

## Chapter 12

# COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

***“If you value the learning process,  
the product will take care of itself”***

*Fasick and McLaren (1995, p. 83)*

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter will provide a comparative analysis between the themes of portfolio management as found in this research, and the literature study on peer helping and portfolio development that was undertaken. Although the themes that were highlighted in this study support those that were found in previous research, differences did occur. Both similarities and differences will, therefore, be referred to in this chapter.

A number of recurrent themes became apparent in the stories of the four participants. The common themes that emerged were the following:

- Initial difficulties with portfolio development
- Taking charge of the process
- Positive versus negative attitudes towards portfolio development
- Reflection on goals and goal-directedness
- Reflection and experiential learning
- Monitoring of skills development and growth
- Using the portfolio as a resource file

These common themes will be discussed in terms of the literature study provided in chapters 2, 3 and 5.

Although a lot has been written about the benefits and uses of portfolios in many fields, limited references were found indicating the use of portfolios in the training, supervision and service delivery of peer helpers.

A number of researchers (Carr, 1988; de Rosenroll, 1989; Lawson, 1989; McIntyre et al., 1982; Varenhorst, 1984) emphasised that peer counsellors do benefit from the training that they receive and that they develop a number of skills through participation in peer help programmes. Varenhorst (1984) suggested that the impact of peer helping on the peer helpers themselves should be researched to explore the peer helpers' experiences during training, supervision and service delivery. Carr (1988) conducted research amongst a number of peer counselling programmes in the Greater Victoria region of Southern Vancouver Island to determine the degree to which programme goals have been reached. The peer counsellor trainees, who formed part of the research participants, were encouraged to use log books or diaries to record their feelings and experiences relating to their involvement in the programme. Carr (1988) furthermore suggested that the peer counsellors maintain portfolios of their achievements such as their school records, academic certificates and feedback from other parties such as teachers. It seemed, therefore, that these peer helpers were encouraged to use these tools with the specific aim of allowing the researcher to monitor the attainment of programme goals.

No references were therefore found, in the literature consulted for this study, on how peer helpers can monitor their development over the period of peer help involvement, by compiling career portfolios. This study is therefore aimed at highlighting how peer helpers develop their portfolios for this purpose.

### **EMERGING COMMON THEMES**

The following common themes emerged from the stories of the four participants:

### **Theme of initial difficulties with portfolio development**

As was explained previously, all four participants participating in this study experienced varying degrees of difficulties when the concept of portfolio development was first introduced. These difficulties ranged from not understanding the concept or the rationale of portfolio development to not understanding how to compile it as well as what they stood to gain from the process. Some felt that the process would demand a lot of work from them, which led to anxiety and self-doubt, while another questioned this new development in the programme.

Similar difficulties were reported amongst research participants in the study conducted by O'Mara et al. (2000) namely that their participants experienced difficulties such as confusion with regard to what portfolio development entailed and what it would require; uncertainty about where to start the process; and lack of motivation to compile the document. What is noteworthy, is that the participants in the study that O'Mara et al. (2000) conducted, were faculty members of the School of Nursing at McMaster University, Canada - clearly at a different academic level to the participants in this study. It appeared that the academics in the study that O'Mara et al. (2000) conducted, understood the concept of portfolios from the start in contrast to the participants in this study, who grappled with it. Both groups, however, experienced similar difficulties related to what the process entailed and how this tool should be compiled.

From the aforementioned it appears that, irrespective of the academic level of the individuals involved in the portfolio development process, initial difficulties, apprehension and confusion can arise. This is an important aspect that project leaders involved in initiating portfolio management processes should bear in mind.

### **Theme of taking charge of the process**

All four participants in this study responded differently to their initial difficulties with portfolio

development and managed to overcome them with varying degrees of success. The following actions facilitated their processes of taking charge:

Nandi and Bongi consulted other sources for help such as the brochure on portfolio development and the Internet to learn more about the process. This is in line with the viewpoint of King (2000, p. 157) who stated that the portfolio development process "... increases student reading, research, library, computer and Internet skills". By typing up the information that was available, the participants also developed their computer skills. This was reported as an advantage of the portfolio development process by King (2000).

Nandi and Bongi also took charge of their processes in a self-directed manner which linked with the viewpoint of Paulson et al. (cited in van Niekerk, 1998, p. 82) who stated that portfolios provided a platform that motivated students to develop the skills needed to become "... independent, self-directed learners". Boitumelo's actions, however, were not as self-directed as those of Nandi and Bongi, as she seemed to be more reliant on her project leader for directions. According to Paulson et al. (cited in van Niekerk, 1998), the portfolio development process provides a medium that facilitates the student's growth towards independence and self-directedness. Boitumelo's actions were, therefore, self-directed but not yet independent. The portfolio development process, according to Paulson et al., could therefore facilitate her growth towards the goal of independence. This highlights an interesting aspect for future research.

All four participants contacted their project leaders for support to a greater or lesser degree. The portfolio process therefore facilitated "collaborative teamwork" between the project leader and the peer helper as proposed by Baltimore et al. (1996, p. 115) and which was echoed by Carney et al. (1996). The instructions that some of the participants received from their project leaders also provided a feedback loop (Baltimore et al., 1996) which enabled the participants to continue with the process. This also linked with the viewpoint of Tracy et al. (2000, p. 245) who emphasised that the portfolio allows for students to receive "... constructive feedback".

Nandi, Bongi and to a lesser degree, Tebogo, determined the outline of their portfolios as suggested by Boes et al. (2001) and Mill (2001) by using the structure of the career portfolio as developed by Williams and Hall (2001). This was, however, not used by all the participants in this study which raises issues around the standardisation of the training in portfolio development across all the Unisa peer helper groups.

In contrast to the other participants, Tebogo halfheartedly took charge of the development of his portfolio as it was not a priority for him. He was caught between resisting the process and having to meet the requirement to remain in the programme. Moorcroft et al. (2000) conducted their research in an informal setting and found that some students did not take this process seriously as they felt that their portfolios would not be assessed by their "... classroom teacher" (p. 24). The fact that peer helping is a volunteer service at Unisa and students did not have to 'pass' the evaluation, raises the question whether this could have had an impact on Tebogo's motivation.

Tebogo's portfolio also created the impression that it was developed in a hasty, careless manner. The findings of O'Mara et al. (2000) confirmed this, namely that, due to procrastination, some participants in their research, delayed the portfolio development process, which resulted in a rushed product at the end.

From the aforementioned it is clear that all the participants did not take charge of the process to the same degree. This highlights the importance of scheduling an intervention with the peer helpers individually at an early stage of the portfolio development process, shortly after the concept has been introduced. The purpose of such an intervention would be to determine the level of acceptance of the process. Doolittle (1994) emphasised the importance of getting acceptance - thus the buy-in, from all stakeholders. It is the opinion of this researcher that this is particularly important to ensure that all peer helpers are on the same level with regard to their acceptance and understanding of the concept at an early stage. The same principle was also followed by Carr (1981) who held individual interviews with peer helper trainees after

approximately thirty hours of training had taken place. The aim was to ensure a student-centred approach within the peer counselling training programme. The portfolio development training process at Unisa should therefore be adapted accordingly.

### **Theme of positive versus negative attitudes towards portfolio development**

From the research it is evident that a range of emotions were initially evoked by the introduction of portfolio development. Some participants initially viewed the process as time consuming, which was also reported by both King (2000) and Moorcroft et al. (2000). Through a variety of self-directed actions which were discussed previously some of the participants' attitudes shifted towards viewing the process as positive. Another remained stuck in resisting the process and being negative towards it.

Collaboration with the project leaders seemed to have played a significant role in the facilitation of the shift in attitudes. The positive feedback received from the project leaders motivated and encouraged Nandi, Bongi and Boitumelo to continue with the process. This linked with the viewpoint of Doolittle (1994) namely that the portfolio allowed for the evaluation of the effectiveness of the interaction between facilitators and students. The project leaders also gave "constructive feedback" (Tracy et al., 2000, p. 245) to the participants, which in turn boosted their confidence and motivated them to continue with the development process. This highlights the significant role that the project leaders play in helping peer helpers adapt to the process.

The self-directed actions and feedback that they received from the project leaders facilitated the shift in Nandi and Bongi's attitudes and allowed them to embrace the process with enthusiasm, dedication and commitment. According to Tracy et al. (2000, p. 245) portfolio development results in a "... domino effect of improved student self-efficacy, persistence, and commitment". This was evident in the exemplary portfolios that Nandi and Bongi presented. Through a shift in attitudes, Nandi and Bongi started viewing the portfolio as a tool to not only

monitor their development as advocated by Baltimore et al. (1996), but also to provide evidence of their achievements as proposed by Arter and Spandel (cited in Grace, 1992).

Nandi, Bonggi and Boitumelo therefore started viewing portfolio development as a worthwhile process and it seemed to impact positively on their motivation to continue with the development of their portfolios. This is echoed by King (2000) who found it "... fulfilling to see how motivated students can be when they are given an opportunity to express their unique interests" (p. 159). Nandi was motivated to broaden her experiences to develop a range of new skills which her portfolio provided evidence of, while Bonggi's motivation was to provide evidence of her career related skills. Boitumelo, on the other hand, was motivated to actively monitor her usage of time which enabled her to develop her time management skills. Bonggi also felt that the portfolio contained the story of her life which linked with the comment made by one of the Swedes, who browsed through Nandi's portfolio. Wolf (cited in Baltimore et al., 1996, p. 114) stated that portfolios contain "biographies of works" - thus telling a story of the development and growth of the compiler of the portfolio.

Through the portfolio development process both Nandi and Boitumelo also realised that they were ultimately responsible for their own growth and development and had to take responsibility for their own learning. This linked with the viewpoint of Dewey (cited in Foster-Harrison, 1995) who emphasised that responsibility is learnt by allowing students to participate in their own learning processes.

Both Nandi and Bonggi also viewed their portfolios as critical to their career development. This linked with the viewpoint of Lester and Perry (1995), who advocated the use of portfolios to assess the career development of students.

In contrast to the other participants, Tebogo remained negative towards the process which was also found in the research conducted by O'Mara et al. (2000). Tebogo resented the manner in which the concept of portfolio development was introduced to his group. He felt that

the concept was thrown at him and that he had no option but to comply. Tebogo had been a peer helper for two years before portfolio development was introduced to the group that he belonged to. Although the manner in which portfolio development was introduced was not an issue for Nandi, who belonged to the same group, Tebogo's comment raised the issue around the ethical manner in which the introduction of a portfolio programme should take place. Carney et al. (1996, p. 126) cited the American Counseling Association's Code of Ethics of 1995, which stipulated that students must be informed in advance about the "... levels of competency expected, appraisal methods, and timing of evaluations". At the stage when the portfolio development process was introduced to the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer groups, aspects such as the level of competency and the method of evaluations were not yet clear and could therefore not be communicated. This could have confused Tebogo, increased his resistance to the concept and could have impacted negatively on his attitude. This highlights an important aspect that needs to be borne in mind by those project leaders planning to implement portfolio development in their programmes.

Arter et al. (1995) and Murphy and Smith (cited in Grace, 1992) emphasised that portfolios can be used to motivate students and to promote their involvement in their own learning processes. This did not apply to Tebogo. Although he shared a number of external motivations for wanting to develop his portfolio, Tebogo lacked the intrinsic motivation to do so. The lack of motivation in compiling a portfolio was a specific difficulty reported by O'Mara et al. (2000).

Tebogo's continued resistance and negativity is in contrast to the findings of King (2000) who stated that the process of developing a portfolio appeals to "... all levels of students with different abilities and learning styles" (p. 159). A possible reason for this difference could be that portfolios within the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme are compulsory for all peer helpers, while King (2000) offered portfolio development as an "... optional [italics added] authentic learning assignment" (p. 156) in her programme. Students who were not comfortable with such a process had other traditional options open to them.



As the process within the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme is compulsory, it becomes critical for project leaders to ensure that peer helpers understand and accept the importance of the process for their own career development. Doolittle (1994) emphasised this and stated that it is essential to communicate the importance of and the need for portfolios, as well as to get acceptance from the stakeholders for the development of this tool. Doolittle maintained that individuals will put effort into the development process, once the concept of portfolios has been accepted and its purpose has been understood.

The portfolio development process therefore evoked strong negative emotions with Tebogo similar to those reported in O'Mara et al. (2000). Gougeon (1989) urged trainers to monitor each peer helper trainee closely and to provide support should they notice that any issue related to training has caused intense feelings with the trainee. Tebogo's project leaders held individual interviews with him, but the focus was on Tebogo's own career development and how the portfolio linked with that. These interviews did not focus on Tebogo's portfolio and the contents thereof, which Tebogo needed practical support in. This highlights the importance of individual interviews with peer helpers to discuss not only the portfolio management process *per se*, but also what the contents should consist of to assess the individual peer helper's acceptance of the process. Determining the level of acceptance for portfolio development is therefore of particular importance for other project leaders planning to introduce portfolio development into their programmes.

### **Theme of reflection on goals and goal-directedness**

All four participants used their portfolios to reflect on either their goals or their goal-directed behavior to a greater or lesser degree.

As discussed previously Nandi and Bonggi used their portfolios in self-directed ways for on-going self-assessment and self-monitoring to determine their strengths and weaknesses as advocated by Baltimore et al. (1996). The viewpoint of Baltimore and his team is, however,

in contrast to the viewpoint of Engel (cited in Grace, 1992) who felt that the portfolio should focus on successes rather than failures. Grace (1992) cited Engel and reported on the use of portfolios with young children at an elementary school level, where the development of a caring and enduring relationship between the teacher and the child, was the focus. The structure of the career portfolio, which includes the elements of a developmental portfolio, is prescribed for the Unisa peer helpers - thus focussing on both strengths and weaknesses to determine gaps to be addressed. Nandi's and Bongji's actions, therefore, allowed them to set goals to develop specific areas in their lives. This is in line with the viewpoint of Wolf (cited in Baltimore et al., 1996) who indicated that such reflection could indicate to students and project leaders which other areas in their development needed attention.

Both Nandi and Bongji used their portfolios to reflect on their career goals. Nandi used her portfolio to reflect on her future career options, which she ranked in order of preference, while Bongji also used her portfolio as "... an organizational tool" as described by Lester and Perry (1995, p. 3) to provide evidence of her personal learning, reflection and activities related to her chosen career. This linked with the viewpoint of Schmid (cited in Tarnowski et al. (1998, p. 17) namely, that "[t]he portfolio also helps [a student to] take responsibility for shaping [a] future professional profile". Both Nandi and Bongji furthermore compiled their portfolios with the specific aim of using it to answer questions, list skills and provide evidence during job interviews as advocated by Boes et al. (2001) - thus becoming the "career negotiator" that Bailyn (cited in Lester & Perry, 1995, p. 3) referred to.

From the interview with Boitumelo it appeared that the portfolio management process helped her to become more goal-directed, although this was not a specific theme identified in her story. It seemed that the process of logging the time spent on peer help activities made her aware of how she used her time and highlighted her lack of time management skills. Boitumelo's awareness of time helped her to become more focussed, productive and goal directed - therefore telling a story of her growth over time (Arter et al., 1995) and her successes in this area of her life (Grace, 1992).

The use of the portfolio to reflect on goals and goal-directed behaviour linked with the viewpoint of Moorcroft et al. (2000, p. 20) who stated that portfolios, as authentic assessment tools, are both "... engaging, and educational". This was evident in the manner in which Nandi, Bongji and Boitumelo reflected on their goals and goal-directedness and what they learnt in the process.

As discussed previously, Tebogo's portfolio contained some reflections on goals, but these were written down in broad terms which lacked smaller, measurable steps of what he needed to do to ensure that he achieved his goals. As he was not committed to, and, engaged in the process as Moorcroft et al. (2000, p. 20) proposed, he could not monitor his progress towards reaching his goals.

### **Theme of reflection and experiential learning**

The project leaders of the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme view experiential learning as critical to the development of peer helpers. The concept of reflection on experiences was, therefore, introduced to the programme by adding an additional session on experiential reflection to the core training; by allowing for periods of reflection after certain training sessions, after each day of training, as well as at the end of the three day core training had been completed; by implementing the process of portfolio management to allow peer helpers to reflect on experiences; and by designing the Critical Reflection Sheet to facilitate and promote structured reflection. This sheet was adapted by SE Barnard and L Deyzel and is based on the Experiential Learning Cycle as developed by Kolb (1984). The ultimate aim of this sheet is to allow peer helpers to reflect on their experiences during training, supervision and service delivery, to determine what was learnt through these experiences and how this new knowledge would impact on their behaviour in future.

Foster-Harrison (1995) emphasised that reflection is critical for growth and development and that time for this should be built into peer help programmes themselves, as is the case with

the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme. Foster-Harrison (1995) furthermore emphasised that there should be a balance between "... the emphasis on role and reflection to ensure a sufficient amount of time for both to occur synergistically" (p. 97). This viewpoint is shared by a number of researchers, namely, Carr (1981); Letsebe (cited in Keller, 1999); and McIntyre et al. (1982). Henriksen (1991) used the Student Workbook by Gail Roberts (1988) to train her peer helpers and encouraged them to make personal notes and reflections in their workbooks as part of homework exercises. The use of portfolios to allow peer helpers to reflect on experiences to identify skills, as well as to compile their individual career portfolios through the process, is the unique contribution that this study has attempted.

From this research, it became apparent that reflection is the critical element of the portfolio development process which allowed some of the participants to monitor their development. The participants in this research, however, varied significantly in terms of the breadth of the experiences that they reflected on as well as the depth of their reflections.

Both Nandi and Bongi presented excellent standard portfolios which contained exemplary examples of reflections on experiences. Both Nandi and Bongi reflected holistically on past and present work and personal experiences with the aim of learning from them. Their reflections were data rich in terms of both the depth of the reflections and the breadth of the experiences that they reflected on. It was evident that both Nandi and Bongi had developed "... documenting and reflecting attitude[s]" as proposed by Steigerwald (cited in Boes, et al., 2001, p. 230). Nandi and Bongi's reflections also provided evidence of "developmental leaps [and] insights" (Baltimore et al., 1996, p. 114) that they had developed through reflection. What was noticeable about some of these reflections was that this was carried out in an ethical manner, in that the identity of individuals or companies was not disclosed - thus linking with the suggestions of Carney et al. (1996) with regard to the issue of confidentiality. It was therefore evident that both Nandi and Bongi clearly valued experiential learning and continued to "... make experience an integral part of [their] learning [processes]" (van Niekerk, 1998, p. 85). This linked with the viewpoint of Murphy and Smith (cited in Grace, 1992) who stated that

learning can be promoted through reflection and self-assessment activities during the portfolio development process. As both Nandi and Bongi are students in the field of Psychology, it raises the question whether there is a link between the ability and the willingness to reflect on experiences and the field of study that a peer helper has chosen. This highlights an important aspect for future research.

Bongi's commitment towards on-going reflection and her enthusiasm towards the portfolio development process was also evident in the creative manner in which she displayed her reflections on coloured paper and the clever use of photographs to illustrate her involvement in projects. This linked with the opinion of King (2000) who stated that different mediums can be used to illustrate the reflections.

Nandi and Bongi also reflected on their participation in Unisa Open Days, to determine what they had learnt from this and what they would be doing differently in future. Their reflections briefly described the levels of their responsibility for the project, as well as what they had learnt from these experiences. This linked with the viewpoint of King (2000, p. 154), who stated that portfolios provide "... concrete examples of what a person is capable of doing". Evans (cited in Romaniuk & Snart, 2000) echoed this and emphasised that knowledge of what a person is capable of, leads to a "... sense of achievement" (p. 29) and motivates a student to continue with their learning process. Through the process of reflection Nandi and Bongi became aware of their strengths and learnt about a number of skills that they had developed, which in turn motivated them to continue with the process of reflection.

What was also apparent in the interview with Bongi was the growth in her ability to reflect in a structured manner. Bongi's initial reflections on experiences consisted of lengthy, unstructured paragraphs. The Critical Reflection Sheet (see Appendix D), however, allowed her to reflect in essence on what she felt she had learnt and would do differently in similar situations. King (2000) echoed this and proposed that reflections should consist of summaries, and not lengthy paragraphs, stating the importance of the experience and the

meaning which it has for the student.

Bongi's reflections also allowed her to highlight her developmental needs. Through a reflection in her portfolio, Bongi emphasized additional training needs that she had - linking with the viewpoint of Gougeon (1989), namely, that trainers should closely monitor the experiences of the trainees. The portfolio process therefore provided a feedback loop which was facilitated through the reflection process in the portfolio and not by means of an evaluation process as Altmann et al. (1986) proposed. Bongi's need for additional training was then accommodated, which linked with Carr (1981, p. 6) who advocated "... a student-centered" rather than "... an agenda-centered" approach, as well as with Rapmund (2000), who emphasised the necessity of freedom within structure. This incident highlighted the manner in which reflection assisted the project leader to become aware of what Bongi was experiencing. It is therefore imperative that peer helpers accept the process of portfolio development and the accompanying reflection on experiences, as this becomes the vehicle for reciprocal feedback for both parties.

From the reflections that Boitumelo and Tebogo shared it was evident that they had not mastered this critical element of the portfolio and that the process of reflection on experiences did not become an "automatic activity" as proposed by van Niekerk (1998, p. 91). Boitumelo shared two examples indicating her attempt at structured reflection - thus indicating a lack of reflection on a breadth of experiences. These reflections were, furthermore, data poor in terms of the depth of the reflections. It was evident that she had not mastered the skill of reflection as she opted to reflect on a number of experiences at the same time, rather than on single experiences. This prevented her from identifying what she had learnt and also to link this new knowledge to a concrete experience. The portfolio process, however, allowed Boitumelo to monitor her own progress (King, 2000) with regard to her time management skills - thus developing insight into her functioning. According to Engel (cited in Grace, 1992, p.1) portfolios consist of "... work samples that meet the need for accountability while recognizing and supporting individual progress". Boitumelo was required by her project leader to log the

hours involved in peer help activities. Her portfolio not only provided this information - thus linking with accountability, but also described how this process has had a positive effect on her personal and work life.

Tebogo, on the other hand, resisted the process of reflection and felt threatened by it. O'Mara et al. (2000) cautioned that reflection carried out during the portfolio process can evoke strong emotions. This viewpoint is shared by Atkins and Murphy (cited in O'Mara et al., 2000) who emphasised that the portfolio process and reflection can cause uneasiness as individuals can feel anxious about exposing themselves in their written reflections. This is an important aspect that project leaders who intend implementing portfolio management to their programmes should bear in mind. Tebogo was also the only male participant in this research and clearly struggled with reflection on experiences. This raises the question whether gender plays any role in the ability and willingness of an individual to reflect on experiences - thus highlighting another topic for future research.

Although Lester and Perry (1995, p. 1) were of the opinion that portfolios allowed students "... to become responsible partners in documenting their learning" Boitumelo did not succeed in this, while Tebogo resisted the process from the start. Baltimore et al. (1996, p. 116) also viewed the portfolio as a tool to identify problem areas such as "incompetency and impairment". The portfolios of both Boitumelo and Tebogo clearly indicated what the difficulties were that they were experiencing. Although Boitumelo viewed the process as worthwhile, she needed more training to help her master the skills of reflection. Tebogo, on the other hand, not only needed support relating to his reflection on experiences, but also in the overall management of his portfolio development process.

Lankard (1996) emphasised the importance of the development of self-knowledge and stated that valuable insights relating to career development can be developed through active reflections. Lankard (1996) also felt that time for such activities should be encouraged, which linked to the developments that have taken place within the Unisa programme. The

development of self-knowledge or the establishment of identity, is of primary importance to employees in the current workplace, according to Romaniuk and Snart (2000). Burke and VanKleef (cited in Romaniuk & Snart, 2000, p. 32) also stated that holistic reflections on learning allow the student to develop an "... integrated identity" which in turn reinforces the development of confidence and motivates the student for continuing learning. Altmann et al. (1986) supported this and stated that self-knowledge can be developed through reflection on personal strengths and weaknesses. Nandi and Bongi therefore increased their self-knowledge by means of broad, holistic, in-depth reflections on a variety of personal and work related experiences which included the self-assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. Through reflection Bongi also learnt that she had the skills to motivate and encourage others, while Boitumelo became aware of the fact that she liked helping others. This linked with the viewpoint of Brendtro, Brokenleg and van Bockern (cited in Foster-Harrison, 1995) who stated that students develop a sense of their own value once they become of value to others.

Lankard (1996, p 3) summarised this as follows:

Whether through experiential, on-the-job, classroom, or community/service learning, students can enhance their awareness of themselves for their career development by continually summarizing and reflecting upon what they are learning as they continue their progression through school and work.

From the aforementioned it is clear that the four participants in this study managed their reflection processes to varying degrees of success. It was also evident that not all the participants were equally skilled at reflecting on experiences, which highlights additional training needs within the Unisa training programme. It also seems that the Critical Reflection Sheet, which had not been implemented in all the regions at the time that this study was conducted, could become a critical tool to monitor the level of the skill of reflection of an individual peer helper - thus facilitating feedback to the project leader in terms of additional support and training needs.



### **Theme of monitoring of skills development and growth**

As discussed previously a number of researchers have confirmed that peer helpers do develop skills through participation in peer help programmes and that positive changes do occur as a result of training, supervision and service delivery. A comprehensive list of the researchers and the reported skills that peer helpers have developed appear in Chapter 3. This study, therefore, attempted to highlight some of these changes that the participants became aware of as they used their portfolios to monitor their development.

It was evident in the active manner in which both Nandi and Bonggi developed their portfolios, that they used this tool to reflect on experiences, which in turn, allowed them to identify the skills that they had developed. Foster-Harrison (1995, p. 98) emphasised the importance of allowing peer helpers to monitor their skills development, as she felt that this was an important condition for continued growth. Through reflection on experiences both Nandi and Bonggi listed a number of skills in their portfolios - thus providing proof that they had become “holder[s] and developer[s] of skills” as proposed by Cawsey et al. (1995, p. 43). Both Nandi and Bonggi’s portfolios therefore contained comprehensive lists of the skills that they had developed (see Chapters 7, 8 and 11) and provided concrete evidence for the claims that they made as suggested by Baltimore et al. (1996) and Williams and Hall (2001). This provided “... a complex and comprehensive view of [their] performance in context” (Paulson et al., cited in van Niekerk, 1998, p. 82). The skills that Nandi and Bonggi developed were both personal and job-related skills as were found in the study by Puchkoff and Font-Padron (1990). Nandi and Bonggi therefore became aware of how their skills base had increased - thus linking with the viewpoint of Tracy et al. (2000, p. 245), namely, that the portfolio allows for “... a sense of accomplishment, and confidence from cumulative learning success”.

Nandi and Bonggi also reflected in-depth on a broad range of their experiences with the specific aim of identifying the skills that they had developed. They reflected on their

experiences during Unisa Open Days to determine the skills that they had developed through this community service. This was in line with the viewpoint of Bowen et al. (1985) who emphasised that such activities not only increased an institution's reach into the community, but also provided the peer helpers with a greater range of experiences to enable them to develop new skills.

Boitumelo's portfolio did not contain a specific section dealing with skills development. Although this was not part of the structure of the portfolio that was suggested in her region, her project leader did stipulate that the portfolio should contain anything that indicated self-development. As Boitumelo experienced difficulties in reflecting in a structured manner she did not develop this critical element of the portfolio as proposed by Boes et al. (2001); Boud et al. (cited in O'Mara et al., 2000) and van Niekerk (1998). This made it difficult for her to identify her skills and provide evidence of how and where these skills were developed as Williams and Hall (2001) advocated.

During the interview with Tebogo he mentioned that he had grown over the last few years of being a peer helper and that he had developed a number of skills. Tebogo's portfolio contained only two attempts at reflection which described his peer help involvement in broad terms and listed some of the skills that he felt he had developed. These 'reflections', however, lacked evidence of how and where he developed these skills. As with Boitumelo, Tebogo did not reflect in-depth, and this resulted in him not monitoring his development in such a way that he could provide concrete evidence of his skills development as suggested by Williams and Hall (2001). His portfolio, therefore, did not attest to him being a "holder and developer of skills" as proposed by Cawsey et al. (1995).

Apart from their development of skills, Nandi, Bongi and Boitumelo indicated that the experience of peer helping had contributed to their growth. Through reflection both Nandi and Bongi developed insight into work related problems that they were experiencing. For Nandi this related to a problematic relationship with a fellow peer helper, while Bongi used the skill

of reflection to process a negative counselling relationship with a client. Nandi's reflections helped her to assess her role in this situation and through introspection, learnt about her interpersonal functioning. She learnt that she had kept quiet about the problem for too long and had definite perceptions about this person that were not to her benefit. According to Baltimore et al. (1996, p. 114) the portfolio can "... provide interesting and important documentation for clinical growth and development". This was evident in the manner in which the portfolio process facilitated Nandi's reflection on this experience. Bongi's reflection on her negative counselling experience, on the other hand, enabled her to explore her own behaviour and the effect this had on the client - thus becoming aware of a "cause and effect" influence in the relationship (Myrick & Erney, cited in Altmann et al., 1986, p. 87). This highlighted a critical area of growth for Bongi (Baltimore et al., 1996, p. 115).

As part of her portfolio development process, Boitumelo reflected on her peer help experiences. Her first reflection was in her narrative essay. Although this reflection lacked structure it helped Boitumelo to become aware of her functioning and learn new things about herself. On a personal level, Boitumelo shared that there has been growth in her confidence, as she initially found it difficult to speak to other students. Rest (cited in Foster-Harrison, 1995) is of the opinion that growth can only take place if a student has reflected carefully on experiences over a period of 6 - 12 months. As Boitumelo's portfolio only contained two reflections, this raises the question whether such growth in confidence did indeed develop, or whether Boitumelo had merely become aware of the manner in which she interacted with others as described by Saunders (cited in Henriksen, 1991). Saunders takes the stance that growth in self-esteem occurs simultaneously with the development of other skills and an increase in confidence over a longer period of time. He found in his research that self-awareness increased in the short term after training, and that growth in self-esteem took place over a longer period of time. This highlights a significant issue for future research.

Both Nandi and Bongi's portfolios also contained the most recent copies of their narrative essays and their CV's. These documents were updated regularly, at least once a year before

the peer helper evaluations - thus overwriting the previous information. Valuable details about incremental growth and development over time, as advocated by Baltimore et al. (1996) and Moorcroft et al. (2000), was therefore lost. Grace (1992) also advocated the use of portfolios to compare current achievements with earlier performances. The portfolios of all four participants furthermore did not indicate the incremental development of individual skills as proposed by Moorcroft et al. (2000), neither did the portfolios indicate the incremental development of counselling skills, although a Likert-type self-assessment scale had been developed for this purpose. This highlights an important aspect that needs to be adapted in the Unisa training programme - thus linking with the viewpoint of Baltimore et al. (1996, p. 114), who stated that the information that is gained by means of portfolios, can be used in "... redesigning the curriculum".

### **Theme of using the portfolio as a resource file**

Although all four research participants used their portfolios, to a greater or lesser degree, as resource files, individual differences were apparent. Nandi's portfolio did not only contain information that she could use personally, but also additional information that she could use to assist other students when necessary. Such information related to the Council of Counsellors in South Africa and articles on career and portfolio development. Her portfolio, therefore, could be used as a resource by herself as proposed by Keller (1999).

Bongi, on the other hand, compiled both a working portfolio, which she used as a resource file and document centre and a presentation portfolio, which she planned to use to sell her abilities and experiences during job interviews as suggested by Boes et al. (2001) and Williams and Hall (2001). The development of two portfolios was in line with the approach suggested by Campbell et al. (cited in James and Greenwalt, 2001). The development of both a working and a presentation portfolio was not followed by the other participants, which raises the issue around standardisation across regional groups again. Bongji's presentation portfolio was compiled by carefully selecting information to provide evidence of her experience and

skills (Arter et al., 1995; Doolittle, 1994). This was done in such a manner that the presentation portfolio provided a brief and powerful overview of her skills and experiences as proposed by Boes et al. (2001).

Boitumelo, on the other hand, used her portfolio to collate and file documents that were of importance to her and that she felt she could use to refer to when needed. These items however lacked any reflection on what meaning Boitumelo attached to them, as proposed by King (2000). From the interview with Tebogo, it appeared that he used his portfolio as a resource file to collate some of the items that were required from him, as well as to list the skills that he felt he had developed.

### **THE RESEARCHER'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PARTICIPANTS**

The interview allowed the researcher to establish a relationship with the participants, as posed by Rapmund (1996) in her study, that was different from what they had been accustomed to. During the interview the participants were given the opportunity to openly share their successes and difficulties with managing the process as well as with their development of their portfolios. The researcher entered the context with care and sensitivity (Terre Blance & Kelly, 1999) and special attention was given to the social part of the interview to establish rapport. The personal interest of the researcher in listening to the participants' stories and the empathic manner in which she related to the participants, allowed them to openly share their experiences with portfolio development. This allowed the researcher to understand the participants' behaviour within their specific contexts (Terre Blance & Kelly, 1999). A close relationship was formed with each participant and was based on respect. This respect did not only include a basic respect for the individual participant, but also for the portfolio and the accompanying artifacts that were shared. The researcher allowed the participants to talk her through their portfolios by paging through the document themselves. This allowed for the participants to emphasise specific items and to elaborate on the meaning which they had for them. The relationship between the researcher and some of the individual participants also

allowed for support to be provided. For Nandi this focussed on allowing her to debrief in terms of her selection for a post graduate course, while the interview with Tebogo allowed him to be talked through the Experiential Learning Cycle in terms of the development of his photographic skills. The participants were also empowered by their participation in this research. For Nandi, this focussed on how she could use her portfolio to explain to another person, in this case the researcher, how she had grown and developed, while the interviews with Bongi and Boitumelo made them aware of other aspects that they could reflect on. The interview with Tebogo, on the other hand, allowed him to make the commitment to arrange for personal sessions to assist him with the development of his portfolio. The interest of the researcher and the active manner in which she listened, observed and asked questions allowed for a deeper understanding of the inner experiences of each participant. This allowed for, not only support to be provided where necessary, but also for practical suggestions to be made in terms of the portfolio development processes of each participant.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although a number of themes emerged from the stories of the participants, these themes were very similar. The four participants, however, varied in terms of the manner in which they managed the process of portfolio development related to the identified themes.

Lester and Perry (1995) were of the opinion that portfolios allowed students "... to become responsible partners in documenting their learning" (p. 1). It was evident from the exemplary portfolios that Nandi and Bongi presented, that they indeed did become such "responsible partners" who managed the process of developing their portfolios in creative and self-directed ways to document their learning. Boitumelo viewed the process of portfolio development as worthwhile and this enabled her to develop her time management skills - thus the responsible partner as Lester and Perry proposed, but relating more to this area of her life. Her ability to reflect in-depth should therefore be developed to allow for the continued exploration of experiences and identification of skills. Tebogo, on the other hand, resisted the process of

developing his portfolio and was threatened by the process of reflecting on experiences as reported by O'Mara et al. (2000); and Atkins and Murphy (cited in O'Mara et al., 2000). He therefore did not master this critical part of learning as emphasised by van Niekerk (1998), which resulted in him not monitoring his skills development. Tebogo therefore requires intensive help to overcome his resistance and support to help him reflect in a structured manner.

The research process therefore managed to highlight not only the similarities, but also the individual differences that existed amongst the four participants. The study furthermore allowed the researcher to gain an overview of the portfolios of all four participants, both in terms of how each participant managed the process of developing his/her portfolio, as well as the standard of the final product that was presented (Reeves, 2000).

Burke, Fogarty and Belgrad (cited in King, 2000) quoted an unidentified educator who compared the portfolio to the palette of an artist. King (2000, p. 155) described this analogy as follows: "... [t]he portfolio pulls all the loose ends together to paint a picture of the whole student - not just an isolated or fragmented picture". The study therefore managed to show how Nandi and Bongji both managed their portfolio development processes to closely monitor their development. Their portfolios therefore provided a "... complex and comprehensive" overview of their achievements as proposed by Paulson et al. (cited in van Niekerk, 1998, p. 82). Boitumelo, however, managed to use her portfolio to provide evidence of her growth related to the development of her time management skills while Tebogo, on the other hand, did not provide evidence of how and where he had developed skills, what personal growth had taken place nor how he used his portfolio to monitor his development.

Cole (cited in Carr et al., 1989, p. 26) stated that peer helping is not the "... panacea for all the ills of the school". Neither is portfolio development the remedy for all the concerns relating to the monitoring of peer helpers. As an authentic assessment tool, the portfolio is "... student-centred, engaging and educational", as described by Moorcroft et al. (2000, p. 20). The

process allowed the participants to provide evidence of how they have individually benefited from the training, supervision and service delivery (student-centredness). It provided information on how they have become involved in the process - thus indicating the level of commitment and motivation of each compiler (engagement). It furthermore provided evidence to a greater or lesser degree of what each compiler has learnt through the process (educational).

The themes that have been identified may therefore be valuable to those project leaders planning to implement portfolio development processes in their programmes. It, however, needs to be borne in mind that these themes are linked, in a special way, to each of the stories narrated in this study.