

A Helpful Guide to Developing your Portfolio Learning

Introduction

There are many steps to developing the portfolio. By the time you are working on the actual statements that demonstrate your learning, you should have completed your narrative autobiographical essay, perhaps the critical incident piece (it's optional). You should have compiled your resume and have begun thinking about where your PLAR learning will fit into your program. These pages of information are designed to help you understand the thought-process involved in constructing your learning statements.

Portfolio Learning

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

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

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

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

We will help you through this process.

Developing your Learning Statements

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

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

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

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

See the list in Appendix A, attached to this document.

See Appendix B for an example of the taxonomy, applied.

Writing your Learning Statements

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

Step 1: Thinking about your learning.

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

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

Decision-making actions for Step 1

Using the example above:

- It's possible to use the report you wrote as material for several types of learning, as shown. Accordingly, in your portfolio, you can document that report, or evidence of it, as many times and for as many learning statements as you need to. However, if you write a learning statement that reflects the knowledge "How to convince an audience," you should only present that learning statement ONCE in response to one criterion.
- Therefore, carefully choose the criterion that will make the best use of that particular learning.

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

We are using the example of "critical thinking" from a list of program criteria. The criteria are reproduced below. (The whole breadth of the chart could not be contained here. Criteria 0-3 have been omitted from the left hand side of the grid and criteria 9 and 10 have been omitted on the right hand side. The example below focuses on criteria 7 and 8.)

	3	4	5	6	7	8
Critical thinking, problem solving, decision-making	Demonstrates a grasp of the tools, mechanisms, and processes of critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making		Analyzes situations with some consistency and demonstrates growing confidence in applying thinking and decision-making tools			Exhibits ability to recognize dilemmas, ambiguity, and a range of problems; proposes a variety of solutions

Decision-making actions for Step 2

You are examining the possibilities of targeting your learning in the area of critical thinking. You ask yourself:

- Which of these levels of accomplishment have I achieved?
- Can I write to the highest level of accomplishment (9/10)?

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

The chart below shows one criterion (critical thinking) that has been selected. You will make your selections based on your opinion of the learning that you have obtained experientially in the area of critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making. An example is given of a learning statement that addresses the criteria.

Critical thinking, problem solving, decision making

Criteria from grid	Exhibits ability to recognize dilemmas, ambiguity, and a range of problems; proposes a variety of solutions
Your learning statements (there could be several to address the same criterion)	Design a report format that permits the expression of several different scenarios to allow transparent decision-making

Learning Statement Hints

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

1. Start each sentence with a verb

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

your learning.

2. Be the prime mover

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

3. Address the what, how, why

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

4. State societal benefits, when relevant

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

Appendix A - Bloom's Taxonomy (list of verbs to use in your learning statements)

How this works

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

LEVEL 1: Knowledge

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

Level 1 Verbs

know, define, memorize, repeat, list, recall, name, relate

LEVEL 2: Comprehension

- Translation, interpretation, extrapolation

Level 2 Verbs

restate, discuss, describe, explain, express, identify, locate, recognize, report, review

LEVEL 3: Application

Level 3 Verbs

apply, employ, illustrate, demonstrate, use, translate, practice, operate, schedule, sketch

LEVEL 4: Analysis

- Analysis of elements, relationships, and organizational principles

Level 4 Verbs

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

LEVEL 5: Synthesis

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

Level 5 Verbs

compose, plan, propose, design, formulate, arrange, assemble, collect, construct, create, set up, manage, prepare

LEVEL 6: Evaluation

- judgments of internal evidence and external criteria

Level 6 Verbs

judge, appraise, evaluate, rate, compare, value, revise, score, select, choose, assess, estimate, measure

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

Appendix B - Bloom's Taxonomy - Example of Application

Program outcome: Problem Solving

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

