

Chapter 9

MY STORY OF BOITUMELO'S STORY

*"[My portfolio:] Learning responsibility,
compiling my achieved skills and getting to know myself better"*

Boitumelo (pseudonym)

Personal Data

Participant:	Boitumelo (pseudonym)
Degree:	BCom degree
Region:	Kwa-zulu Natal
Age:	26
Gender:	Female
Peer help experience:	12 months (interrupted)
Experience in portfolio development:	12 months (interrupted)
Marks obtained for the portfolio:	Satisfactory progress (50 - 59%)

Boitumelo confirmed that she was comfortable with the interview being recorded and completed the Personal Data and Consent Form to participate in the research.

INTRODUCTION

This story is based on the transcribed interview between the researcher and Boitumelo. This chapter will focus, firstly, on the researcher's impressions of Boitumelo. This will be followed by a discussion of emerging themes, highlighting the research participant's experiences during the development of her portfolio. The relationship between the researcher and Boitumelo will also be described in terms of what was found to be helpful and what was

unhelpful. Finally, an overall analysis of Boitumelo's portfolio will be provided in the conclusion.

MY IMPRESSIONS

Boitumelo arrived early for our appointment and I met her in the Peer Help Office. Although the office was small, I experienced it as vibrant and student friendly. The office bore proof of areas where peer helpers had been working. The slogan in the office "It is here we learn to work" summarises the researcher's observations.

The interview with Boitumelo was scheduled, through the counsellor in that region, to take place in the Board Room. Unfortunately the venue had been double booked, which led to a scurry to find another suitable venue. This caused some feelings of anxiousness with the researcher, which subsided once everything was set up for the interview.

Boitumelo was neatly dressed in a fawn top and denims. She appeared friendly, though shy. She did, however, describe herself as being an outgoing person, who likes to be happy. She also mentioned that she likes to work with people and to learn more about different cultures.

EMERGING THEMES

I started the interview off by asking Boitumelo to tell me about her experiences in developing her portfolio. The transcribed interview formed the basis from which the following themes emerged:

Theme of initial difficulty and confusion

Boitumelo started off speaking very softly. She mentioned that initially, when the project leader explained the concept of portfolio development, she felt confused. She wrote in the Personal Data and Consent Form that initially "... I didn't understand the need or the importance of

having a portfolio...". She also experienced difficulties in developing her portfolio as she did not know what to put in it. She did not know what was important to include and what she needed to leave out. After the first brief from the project leader, Boitumelo attempted to develop her portfolio, but she immediately encountered difficulties. She said:

Yes, it was after the first time [the project leader] explained. But when it actually came to doing - actually putting something on it [the portfolio], it was a problem.

Boitumelo also seemed to be confused about whether the portfolio should focus on peer help work only or not. She mentioned that her period of peer help service was interrupted when she was appointed in a contract position in a government department. This resulted in her discontinuing any further development of her portfolio. Boitumelo clearly did not understand that the portfolio could, for example, also include reflections on other experiences related to her part time job. This linked with the **theme of a lack of understanding of the concept and the purpose of portfolio development**.

Theme of taking charge of the portfolio development process

To overcome her difficulties, Boitumelo contacted her project leader. She mentioned that the project leader explained everything again and tried to simplify the process. According to Boitumelo the project leader made a number of valuable suggestions, namely, she:

- **emphasised that the portfolio should consist of whatever Boitumelo did, however small.** She said: "[The project leader told me] ... everything you do, no matter how tiny it is, it is important ...".
- suggested that Boitumelo **separates the different peer help activities in her portfolio**. She said: "... to separate the sessions, the projects, to know what you do in the sessions, what do you do in the projects ...".
- told her to **firstly write her narrative essay**.

- **told her to reflect on experiences.** She said: "... and compiling the reflection sheets ... tell whoever pages through your portfolio about yourself".

Through contact with the project leader, Boitumelo learnt that the content of the portfolio could consist of "... anything that is self-developing ... that is part of who you are, what you have done and what [you] can ... do in future. It is a reflection of you". Once Boitumelo understood the concept of portfolio development and started developing her own portfolio, she started viewing the portfolio as a worthwhile document to have. She wrote in the Personal Data and Consent Form that she particularly liked the following about the process of portfolio development:

Learning responsibility, compiling my achieved skills and getting to know myself better...

It therefore seemed as if Boitumelo overcame her initial difficulties and confusion by contacting her project leader to find out what she needed to do. Once she had determined the structure of her portfolio, she started viewing the development process in a positive light. This linked with the **theme of willingness to ask for help** and the **theme of having a positive attitude towards portfolio development**.

Subsumed under the **theme of taking charge of the portfolio development process** is the **theme of following instructions**. Having elicited the help of the project leader, Boitumelo followed the instructions that she had received and started the process of compiling her portfolio. She took the following steps: (1) she separated the different peer help activities in her portfolio; (2) she read the leaflet on portfolio development to get an idea about the structure for her portfolio, but decided to follow the directives received from the project leader; and (3) she wrote her narrative essay (see Chapter 4, p. 81 for details on what the narrative essay entails).

It therefore seemed as if the process of developing the portfolio became easier, once Boitumelo contacted her project leader for help, understood what the structure should consist of and followed the instructions that she received.

Theme of reflecting on growth

Boitumelo mentioned that she had noticed growth that has taken place over her period of peer help involvement namely:

- She had learnt to manage her time:** According to Boitumelo she initially lacked a clear plan of how she wanted to use her time. Although she had a number of responsibilities, she did not plan how she could fit them into her day. Boitumelo felt that the portfolio had helped her in the process of learning to manage her time. She mentioned that the project leader required from the peer helpers to record in their portfolios the time that they spent on each peer help activity, such as writing an article for the peer help newsletter. This was new to Boitumelo as she had not been aware of how she used her time before. She said: “I use to spend most of the time not knowing what I have done today”. According to Boitumelo she did not plan her days and, therefore, time ran out without her using it constructively. She shared the following, while laughing self consciously: “... and I could sleep the whole day and not worry”. It therefore seemed as if the portfolio development process has helped her to become more aware of how she used her time on a daily basis. Boitumelo also mentioned that she has, since then, been logging her time spent on activities, on a regular basis. This linked with the **theme of developing self-management skills**.
- She became more focussed:** As Boitumelo started becoming aware of time and how she spent it, she started planning her days carefully. She said:

Every time I wake up in the morning I always think what will I do today ... I was busy with exams and work ... and on my rest days what will I do? I go to the library I used to go and volunteer at the [HIV/Aids] clinic. So I have more time, I have to have more things to do with my time. I have to think what will I do.

This demonstrated that through Boitumelo’s awareness of time, and how she utilized it, she became more focused. This helped Boitumelo to become more goal-directed

and helped her to reflect on how she would diversify her activities - thus using time more productively. Boitumelo also confirmed that she used this skill at work to determine how long it will take her to complete a task. She said: “Ja, it helps me ... even at work. I just look at my workload and say Ok - this docket, the first one I took 15 minutes, the second one 10 minutes, if nothing disturbs me, ... I’ll take an hour to register this lot”. It therefore became evident that Boitumelo was initially not organised and did not work in a planned manner. As she started reflecting on how much time activities took and how she had to plan her day, she learnt that she needed to be aware of her usage of time in different situations - thus linking with the **theme of goal-directedness**. Boitumelo also confirmed that she would not have been aware of how she used her time, had she not reflected on this issue in her portfolio.

- **Her improved communication skills led to a growth in confidence:** Boitumelo also reflected in her narrative essay that she had developed her interpersonal communication skills and the ability to relate to other students. This in turn, had an impact on her confidence. Boitumelo mentioned that she had a problem with her confidence prior to joining the peer help programme. She said: “If somebody has to talk to me [sigh] I was shaken... now I can see that I am free. I just have to listen to the person, what is she saying, what is he saying, and then answer as honest as I can”. Boitumelo also reflected in her portfolio that her participation in the role play sessions allowed her to develop her confidence. Although she felt quite threatened by this activity, she mentioned that she did learn how to conduct herself in these sessions.

It therefore seemed as if the portfolio has allowed Boitumelo to reflect on her growth and the skills that she has developed through participation in the peer help programme. She learnt how to manage her time, became more focused and improved her communication skills. This in turn, boosted her confidence - thus linking with the **theme of developing self-management skills**; the **theme of goal-directedness** and the **theme of building confidence**.

Theme of reflection on experiences

Boitumelo's first reflection on experiences was in her narrative essay where she wrote the following:

Before I joined Unisa, I was from a full time institution, and had different perceptions about studying in a distance learning institution. Various people were saying different things - some discouraging, other more motivating. I was not aware how useful is the Student Counselling up until I joined the Peer Help Movement.

I discovered a lot about myself and other people - that we are different and think different. But now I am able to deal with that and [am] still learning. I enjoy being part of students who help those who register at Unisa, not familiar with distance learning, and those who do not cope with their studies, because of different reasons. I enjoyed to work closely with the Student Counsellor and the Career Advisor, as I learn new things now. What I learnt so far in Peer Helping is gaining various skills and still improving others skills. To relate to other students, to prioritise in everything I do, to use a different approach in various issues and to be more organised and planned.

Although this reflection lacked structure, Boitumelo learnt a number of things. In terms of the development of self-knowledge, she learnt that she likes helping others and learning new things. She also reflected that she has become aware of a number of other skills namely, interpersonal skills; cross-cultural skills; self management skills such as managing her time, prioritising and organising; and working in a planned manner. This reflection, however, lacked structure and consisted of vague descriptions - therefore lacking depth. Despite this, it seemed as if Boitumelo found the reflection on experiences beneficial as it allowed her to become aware of some of her skills - thus linking with the **theme of awareness of skills**.

Boitumelo's portfolio also contained a section which she labeled as 'Skills to identify to take to the working environment'. Under this section she filed her Critical Reflection Sheets which allowed her to reflect in a structured manner. She reflected on the period July - November 2002 as follows:

<p>Concrete experience:</p> <p>My experience was joining the peer help movement, the peer help training, learning about the excitement of peer helping - knowing that I will be helping my fellow students. I was involved in sessions [supervision], listening to different programmes [referring to curricula] that students put forward pertaining to their studies, and learning the best way to manage my time, and to allocate time to everything I do.</p>	<p>Feeling quadrant:</p> <p>I am feeling better than before, made friends and being able to learn new things. Having changed my way of thinking about studying and prioritising. Being aware that different people have different problems and that there are different ways of overcoming them.</p>
<p>Action quadrant:</p> <p>To be more involved in the peer help movement. To attend more workshops offered by the Bureau for Student Counselling and Career Development, and to be more involved in projects</p>	<p>Analysis quadrant:</p> <p>My experiences was different from now because I was not aware of the importance of Student Counselling. I used [sic] to make decisions on my own, but that gave me problems concerning my studies.</p>

Boitumelo used the Critical Reflection Sheet, which is applied within the Unisa Peer Help

Volunteer Programme to help peer helpers reflect in a structured manner. From her reflections it is apparent that Boitumelo became aware of her problem-solving and decision-making skills, as well as the importance of prioritising as a self management skill. She, however, combined a number of concrete experiences in one reflection sheet, which resulted in a vague, data poor reflection. Although she claimed that she had developed specific skills, the reflection did not provide the necessary evidence of the claims that she made.

Boitumelo continued to share her reflection on the period July - August 2003. She explained that this reflection was based on what she could remember about different peer help experiences such as the peer help meetings, the self-awareness questionnaires that she completed and the role play sessions that she attended. By completing the reflection sheet after a period of time has lapsed - thus relying on her memory of what she has experienced; and by combining a number of experiences in one reflection sheet, detracted from the quality of her reflection. She reflected as follows:

<p>Concrete experience:</p> <p>Reflection on the experiences of the peer help meetings; what the peer helpers actually did during the semester; meetings, roleplays and (supervision) sessions.</p>	<p>Feeling quadrant:</p> <p>Feeling much better in meetings because I was able to identify my progress in my personality... and being aware that I have improved in relating to students and I have assisted in admin work during my sessions. Also in the office, answering the telephone, making copies, making faxes, general admin work.</p>
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<p>Action quadrant:</p> <p>To be judgmental in what I do ... whatever I do to be... to feel before I do ... to be open to my feelings ...NOT TO JUST DO.</p>	<p>Analysis quadrant:</p> <p>Communication skills, to be optimistic, interpersonal skills.</p>
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From this reflection it seemed as if Boitumelo became aware of her interpersonal skills; office administration skills; communication skills and thinking skills. This reflection also did not provide specific evidence of the claims that she made.

Another activity that helped Boitumelo to gain self knowledge was the completion of a personality questionnaire. Boitumelo mentioned that she had learnt that there is a match between her personality and her career. She did, however, identify one area that needed further development namely that of critical thinking. The portfolio, therefore, allowed her to identify an area for future growth - thus linking with the **theme of goal-directedness**.

Boitumelo also mentioned that she had learnt from an experience of having an interview with a disabled student. She explained:

I learnt that although he cannot see, he does have goals, he has ambitions ... there is something that is driving him. And he is as normal as everybody else - it is just that it is his eyes only. And he is focused... and he's got good passing marks.

Boitumelo mentioned that she had learnt that such students should be motivated and supported and not sympathised with.

Although this was a significant experience for Boitumelo, she omitted to reflect on this

experience in writing. The **theme of lack of reflection on significant experiences** was apparent in a number of incidents that Boitumelo shared during the interview. She omitted to reflect on: (1) her experiences during the interview with the disabled student; and (2) the lack of her critical thinking skills.

According to Boitumelo, the reason why she still omitted to reflect on significant experiences was due to the fact that the Critical Reflection Sheet was a new development in her region and that it was not used initially when she was trained. She also mentioned that she did not have sufficient Critical Reflection Sheets at her disposal, and suggested that peer helpers should have easy access to these forms.

Theme of using the portfolio as a resource file

Boitumelo used her portfolio to collate and file a variety of information namely information on: (1) sessions attended - she kept notes on supervision sessions which focused on a variety of topics namely concentration, effective study, motivation, study planning, and time management. She also kept notes of the hours that she had rendered a service in the peer help office; (2) workshops attended - she kept notes of both training sessions and workshops that she had attended. These focussed on career development and study skills workshops, and information on curriculum training, and leaflets on topics such as managing anxiety, stress and tension, fitness, setting realistic goals and goal directed activities - thus keeping the information for her own benefit and use. There was, however, not reflection attached to any of these documents indicating the meaning that they have for Boitumelo.

MY RELATIONSHIP WITH BOITUMELO

It was important for me to establish rapport at the beginning of the interview as Boitumelo and I have not met before. I started off by expressing my appreciation for her willingness to share her portfolio with me and to speak about her experiences during the portfolio development

process. To further develop rapport and ease the start of the interview, I asked Boitumelo to tell me about herself as I wanted to get to know her better. She spoke very softly and needed to be reminded to speak louder in order to record the interview.

I used the opportunity to explain where my interest in peer helping and portfolio development originated from. I also emphasised that her participation in the research was important as the experiences that she will be sharing will benefit, not only the project leaders within the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme, but will also make a contribution on a national and international level in terms of understanding how peer helpers monitor their development through portfolios. This social part of the interview gave us the opportunity to get to know each other a bit better and eased us into the discussion of her portfolio.

My perspective of what was helpful

During the interview it became apparent that once Boitumelo managed to determine a structure for her portfolio, the development process became easier. The interview therefore helped me to understand at which point Boitumelo's attitude towards the process shifted.

It also became apparent during the interview that there was a gap in the periods that Boitumelo reflected on. Boitumelo, however, explained that this was due to the fact that she did not reflect on experiences during her contract employment period. The interview therefore highlighted Boitumelo's perception that the portfolio was restricted to her peer help experiences only. This highlighted an important training issue for the programme.

It was enlightening to see how the process of logging her time in her portfolio had impacted positively on both Boitumelo's work and personal life. The development of her time management skills had a profound effect on her as it helped her to become more focussed and goal-directed.

The interview with Boitumelo also highlighted the importance of ensuring that the peer helpers have a supply of Critical Reflection Sheets at their disposal to encourage them to reflect regularly on experiences - thus emphasising an important logistical arrangement of the programme.

The manner in which Boitumelo reflected on the Critical Reflection Sheets was also an important aspect of this interview. Boitumelo combined a number of experiences in one sheet. This detracted from the quality of the reflection and prevented her from analysing what she had learnt from a specific experience. The interview was therefore helpful in that it highlighted an important training issue in this regard.

Boitumelo's portfolio also contained leaflets on academic skills and other material provided

by the Bureau. These items, however, were included in her portfolio without her reflecting on them - thus not indicating the meaning that they had for her. This once again, highlighted an important training issue.

My perspective of what was less helpful

During the interview Boitumelo spoke very softly and had to be reminded to speak up to enable the interview to be recorded. Although Boitumelo tried to do this, she frequently reverted to speaking softly again. I was not sure whether this related to Boitumelo's culture, namely showing respect, or whether she was intimidated by the recording of the interview. In retrospect, I should have cleared this up during the interview.

Boitumelo mentioned right at the beginning of the interview that she was "... less participative [sic]" in 2003. To understand her lack of participation, I asked her to explain her situation using the word 'why', which is a justifying question and should be avoided.

Boitumelo's perspective on what was helpful

During the interview Boitumelo admitted that she realised that many significant experiences have passed and that she had omitted to reflect on them. She mentioned that she would reflect on these incidents after the interview, to ensure that she recorded this in her file.

Boitumelo also shared that she needed to improve an area of her life namely to be more judgemental. As I did not understand what she meant by this, I asked her to explain. She experienced difficulty in doing this and eventually came up with a description namely "... not to just do". When I asked her whether this referred to the ability to think critically about her actions, she agreed that it was. According to Boitumelo, this was an area that she needed to improve and reflect on in her portfolio.

CONCLUSION

Boitumelo overcame her initial difficulties with portfolio development and managed to compile an average portfolio which provided evidence of growth in some areas of her life during her period of peer helper involvement. Once Boitumelo realised that the portfolio should contain anything that is self-developing, her attitude towards the process changed. The most significant impact of the portfolio development process was that it helped her to become more aware of how she used her time. This led to her becoming more focussed and goal-directed. Boitumelo is still not skilled in reflecting on experiences with the result that her reflections were mostly vague. Her portfolio contained only three reflections which provided data poor descriptions both in terms of the depth of the reflections as well as the breadth of experiences that she reflected on - thus detracting from the quality of the portfolio. As she did not reflect in detail on individual experiences, she could not provide evidence for the claims that she made in terms of the skills that she had developed. She also used her portfolio as a resource file to collate information that was important to her. These items, however, were included without any reflection indicating the meaning that these items had for her. It appeared that Boitumelo's portfolio was developed more in line with a resource file than a career portfolio. Although Boitumelo took trouble to design attractive cover pages for each subsection, her portfolio did not create a professional image.