Chapter 11

MY STORY OF THE PARTICIPANTS' STORIES

"A situated account
is the researcher's retelling
of what the research participants told her or him"
Kelly (1999c, p. 415)

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this chapter will be on the themes which link the four participants' experiences in developing their individual portfolios. Although each participant told his/her own unique story which occurred within a specific context, common themes are evident. This chapter will therefore highlight, not only the commonalities, but also the differences found in the four stories.

EMERGING THEMES

The following are the common themes that emerged from the participants' stories relating to the management of their portfolio development processes:

Theme of initial difficulties with portfolio development

A recurrent theme in all four participants' stories was the initial difficulties in understanding what portfolio development entailed. Although all four participants grappled with the concept, each participant experienced unique difficulties.

Initially **Nandi** had difficulty in understanding what portfolio development entailed. She did

not understand the concept or the purpose of this career tool, neither did she understand how to compile it, nor what she stood to gain by developing it. It seemed to her that the main focus of the portfolio was to allow the project leaders to monitor her activities. This initially confused her.

Similarly, **Bongi** also experienced initial difficulties in understanding, not only the concept of portfolio development, but also what the word 'portfolio' meant or what this would require from her. It appeared to her as if portfolio development would demand a lot of work from her. This made her anxious and she doubted her ability to complete the task.

Boitumelo's initial confusion, however, related to her lack of understanding the need for developing a portfolio - therefore not understanding the rationale for this career tool. She was confused about a number of aspects namely what the content of the portfolio should be and whether to include other information beside her peer helping experiences.

Tebogo also felt confused as he did not understand the reason for developing a portfolio. Tebogo had been a peer helper for two years when the concept was first introduced to his group. He clearly resisted this new requirement as he felt that his work should speak for itself. This strong resistance towards portfolio development seemed to indicate a lack of flexibility to adapt to change with Tebogo.

Theme of taking charge of the process

Each of the participants, however, responded in a unique manner to their challenges and managed to overcome their difficulties with varying degrees of success. This enabled each of them to present a unique portfolio.

Despite her initial confusion, **Nandi's** self-efficacy and self-directed actions helped her to overcome her difficulties and to take charge of the process. She immersed herself in the

task and took specific actions to clarify her confusion. She read the brochure on portfolio development and pro-actively consulted other sources, such as journal articles and the Internet, for help. She also consulted fellow peer helpers and the project leaders to gain insight into the matter. This allowed her to take charge of the process and start developing her portfolio, based on the structure of a career portfolio.

Similarly, **Bongi**, also took charge of the process and overcame her initial confusion. She: (1) read the brochure on portfolio development to broaden her understanding of what a portfolio should contain; (2) typed up information that she had at her disposal; (3) consulted regularly with the project leader to monitor whether her understanding of what was expected of her was correct; (4) displayed a willingness to learn from others how to compile the portfolio; and (5) meticulously followed the instructions that she received but strived to maintain a balance between being self-reliant and dependent on the project leader. The positive feedback and encouragement that she received from the project leader had a direct impact on her confidence and allowed her to continue developing both a working and a presentation portfolio, which was based on the structure of a career portfolio. Bongi's self-directed actions therefore indicated a strong self-efficacy.

Boitumelo also took charge of the portfolio development process by contacting the project leader to determine what was expected of her. From the discussion with the project leader she realised that her portfolio should contain anything that is self-developing and that would be a reflection of her growth and development. She then started developing her portfolio based on the directives received from the project leader. Although Boitumelo's action of contacting the project leader was self-directed, she seemed more reliant on the project leader than Nandi and Bongi. Following on the directives received, Boitumelo started developing her portfolio and based the structure of her portfolio on the different peer help activities that she was involved in, as this was the structure used by her group.

In contrast, **Tebogo** found himself in a difficult position. Although he resisted this new

requirement, he had to comply to remain in the programme as it was compulsory for peer helpers to develop their portfolios. Tebogo, therefore, halfheartedly attempted to compile his portfolio, which was based on the structure of a career portfolio. He, however, lacked the commitment and the intrinsic motivation to compile his portfolio and therefore did not put much effort into the process. This was clearly not a priority for him. Although he shared a number of external motivations for wanting to develop the portfolio, he lacked the intrinsic motivation to do so. Tebogo's lack of commitment and motivation to develop his portfolio made him feel disappointed and also impacted negatively on his self-confidence. As a senior peer helper, he had not mastered the development of his portfolio and felt uncomfortable when junior peer helpers asked him for help and he could not assist. Throughout the interview Tebogo continued to be embarrassed about the standard of portfolio that he was presenting. Despite the negative impact that this had on Tebogo, he could still not motivate himself to commit to the development of his portfolio - indicating a lack of intrinsic motivation and a lack of self-efficacy.

All four participants therefore took charge of the portfolio development process to a greater or lesser degree. They varied in terms of the process of taking charge and displayed various levels of dependence on the project leaders. The structure of the portfolios also differed. Nandi, Bongi and Tebogo used the structure of a career portfolio, while Boitumelo based her portfolio on the different peer help activities. This clearly raised the issue of standardisation amongst the different peer helper groups, which could also impact on the standardisation of evaluations based on the portfolios presented.

Theme of positive versus negative attitudes towards portfolio management

Another theme that became apparent was that the participants initially experienced different attitudes towards portfolio development. Through their actions some of the participants' attitudes shifted from being negative, unsure or confused to being more positive, while others remained stuck in viewing the process as negative.

From **Nandi's** story, it seemed that she did not experience specific negative feelings towards the process although she was concerned that the process would be time consuming. In spite of her initial struggle with the concept of portfolio development, this did not seem to impact negatively on her attitude. The actions that she took to familiarise herself with what portfolio development entailed, helped her to shift from being unsure about the concept, the purpose and the benefits, towards being positive towards the process. This enabled her to embrace the process with enthusiasm and dedication. She started viewing the portfolio as a tool that she could use for her own benefit, namely to monitor her development and to become aware of her strengths, weaknesses and areas for growth. Nandi also started viewing the process in a positive light as she could see that this tool could facilitate communication between a project leader and a peer helper - thus facilitating collaboration aimed at the development of the peer helper. Through the portfolio development process Nandi realised that she was responsible for her own learning and had to create opportunities whereby she could learn. Nandi also viewed portfolio development as being of critical importance to her own career development and she stated that she believed that she would have been one of the unemployed graduates, had she not developed her portfolio. Nandi's change in attitude also had an impact on her behaviour as she actively advocated the use of portfolios to individuals that she came in contact with. She viewed the portfolio as critical to ensure continued growth - thus preventing a person from stagnating.

Bongi's initial confusion about portfolio development did, in contrast to Nandi's experience, cause initial negative feelings. These negative feelings, however, disappeared when she realised that the portfolio provided a positive picture of herself, her activities and the learning that had taken place as a result of her peer help involvement. She then started to view portfolio development as a "wonderful" idea and a worthwhile process. She felt that the portfolio contained the story of her life and viewed the portfolio as a tool to help her reach her career goals - thus viewing it as an important career tool with a specific career focus. It also became clear that the process of developing her portfolio impacted positively

on her confidence, highlighted her belief in her ability to succeed, and allowed her to develop self-knowledge.

Although the theme of positive versus negative attitudes towards portfolio development was not overtly evident in **Boitumelo's** story, her attitude towards portfolio development did shift. To overcome her initial confusion, Boitumelo worked closely with the project leader and followed the instructions that she received. These instructions, namely that the portfolio should consist of anything which indicated self-development, was a revelation to her and positively changed her attitude. She started to view portfolio development as a worthwhile process and emphasised that the process allowed her to take responsibility for her learning, helped her to collate her skills and facilitated the development of self-knowledge.

Tebogo, on the other hand, continued to be negative towards the process. He viewed the portfolio as a tool to report to the project leaders and failed to understand what he stood to gain by developing this tool. He felt that his dedication and commitment to the programme should be sufficient, and resisted reflecting on experiences - thus raising issues around accountability. Tebogo also resented the manner in which portfolio development was introduced to his group. He felt that the concept was thrown at him, which raised questions around his flexibility and ability to adapt to change. He, furthermore, viewed the portfolio as a punitive measure to monitor him - thus not a career tool that he was developing for his own benefit.

From the aforementioned it therefore seemed that the attitudes of Bongi, Nandi and Boitumelo changed once they understood what they could gain from developing their portfolios. For both Nandi and Bongi, the shift was towards viewing the portfolio as an important career tool, while Boitumelo realised that she could use her portfolio to monitor her learning. Tebogo, on the other hand, remained stuck. He viewed the portfolio as a tool to report to the project leaders and as a punitive measure and not a tool that he could

benefit from. Tebogo also resented the manner in which the portfolio process was introduced, yet both he and Nandi formed part of the same group when the concept was first introduced. They, however, responded entirely differently to the challenge.

Theme of reflection on goals and goal-directedness

The theme of reflection on goals and goal-directed behaviour was also apparent during the interviews with the participants. Although all four participants used their portfolios to reflect on, either their goals, or their goal directed behaviour, only Nandi and Bongi used reflections in a pro-active and self-directed manner to help them to evaluate themselves and to set future goals to aspire to.

Nandi used the portfolio actively to reflect on both her goals and her goal-directed behaviour. She pro-actively used the feedback that she had received from a number of sources (such as peer helper evaluations; testimonials and feedback from other parties) to reflect on both her strengths and weaknesses *(see blue insert on next page).* This allowed her to set goals to develop specific areas in her life. She also actively reflected on past experiences to explore the decisions that she had made. This was apparent in one of her first reflections on why she decided to join the peer help programme. Through this reflection she realised that her motivation to join the peer help programme was based on the difference in developmental levels that she had perceived between herself and the students who had been trained as peer helpers. Her reflection therefore highlighted her goal-directed behaviour in this instance.

Nandi also shared that as the portfolio process required from her to reflect on her goals, the process not only allowed her to monitor her progress towards reaching specific goals, but also enabled her to set her goals realistically, to ensure that she had a number of options available and to rank these in order of priority. Nandi also pro-actively reflected on her skills set. She evaluated herself against nine categories of transferable skills to

determine gaps in her development - thus highlighting not only her goal-directedness but also her self-directed behaviour.

This self-directedness was also apparent in a number of the examples reflected in Nandi's portfolio. She helped a student beyond what was expected of her, and conducted a search for information on the Internet, as she felt she and other students could benefit from the same information. She applied the knowledge that she had gained through a certificate programme in the development of career guidance outreach programmes, with the specific aim to develop her skills and apply her knowledge in practise. She also volunteered to become involved in electronic and written counselling activities with the specific aim of extending her counselling skills to include these two modes of counselling delivery. Nandi was also willing to participate in additional activities, such as presenting a workshop to peer helpers in Port Elizabeth, as she had the specific goal of broadening her experiences and skills. She received specific feedback on her involvement which she filed in her portfolio under feedback received, and which she reflected on. It is therefore clear that Nandi had specific goals in mind and she used her volunteer experiences to reach these goals - thus indicating a strong goal- and self-directedness.

Similarly, **Bongi**, also used her portfolio to reflect on her goals and her goal directed behaviour. The decisions that Bongi took and reflected on, were driven by a clear focus of what she wanted to achieve in terms of her career development, namely, to become an industrial psychologist. The portfolio development process enabled Bongi to reflect on past behaviour. Through this process of reflection she learnt how the decisions that she had made were influenced by the goals that she was pursuing for example that her decision to join the peer help programme was influenced by her need to join a student structure and be of help to others. Bongi's portfolio also contained a number of examples of reflections on her involvement in peer help activities. These reflections highlighted the skills that she had developed and indicated her future goals with these new skills *(see red insert on next page).*

Bongi also had definite goals with the development of her portfolio. She developed her portfolio to provide evidence to prospective employers of her personal learning, reflections and activities. She wanted her portfolio to clearly indicate her career goal of becoming an industrial psychologist. Bongi therefore aimed to use the portfolio to answer questions, list skills, provide evidence and act as a resource during job interviews.

From the interview with **Boitumelo** it was evident that the portfolio management process helped her to become more goal-directed, although this was not a specific theme identified in her story. During the interview with Boitumelo it became apparent that she, initially, lacked a clear plan on how to use her time effectively - thus lacking time management skills. Although Boitumelo did have a number of responsibilities to take care of, she did not plan how she should fit them into her day. As the portfolio development process required from her to log the time that she was involved in peer help activities in her portfolio, she became aware of how she used her time. This awareness of the importance of using time effectively, motivated Boitumelo to start planning her day more carefully and to set specific daily goals to achieve - thus helping her to become more productive, focussed and goal-directed.

Tebogo's portfolio also contained some reflections on goals. He, however, stated that he did not feel that it was necessary to write his goals on paper as long as he knew what he wanted to achieve - thus resisting reflection on goals and raising the issue around accountability. He, however, wrote down some goals in broad terms but these goals lacked a specific time line, or smaller, measurable sub-goals of what he needed to do to ensure that he achieved his goals. By not identifying smaller measurable sub-goals, Tebogo could not monitor whether he remained on track, which again raised the issue around accountability. As Tebogo also did not set definite deadlines for the peer helper newsletter, he did not manage to get the contributions from other peer helpers in on time - thus he did not reach his goal of publishing two copies of the newsletter annually, which raised the issue of self-efficacy. Tebogo also shared an elaborate 15 year career plan which

described the progress from the starting point as a junior journalist, to his ultimate goal of being a sports commentator on TV. Once again these goals lacked specific steps on how he planned to achieve them. Tebogo therefore used his portfolio to record his goals in vague terms. It also seemed as if the process of reflecting on goals was, once again, completed in a half-hearted manner. Tebogo did not want to reflect on his goals (or develop his portfolio), but had to, to remain in the programme. This resulted in incongruent behaviour and resistance to the process.

Theme of reflection and experiential learning

Experiential reflection forms an integral part of the portfolio development process of peer helpers involved in the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme. The participants in this study, however, varied considerably in terms of their attitude towards reflection, the type of issues that they reflected on, the number of reflections that were included in the individual portfolios, the depth and breadth of the reflections and their attitudes towards the process itself.

Nandi's portfolio contained numerous examples of how she reflected on experiences. Although she initially experienced the process of reflection as time consuming, she soon realised that this was important for her own development. This changed her attitude and she started reflecting regularly. She reflected on past experiences such as on her academic skills development and her motivation to join the peer help programme. This helped her to understand why she made specific decisions in the past. She reflected on both personal and work experiences to determine what she could learn from them. The reflection on a personal situation that she was involved in, for example, required introspection and definite action from Nandi. By going for therapy and reflecting on the situation in her portfolio, she managed to process the experience. She also reflected on current situations to determine what she had learnt from this and what she would be doing differently in future. Her reflection on her participation in the Unisa Open Day highlighted

specific issues that she would do differently in similar situations - thus the reflection allowed her to learn from her experience.

She also used the reflection process to compile parts of her portfolio, such as her work philosophy which was based on her personal value system. Her portfolio also contained a comprehensive narrative essay which she updated regularly. The narrative essay described her development over the time of peer help involvement. It is therefore apparent that Nandi reflected holistically on past and present experiences with the aim of learning from them and to enable her to use this new knowledge in similar situations in future. Her reflections were data rich in terms of both the depth of the reflections and the breadth of the experiences that she reflected on. Through her reflections, Nandi processed her experiences, developed self-knowledge, monitored her skills development and learnt from her experiences.

Similarly, **Bongi** also used her portfolio for on-going reflection on experiences. From the examples that Bongi shared, it appeared that she had benefited from regular reflection in a number of ways, namely, she developed self-knowledge; she became aware of her goal directedness, dedication and perseverance; it helped her to process personal trauma; and she learnt from negative experiences which allowed her to identify areas for future development. The reflection process demanded that Bongi be introspective and she learnt from her own behaviour, such as that she at times during interviews, spoke too fast. Such reflections helped her to determined her strengths and weaknesses *(see red insert on the next page)*. Bongi confirmed that she was comfortable with the process of reflecting experientially. Her portfolio contained numerous reflections and she reflected on both personal and work related issues. Her portfolio also contained a comprehensive narrative essay which she revised regularly. Bongi's reflections were also data rich in terms of both the depth of the reflections and the breadth of the experiences that she reflected on. During our discussion, Bongi identified a number of instances which she omitted to reflect on and she made a commitment to return to these aspects to reflect on them. What was

also apparent in the interview with Bongi was the growth in her ability to reflect on experiences. Initially it seemed that Bongi's reflections lacked structure. Despite this, she continued to reflect experientially. Once the Critical Reflection Sheet was introduced to her region, it allowed her to reflect in such a way that she described the context, reflected on her feelings, analysed what she had learnt and identified what she would do in similar situations in future *(see red insert on the next page).*

As part of the requirement of the portfolio management process, **Boitumelo** also reflected on experiences. Her first reflection was in her narrative essay. Although this reflection lacked structure it helped Boitumelo to broaden her self-knowledge and to reflect on a number of skills that she felt she had developed. As she reflected on experiences in her portfolio she realised that growth had taken place over a period of time. Her awareness of how she used time available to her, had a profound impact on her life and she credited the portfolio reflection process as having helped her to develop in this area of her life.

Boitumelo also felt that the portfolio reflection process allowed her to become aware of areas in her life that she had to develop further, namely critical thinking and becoming more discerning. Her portfolio, however, contained only a few reflections, compared to the portfolios of Nandi and Bongi. The two reflections that Boitumelo filed in her portfolio also lacked depth and bordered on being vague. Boitumelo furthermore combined a number of experiences in one reflection sheet. This detracted from the quality of her reflections. By combining a number of concrete experiences in one Critical Reflection Sheet, Boitumelo was prevented from working through the Experiential Learning Cycle to determine what she felt, what she had learnt and what she would do differently with regard to each experience. This resulted in an unstructured reflection which did not serve the purpose for which it was designed, namely to help her learn from experiences.

Boitumelo also described in vague terms what she had learnt from her experiences. Again, due to her combining a number of experiences in one reflection, Boitumelo could not

identify what she had learnt. She therefore described in vague terms that she had developed some skills, namely communication skills and interpersonal skills. She could also not provide evidence for the claims that she made in terms of her skills development *(see orange insert on the next page)*. It is therefore clear that Boitumelo required additional assistance to help her to master the skill of reflecting on experiences. She also needed support and feedback in the manner in which she used the Critical Reflection Sheet. Boitumelo also omitted to reflect on a number of significant experiences that she had undergone which highlighted the importance of regular interviews between a project leader and a peer helper to discuss the portfolio and highlight such omissions.

Tebogo's portfolio, on the other hand, indicated that he was experiencing difficulties in reflecting experientially on significant experiences and projects that he was involved in. His portfolio included only two attempts at reflection and he provided a number of reasons for this, namely that: (1) he did not know how to reflect on paper; (2) he was unsure whether to include only peer help related experiences, or life experiences; (3) he found it difficult to write his reflections on paper; (4) he did not make time to write down his reflections as it was not a priority for him to reflect regularly; and (5) he was unwilling to reflect on past experiences as he said that he preferred to look forward rather than look back. It appeared therefore that Tebogo resisted the process of reflection, felt threatened by it and consequently provided a number of justifications for his non performance in this regard. As with Bongi and Boitumelo, Tebogo also omitted reflecting on a number of significant experiences. In line with his general attitude towards the portfolio development process, his omissions indicated a lack of commitment to the process and a lack of willingness to learn from experiences.

As mentioned above, reflection forms an integral part of the portfolio development process as required within the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme. Although Nandi and Bongi skilfully reflected in their portfolios, the same cannot be said for Boitumelo and Tebogo, as both of them have not mastered the art of reflection. It was also evident that the levels of

commitment and dedication towards reflection differed considerably between the four participants. Both Nandi and Bongi are psychology students, while Boitumelo and Tebogo are students in other fields of study. This raised the question of whether the quality of reflection relates in any way to an individual's field of study - thus indicating an important aspect for future research. Tebogo was also the only male participant in this research and was clearly threatened by the process of reflecting on experiences. This raised the question of whether gender plays any role in the ability and willingness of an individual to reflect on experiences - thus highlighting another topic for future research.

Bongi, Boitumelo and Tebogo also identified significant experiences that they omitted reflecting on. This highlighted an aspect that needs to be addressed during individual interviews between a project leader and a peer helper. The variation in competency with regard to reflection also differed considerably and needs to be addressed through on-going training and individual support. The development of the Critical Reflection Sheet had not been introduced to all the regions by the time the interviews were held. This highlighted the importance of standardisation from a programme management point of view in terms of both portfolio development as well as the evaluation of peer helpers.

Theme of monitoring of skills development and growth

All four participants shared summaries of skills that they have developed through participation in peer help activities. They did, however, differ on how they have become aware of such skills development. Nandi and Bongi linked their skills development directly to specific activities and reflections on these experiences. They could therefore provide verifiable proof of where such skills development had taken place. This was not the case with Boitumelo, who merely listed skills that she had developed, and Tebogo who at times provided vague descriptions of how he developed some skills.

From the interview with **Nandi** it became clear that she felt that the portfolio development

process facilitated on-going reflection and allowed her to identify the skills that she had developed. Her portfolio consisted of numerous reflections on activities that she was involved in. Through reflection she listed the skills that she had developed through her participation in these activities, namely:

> Communication skills; problem-solving and decision-making skills; ability to work independently and under pressure; listening skills; telephone etiquette; office administration; flexibility; adaptability; writing skills; liaison skills; organisation skills; marketing skills; negotiation skills; creativity; [the ability to] read between the lines; reception skills; probing skills; analysing and interpretation skills; design of questionnaires; job finding skills; cross cultural competency; presentation skills; team work; initiative; research skills; interpersonal relation skills; time management skills; project management skills and budgeting skills.

Nandi also felt that her reflections on experiences allowed her to monitor her development that had taken place and to compare her growth over time. She looked at her skills set before she was trained as a peer helper, after she completed the peer help training and after she had been functioning as a peer helper, an Assistant Student Counsellor and an Administrative Assistant for a period of time. These reflections, however, focussed mainly on her growth over time in terms of the development of a range of skills - thus focussing on providing evidence of her multi-skilling.

What was also noticeable was that, although Nandi listed a number of counselling skills that she had developed, her portfolio lacked evidence of how such individual skills have developed and grown. Through active reflection Nandi, therefore, managed to gain an overview of the extent of the range of skills that she had developed. Nandi also used the insight gained through reflection to compile her CV. She reflected on her experiences and then summarised the developed skills in her CV. By doing this she felt that the portfolio acted as a visual reminder of what she had been involved in and prevented a possible omission of critical information related to her skills development and learning.

Similarly, **Bongi** also mentioned that she used the portfolio to monitor the skills that she had developed through participation in the peer help programme. She provided examples

of reflections on her involvement in activities and listed the following skills that she had developed, namely:

> Communication skills; teamwork; facilitation of the decision-making process; empathic listening skills; portfolio development skills; presentation skills; dealing with emotional issues; academic skills; career development skills; interpersonal skills; organisation and planning skills; information management skills; and leadership skills.

As with Nandi, Bongi's portfolio also contained specific reflections on how and when these skills were developed and she could provide concrete evidence in this regard *(see red insert on the next page).* These reflections, however, focussed mainly on her growth over time in terms of the development of a range of skills - specifically relating to her future career skills. As with Nandi, Bongi's portfolio also lacked evidence of how her individual skills as well her counselling skills have developed and grown over time. Through active reflection Bongi, therefore, managed to gain an overview of the extent of her development in terms of a range of career related skills.

Bongi, furthermore, used the portfolio to reflect on not only her skills development, but also her personal growth that had taken place. She listed the growth in confidence as of particular importance and felt that this was directly related to her developing her portfolio. Bongi, furthermore, used her working portfolio as a resource file to collate her reflections on experiences and then summarised her skills in her CV. She then selected the best examples of her skills development for her presentation portfolio.

Boitumelo also used her portfolio to identify the skills that she felt had developed, although this was not a specific theme in her portfolio development story. She did, however, through reflection, identify the following skills that she had become aware of, namely:

Interpersonal skills; time management skills; organisational skills; general office administration skills; communication skills and thinking skills.

During the interview with **Tebogo** he mentioned that he had grown over the last few years of being a peer helper. He also mentioned that he felt that he had developed a number of skills. Tebogo's portfolio contained only two reflections which described his peer help involvement in vague terms. These reflections, however, lacked evidence of how and where he developed his skills. As his reflections did not indicate what he was involved in, how he felt about it and what he learnt from the activity, he could not provide verifiable proof of his skills development. It therefore seemed as if he used his portfolio as a resource file only by merely recording the skills that he felt he had developed. Tebogo listed the following as skills that he thought he had developed through participation in the peer help activities, namely:

Cross cultural competency; presentation skills; interpersonal skills; editing skills; teamwork; leadership skills; listening skills; supervising skills; photographic skills; self-directed learning skills; and research skills.

It therefore seemed as if Tebogo had an appreciation for and an awareness of the growth and development that had taken place over a period of time, but his portfolio lacked concrete evidence of how and where these skills were developed.

From the aforementioned it seemed as if Nandi and Bongi provided verifiable proof of where and how their skills development had taken place. This was not evident in the skills that Boitumelo and Tebogo listed. As they did not reflect in detail on their experiences, their portfolios did not provide this information. What was even more noticeable was that all four participants did not provide evidence of growth that had taken place in an individual skill, or even how their counselling skills developed over time. It seemed therefore that the focus was on providing evidence of how the range of their skills have expanded and not of the honing of an individual skill.

Theme of using the portfolio as a resource file

All four participants used their portfolios as resource files to file information for their own benefit. Nandi, however, was the only participant that used her portfolio to file information to be used by her to assist other students who approached her for help - thus indicating a pro-active and goal-directedness.

Although **Nandi** developed her portfolio with the specific objective of reflecting on experiences to provide evidence of the range of the skills that she had developed, she also used the portfolio as a resource file and document centre to file important information. She kept some information such as that for the Council of Counsellors in SA, not only for her own benefit, but also to assist other students approaching her for help. She also filed articles relating to career development in her portfolio to advocate the importance of portfolios to others. She also used the portfolio to file important personal information such as degree certificates; short course certificates; testimonials and letters of appreciation. This was done with the specific purpose of being able to present verifiable proof during job interviews, should she be asked to do so.

Bongi developed both a working and a presentation portfolio. The working portfolio was used exclusively to collate important information and contained copies of the number of hours of volunteer service rendered; lists of projects that she was involved in; leaflets; examples of interest questionnaires; notes on academic offerings at Unisa; copies of newspaper articles of importance to her as well as the rough drafts of her reflections. Bongi then summarised this information in her presentation portfolio. The presentation portfolio therefore was based on the structure of a career portfolio and also consisted of outlines of training workshops, testimonials, summaries of outreach activities; her academic records and selected reflections that were neatly typed out and printed on colourful paper. The ultimate aim of her presentation portfolio was therefore to provide verifiable proof of her career related skills and experience during job interviews.

Boitumelo also used her portfolio to collate and file documents that were of importance to her. These included notes on supervision sessions attended; information on academic skills; records of the number of volunteer hours rendered; notes on career development and study skills workshops attended; as well as academic skills leaflets. It was evident that Boitumelo's motivation was to use this information as sources that she could refer to when needed.

In contrast to the other three participants, the theme of using the portfolio as a resource file was not a specific theme identified in **Tebogo's** story. Tebogo did, however, use his portfolio to file some reflections and to record his skills development.

CONCLUSION

The portfolios of all four participants varied in terms of a number of aspects. Each managed the process in a unique manner in terms of how they took charge of the process; how the portfolio was structured; the general organisation of the content; the inclusion of reflective learning experiences; and the monitoring of skills development.

Nandi managed the portfolio development process with enthusiasm, dedication and commitment. Her portfolio created a professional image and she compiled an excellent standard portfolio. The most distinctive characteristics of her portfolio were the following:

- The general organisation was carefully planned in terms of the structure and layout of the information.
- It included a comprehensive narrative essay which provided an overview of Nandi's peer help involvement over a three year period. The narrative essay furthermore contained a comparative table on how the range of Nandi's skills had developed over time.
- The portfolio also contained numerous examples of reflective learning which enabled Nandi to develop insight into her own personal functioning. These

reflections were data rich in terms of both the depth of the reflections and the breadth of the experiences that she reflected on.

- The central focus of Nandi's portfolio was to provide verifiable proof of the range of skills that she had developed. She therefore selected items carefully and included reflections for each claim that she made in terms of her growth and development.

- Her portfolio contained numerous examples of self-directed learning activities such as her analysis of her transferable skills. This helped Nandi to develop an awareness of her strengths and weaknesses.

- She also used the portfolio as a resource file to store articles of importance, both for her own benefit as well as for the benefit of other students approaching her for help.

Similarly, **Bongi**, managed the process with a clear goal directedness. She knew what she was aiming at, and involved herself in activities and reflected on these experiences with the specific aim of identifying the career specific skills that she had developed. Bongi developed and maintained both a working and a presentation portfolio. She used the content of her comprehensive working portfolio to carefully select items to compile an excellent standard presentation portfolio, which created a professional image. Bongi creatively made use of photos to illustrate her involvement in projects, which she linked to a structured reflection to provide evidence of her activities and learning. The following are the most distinct characteristics of her portfolio:

- The general organisation of Bongi's portfolios were carefully planned in terms of the layout of the information and the structure that it consisted of. Her working portfolio was organised according to broad categories while her presentation portfolio was organised according to the specific structure of a career portfolio.

- The central purpose of Bongi's presentation portfolio was to provide verifiable proof of her career specific skills development.

- Considerable time and effort went into the planning of her portfolio. This was clear

from the items that were creatively printed on coloured paper with interesting photographs.

- As a dedicated and committed peer helper, Bongi had ample experiences to reflect on. Her portfolio therefore contained numerous data rich reflections both in terms of the depth of the reflections and the breadth of experiences that were included in the portfolio.

- Her portfolio provided a clear indication on how her reflective abilities developed over time. As she became more comfortable with using the Critical Reflection Sheet, she volunteered to revisit some of her previous reflections to update these as well.

- Her portfolio also provided evidence of significant self-directed learning which helped her to increase her self-knowledge, to reflect on negative experiences and to help process personal trauma.

- Her reflections also allowed her to identify areas for future growth and assisted her in setting goals to strive for in future.

Boitumelo, on the other hand, experienced difficulties in understanding the need for the portfolio. She did, however, overcome these difficulties and presented a satisfactory portfolio during the interview. The following are the most distinct features of her portfolio:

- The general organisation of her portfolio had a definite structure which was based on the different peer help activities which seemed to be the structure followed in her region.

- Although Boitumelo created attractive cover pages for each subsection, her portfolio did not create a professional image. It seemed as if the portfolio had been compiled in a hasty manner.

- Boitumelo's portfolio contained a brief narrative essay which described her peer help experiences in vague terms. Her narrative essay also listed skills that she felt she had developed without providing the context in which the learning had taken place. These reflections also did not indicate how her new knowledge would impact

on her behaviour in future.

- Her portfolio contained only two reflections which were unstructured and seemed vague at times - thus providing data poor reflections on experiences. These data poor reflections related to both the depth of the reflections and the breadth of the experiences that she reflected on.

- Her portfolio also lacked evidence of self-directed learning that had taken place.

- Boitumelo's portfolio did contain evidence of growth over time. This related to the development of her time management skills.

- The portfolio development process also allowed Boitumelo to identify areas for future growth namely to develop critical thinking skills and the ability to be more discerning and judge situations more skilfully. She indicated that she wanted to pursue these goals in future.

Lastly, my story of **Tebogo's** story is one of on-going difficulty with the concept of portfolio development, over a period of three years. This lead Tebogo to develop a sub-standard portfolio which was rated as 'Experiencing Difficulty' during both the peer helper evaluations in 2002 and 2003. The following are the most critical features of his portfolio:

- Tebogo's portfolio did not create a professional image and it seemed to be compiled without much thought and effort.

- The portfolio lacked a central purpose. He arranged his portfolio around a quotation of his role model which stated that if a person does not want to do something, he/she will find every excuse not to do it. This aptly described Tebogo's attitude towards portfolio development.

- His portfolio lacked evidence of self-directed learning that had taken place.

- The issue of experiential reflection was very threatening to Tebogo. He felt strongly that he did not want to include personal experiences in his portfolio and used this as one of the reasons for not developing his portfolio. His portfolio therefore provided limited examples of insight developed as a result of reflection.

- Tebogo's portfolio contained only two reflections, namely a narrative essay and a

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general reflection on his skills development. Both reflections were vague and consisted of data poor, unstructured reflections. His reflections did not indicate how he felt about his involvement in the activities and what he had learnt from these.

- From the interview it seemed as if Tebogo, for a variety of reasons, did not benefit greatly from the process of developing his portfolio and that the discussion with the researcher, as a mentor, during the interview seemed more beneficial to him.

THE RESEARCHER'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PARTICIPANTS

The role of the researcher's relationship with the participants formed part of the story of these peer helpers and their experiences with portfolio development. It is therefore also a story that needs to be told and cannot be excluded from this discussion. This relationship was evaluated in terms of what was helpful from the viewpoints of both the researcher as well as the participants.

Nandi and I know each other well but it was necessary to re-establish rapport for the purpose of this interview. The interview therefore commenced with a discussion around Nandi's friend who was in hospital and her concern for her friend's well being. What was helpful in the interview with Nandi was that it was easy to speak to her. She readily shared her experiences with developing her portfolio as she clearly believed in the benefits of this career tool. She openly shared her initial difficulties and how she tried to cope. It was motivating to listen how her enthusiasm for the process developed, and how she advocated portfolios to others. It was furthermore enlightening to discuss the portfolio process with her as we shared a common interest and enthusiasm for this tool. It was also a privilege to have had the opportunity to work through Nandi's portfolio, which was clearly an excellent standard portfolio. Her high level of involvement in the process was noticeable in a number of items such as the comparative table and the additional section on evaluation. As Nandi paged through her portfolio, she set the pace for the interview which allowed her to place the emphasis on those items that she wanted to highlight. This

allowed me to gain an appreciation for the pro-active and self-directed manner in which she approached the process. It was also enlightening to see how she actively reflected on her strengths and weaknesses, which she openly discussed. By determining her weaknesses she could set goals for future development. The interview also allowed her the opportunity to debrief in terms of her being selected for a postgraduate programme and how this impacted on her. This allowed me to provide a different perspective to how she viewed the issue, which she accepted.

Bongi and I met each other during a previous peer helper evaluation which was conducted in her region. To establish rapport Bongi and I discussed the birth of her baby and how she coped with motherhood and studies. As with Nandi, I also found it easy to speak to Bongi although she spoke very fast at times and her sentence construction demanded my active listening to understand her clearly. She openly shared her experiences with developing her portfolio which helped me to gain an understanding of how she managed the process. Bongi was clearly enthusiastic about the process and it was insightful to listen to her account of what the process meant to her and how it impacted on her development. The interview allowed Bongi to talk me through both her working and her presentation portfolio. As she set the pace, she could place the emphasis on those items that she was proud of. It was insightful to learn how meticulously Bongi compiled both her portfolios. The effort that she put into the process and the creative manner in which she highlighted her involvement in projects were of particular interest to me. It was clear that the portfolio had become part of her life and not just a project leader requirement that she had to meet. It was also enlightening to view the range of experiences that Bongi reflected on as this illustrated her involvement in the process.

As I had not met **Boitumelo** before the interview, our meeting commenced with me asking Boitumelo to tell me about herself. This gave me the opportunity to get to know Boitumelo better. It was interesting to see how Boitumelo's attitude to the process changed once she determined a structure for her portfolio. This highlighted the important role that the project

leader played in her story. The interview also helped to identify her perception that the portfolio should be focussed on peer help experiences only and this could be changed in the interview. It was enlightening to witness the personal growth in Boitumelo which resulted from her logging the time spent on peer help activities. Boitumelo credited the portfolio process for this development in her life. The interview also highlighted the importance of providing peer helpers with a supply of Critical Reflection Sheets. Boitumelo furthermore struggled to master the skill of reflecting on experiences. She combined more than one experience in the same Critical Reflection Sheet which detracted from the quality of her reflections. This, however, highlighted an important training issue.

Tebogo and I know each other well and have been working together for a number of years. I opened the interview up by stating that I was aware that Tebogo had been experiencing difficulty in developing his portfolio and expressed my genuine interest in understanding what this difficulty entailed. This allowed Tebogo to openly discuss the details of his struggle. I emphasised that I wanted to understand his difficulties and why he thought that he was different to the other peer helpers. This created an unconditional acceptance of Tebogo, which allowed him to discuss his process. He shared his on-going conflict with the process and mentioned how disappointed he was about not receiving a certificate. This allowed me to reframe his disappointment as being both about not developing his portfolio as well as not receiving the recognition that he hoped for, which Tebogo accepted. A large part of the interview focussed on Tebogo's struggle with the process. It was therefore more positive to discuss his growth related to his photographic ability. It was also insightful to see how the interview allowed Tebogo to understand the incongruency in what he said and what he managed to do with regard to the development of his portfolio. The interview also allowed Tebogo to share, for the first time, how his on-going struggle with portfolio development impacted on his functioning as a senior peer helper. The interview also allowed for the opportunity to verbally lead Tebogo through the process of reflecting on experiences - thus allowing him to become familiar with the process. It seemed therefore that Tebogo benefited more from the interview with me as a mentor, than from the

development of his portfolio.

The interview was also helpful in that it **contributed to the on-going growth and development of the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme**:

- The interview with Bongi generated the idea of annual individual interviews with peer helpers to allow them to share the development of their portfolios and receive feedback from their project leaders.
- The interview with Boitumelo highlighted the importance of having a supply of Critical Reflection Sheets available for use by the peer helpers.
- Tebogo, who had been struggling with the process of reflecting on experiences was guided through the process of reflecting on his editing skills by the researcher. This provided the opportunity for him to discuss his difficulties around the production of the newsletter. The discussion allowed for the identification of a different way of scheduling of the contributions to the newsletter to allow Tebogo to reach his goal of publishing two editions annually.
- The interview also highlighted the fact that the structure of the career portfolio was not used in all the regions - thus emphasising the importance of standardisation across regions.
- All four participants omitted reflecting on the growth in their counselling skills which highlighted a training issue.

The **participants found the following to be helpful** about the interview:

- Nandi felt that the interview enabled her to gain an overview of what her portfolio contained and affirmed her ability to present her portfolio to a third party *(see pink insert on the next page)*. She also felt that the feedback received from the researcher boosted her confidence. During the interview she also realised, once again, that she was responsible for her own growth and this highlighted the importance of goal-directed behaviour for her. Finally the interview highlighted the importance of portfolio development to help her plan her life and her direction.

- Bongi felt that the interview was helpful in that it highlighted gaps in her portfolio and helped her to identify areas that she could improve on.

- From the transcribed interview with Boitumelo it seemed that the interview highlighted significant experiences that she had omitted to reflect on. It also reframed the aspect of critical thinking and to be more discerning as an area of future growth for her.

- The interview with Tebogo was helpful in a number of ways and could be regarded as a critical intervention. It allowed Tebogo the opportunity to explain how disappointed he felt about not compiling a professional portfolio. It allowed him to share how threatened he felt when the junior peer helpers approached him for help with their portfolios, as he could not assist. It furthermore allowed him to acknowledge that he had been making excuses for his non performance and that he realised that hard work alone was not enough and needed to be backed up by a tool such as his portfolio.

The **following processes were regarded as less helpful** by the researcher though it allowed her to learn from the process:

- Nandi often spoke in general terms, moving from sharing personal experiences to speaking in the third person. The researcher failed to point this out.

- Nandi provided ample evidence of skills development but the researcher omitted to ask her whether her identified skills could be developed further.

- Bongi spoke very fast at times and although the researcher did ask her to speak slower, this issue was not explored during the interview.

- Boitumelo spoke very softly at the start of the interview and despite being made aware of this, she continued to do so. This resulted in a situation where the researcher's tone of voice and volume did not match that of the participant during the interview.

- Tebogo seemed threatened by reflecting on experiences. At a stage in the interview he mentioned that he preferred to look forward rather than look back. This issue

was not explored further.

- Tebogo mentioned in his narrative essay that his portfolio contained a copy of his CV. During the interview Tebogo did not share this with the researcher and this aspect was not explored further.