal life and takes Jane's advice on most issues. She feels she can trust Jane.*
- *Maria is a new staff nurse on the unit; she started working on the surgical ward a month before. She had two years' nursing experience as a theatre nurse before she accepted the*