A helpful guide to developing your portfolio learning

Introduction

There are many steps to developing the portfolio. By the time you are working on the statements that demonstrate your learning, you will have completed required documentation including your autobiographical essay, resume, and perhaps the critical incident piece (optional). You will have begun thinking about where your PLAR learning will fit into your program. This guide is designed to help you understand the thought process behind constructing your learning statements.

Portfolio Learning

The process of creating your portfolio provides you with the opportunity for new learning. We often learn at a "surface" level – merely memorizing facts or information – but portfolio learning involves "deep" learning – integrating past knowledge into new situations while considering your prior learning in a new light. The "new light" is provided by the requirements of your Athabasca University program.

You will go through several reflective stages as you make this journey. The stages could be described as noticing, making sense, making meaning, and then working with that meaning (Moon, 2001)[1]. The result of this process is that you will have changed or transformed your understanding of your own learning.

As a part of this process, you will be encouraged to look beyond the detail of what you know and what you did. The details of "knowing" and "doing" that were involved in the accumulation of your knowledge will expand into a more holistic view, where you are able to place that knowledge into your current context and link the knowledge to other ideas.

Think of the portfolio process as a "scaffolding" kind of process, where you start with your foundational knowledge and then build on it until you have created a new structure.

CLA mentors will help you through this process.

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[1] Moon, J. (2001) 'PDP working paper 4: reflection in higher education learning' (online), The Higher Education Academy. http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resourcedatabase/id72_Reflection_in_Higher_Education_Learning.rtf (accessed June 4, 2021)

Developing your learning statements

Learning statements are the heart of the portfolio. This is the material that assessors will focus on to determine if you have demonstrated the appropriate learning. Learning has to be relevant to your program and expressed at a university level. Learning statements are clear, descriptive, and effective statements of your prior learning, articulated in precise language.

Learning can occur at various levels of complexity. For example, you may have some knowledge about economics. At a basic level, you may understand the law of supply and demand. At a more complicated level, you may be able to discuss current economic trends and analyze the current economic picture in various countries.

Your learning statements should accurately and honestly describe the learning that you have gained through experience and that relate to your program's learning objectives. To help you in this task of describing your learning, we will use a specific vocabulary that is based on the work of Benjamin Bloom.

In the 1950s, educator Benjamin Bloom developed a catalogue of various levels of learning. He published a taxonomy or classification of educational objectives, noting six levels of intellectual behaviours. Along with these various levels, he developed a list of words that describe one's depth of understanding for each level (Bloom, B.S.,1965)[2].

See **Appendix A** below for a list of some of these words.

See **Appendix B** below for an example of the taxonomy being applied.

Note: this example does not demonstrate completed learning statements, but rather, it demonstrates the individual's broader understanding of their experiences. Each element in that broader understanding will need to be expressed through the "what, how, and why" principle of statement development. This will result in the creation of several unique learning statements.

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[2] Bloom, B.S. (1965). Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals. New York: McKay.

Writing your learning statements

Following are the steps to writing effective learning statements, using examples. Your mentor will walk with you through these steps.

Step 1: Thinking about your learning.

This visual illustrates how you will think about your learning. Begin by asking yourself "What did I do [to learn]?" The chart below uses an example based on the task of report-writing and the learning that results from that.

What did you do?	What knowledge does this learning demonstrate?	What type of knowledge is this?	[For program-based portfolios]: What competency does the demonstration of this knowledge address?	[For course-based portfolios]: What course does this knowledge fit into?
Wrote a report	How to express an idea How to document an activity How to create an argument (linking ideas together) How to convince an audience How to apply a principle or a model	Communication Critical thinking Logic Team-building (Was it a part of team activity?) Supervisory (Was it a part of supervisory activities?) Problem-solving (Did the report solve a problem in the workplace?) Policy management (did the report contribute to or create policy?)	Critical thinking Theoretical knowledge Knowledge of field Communication Professionalism Working with teams Planning/executing projects	

Decision-making actions for Step 1

Using the example of "Wrote a Report" from the table above:

- It is possible to use the report you wrote as material for several types of learning, as shown. Accordingly, in your portfolio, you can showcase that report, or evidence of it, as many times and for as many learning statements as you need to.

- However, if you write a learning statement that reflects the knowledge "How to convince an audience," you should only present that learning statement ONCE in response to one criterion.

- Therefore, carefully choose the criterion that will make the best use of that learning.

Step 2: Check the criteria for the program or course outcomes to target your learning

We are using the example of "critical thinking" from a list of program criteria. The criteria are reproduced below.

Note: Due to size limitations, the entire table is not reproduced below. Criteria 0-4 have been omitted from the left side of the grid. The example below focuses on criteria 5-10.

Critical thinking, problem solving, decision-making		
5-6	**7-8**	**9-10**
Analyzes situations with some consistency and demonstrates growing confidence in applying thinking and decision-making tools	Exhibits ability to recognize dilemmas, ambiguity, and a range of problems; proposes a variety of solutions	Monitors and assesses developments, behaviours, and changes in the field based on theoretical understanding; develops theory where appropriate

Decision-making actions for Step 2

For this example, you are examining the possibilities of targeting your learning specific to critical thinking. Ask yourself:

- Which of these levels of accomplishment have I achieved?

- Can I write to the highest level of accomplishment (9/10)?

Step 3: Creating your learning statements to address the criteria you have chosen.

The chart below shows one program category (critical thinking) that has been selected. You will make your criteria selections based on your opinion of the learning that you have obtained experientially specific to **critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making.**

There is an example of a learning statement that addresses the criteria below.

Critical thinking, problem solving, decision-making	
Learning Criteria	**Learning Statements**
List criterion from the grid here that you feel your learning fits within.	Your Learning Statements go here. There could be several to address the same criteria.
Exhibits ability to recognize dilemmas, ambiguity, and a range of problems; proposes a variety of solutions	Design a report format that expresses several different scenarios including their potential outcomes as this enables transparent decision-making, ensuring others understand the pros and cons of each approach.

Learning statement hints

Writing learning statements is both difficult and important. Remember that your task is to clearly state your learning so that it matches the criteria and then support it with documentation that speaks directly to the stated learning. Here are some techniques to making good learning statements.

1. Start each sentence with a verb

Start each learning statement with a verb in the **present tense,** matching your learning to the appropriate level (see Bloom's Taxonomy, Appendix A) through the right choice of verbs. This focuses the statement directly to the activity and effectively describes your learning.

2. Be the prime mover

Your unique experience within an activity needs to be declared as your learning. To identify your experience, picture yourself as the prime mover or the agent of change within that activity. Each step or aspect of the activity that you impacted or that you initiated potentially declares your learning. Use the level of verb that you feel aligns to the learning you hold and target the criteria to a level that fits your learning.

3. Address the what, how, why

As you review your learning, be sure to mention the "what", "how", and "why" of the activity. The portfolio can be likened to a one-sided interview where the assessors do not have the luxury of asking you for clarification as they read your statements. They will ask what you did, how you did that, and why you did that. The "why" is especially important in your learning statements as this declares your understanding of the foundational principles of your learning.

4. State societal benefits, when relevant

The "why" helps you focus on the purpose of the activity. Look for the benefits of that activity, the societal impact, the technical gain, the economical impact, etc. Look for the theoretical foundation of your activity through the lens of a societal benefit. This presents a high level of understanding within the knowledge area.

Appendix A - Bloom's taxonomy (verbs to use in your learning statements)

In this taxonomy there are 6 levels of knowledge, from most basic (simply knowing something) to the most sophisticated (being able to assess or evaluate). Certain verbs are used to describe each category of knowledge. Your PLAR learning will be assessed according to level.

Level 1: Knowledge

- Specifics (terminology, specific facts)
- Ways & means of dealing with specifics (conventions, trends, sequences, classifications, criteria)

Level 1 Verbs
define, know, list, memorize, name, recall, relate, repeat.

Level 2: Comprehension

- Translation, interpretation, extrapolation

Level 2 Verbs
describe, discuss, explain, express, identify, locate, recognize, report, restate, review.

Level 3: Application

Level 3 Verbs
apply, demonstrate, employ, illustrate, operate, practice, schedule, sketch, translate, use.

Level 4: Analysis

- Analysis of elements, relationships, and organizational principles

Level 4 Verbs
analyze, appraise, calculate, compare, contrast, criticize, debate, diagram, differentiate, distinguish, examine, experiment, inspect, inventory, question, relate, solve, test.

Level 5: Synthesis

- Production of a unique communication, plan, or proposed set of operations
- Derivation of a set of abstract relations

Level 5 Verbs
arrange, assemble, conclude, compose, collect, construct, create, critique, design, formulate, plan, prepare, propose, set up.

LEVEL 6: Evaluation

- judgments of internal evidence and external criteria

Level 6 Verbs
appraise, assess, choose, conclude, compare, critique, estimate, evaluate, judge, rate, revise, score, select, measure, value.

After you examine the taxonomy, you will notice that verbs such as "name," "know," or "define" in Level 1 describe what we may consider less sophisticated activities than "evaluate," "judge," or "assess" (Level 6). Whether your learning occurs at an advanced or introductory level, ensure that you have described it accordingly.

Important: some above noted verbs are present in more than one level. This demonstrates the importance of verb choice. The verb you use to "name" your knowledge frames your learning. How you describe the learning as it pertains to the verb helps others to ascertain your level of learning. Your mentor will guide you in other aspects of learning statement phrasing. This will help you to define and describe the specific "level" that you feel your learning aligns to.

Note: this resource contains examples of verbs within Bloom's Taxonomy. As you work with your mentor, additional resources and guidance on verb selection will be provided.

Appendix B - Bloom's taxonomy - example of application

Program outcome: Problem solving

Criterion: Provides leadership, leads/coaches others in problem solving and decision making for organization and community

Statement Revisions Phases:

1. **Initial statement**

   ➡ Work with four departments to **develop** the budget for a new landscaping project.

   Basic statement of function. Broad, vague.

2. **First revision**

   ➡ Request submissions of department budgets to add to pre-set budget template for landscape project.

   This shows a more detailed activity. A basic level of knowledge (understanding) is required for this activity and there is also evidence of application.

3. **Second revision**

   ➡ Forward budget template established by executive management to departments and followed up with meetings to coach personnel regarding the budget implications specific to their department. Compile all department data into one master template for budget of complete landscaping project.

   Shows a more involved activity within the project. A higher level of learning (application, analysis, synthesis) is needed for this activity.

4. **Third revision**

   ➡ Design budget template for landscaping project after discussing project with internal and external contractors. Select and modify elements of project management software to formulate project-specific reporting ability for many partners within the project. Meet with departmental financial managers to discuss implications of project to their specific budgets and coach personnel regarding use of budget template. Compile data from all departments into master template.

   Activity is performed at high and detailed levels thus indicating that a high level of knowledge (synthesis, deduction, causal reasoning, creative thinking) is required. This will help to uncover more and broader pre-knowledge that can be reflected on to build various learning statements.

5. **Fourth revision**

   ➡ Design budget template for landscaping project by outlining breakdown of costs from contractors to purchase and install foliage according to type, maturity, and volume so the customer can see all expenditures and request adjustments while protecting their pocketbook.

➡️ **Formulate** transactional project reports for partners **by adjusting software parameters to categorize billable elements according to department, status, and outcome** so everyone has access to current progress and can address any financial excesses or shortages.

➡️ **Support** personnel's capacity to use software **by demonstrating how to change a factor, such as the number of trees to be planted, and how that applies to the budget** so all staff understand the immediate impact any change in specifications will have on the overall expenditures.

➡️ **Centralize** material and labour data **by directing each stakeholder to itemize expenses without rounding up or down and providing examples to inform each user of data categories**, so all financials are tracked by true cost and itemized by type, mitigating any potential need for manual invoicing.

The high-level of knowledge (synthesis, deduction, causal reasoning, creative thinking) is reflected on to uncover pre-knowledge. That forms the basis for different learning statements that may benefit from further revision to fully develop. Each of the above examples express different learning associated with the category "Problem Solving" and demonstrate the "what, how, and why" format expected for statement development.

Getting to additional pre-knowledge within the "how" phrases highlighted above will help uncover other learning that may be associated with problem solving or a different category.

6. Fifth revision and beyond

➡️ **Defend** the use of a centralized tracking system to keep a project on budget and on track by immediately informing a client when items are marked as unavailable, or costs exceed the estimate so they can be involved in all aspects of planning and implementation and understand where their dollars are being spent.

➡️ **Value** precision in data entry, recognizing that when each expense is itemized to two decimal points and categorized by material or labour costs, taxable elements can be automatically calculated so the full cost of the project is visible to all stakeholders.

➡️ **Defend** broader client involvement by reminding contractors that when project specs are changed without approval, client's may withhold payments or stop work, so project partners understand that resolution for any unapproved adjustments will be their financial responsibility.

The above are example learning statements tied to communication, ethics, and problem solving respectively that were pulled from a reflection of pre-knowledge hidden in "how" phrasing in the "Fourth revision" section. Each statement will need to be placed into their respective categories.

Additional high-level knowledge that is either named or hidden in any "how" phrasing is reflected on to uncover additional pre-knowledge. That forms the basis for additional learning statements to add to other sections of the learning summary.

Continue getting to the pre-knowledge until you determine that all related learning is uncovered and expressed through a variety of unique learning statements.