

Professional Portfolios for Student Teachers

By **Andrea M. Guillaume & Hallie Kay Yopp**

Because teaching is a complex, contextually-bound activity, it is best captured by assessment forms that provide multiple sources of data and that capture the richness of the teaching act (Newman & Archbald, 1992; Shulman, 1987; Wolf, 1991a). Portfolios, as “purposeful, collaborative, self-reflective collections of work” (McRobbie, 1992, p. 1), are one vehicle used to provide a more complete, situated view of teachers’ skills, knowledge, and commitments. Portfolios allow the audience to gain insight into the teachers’ growth over time and in a variety of contexts. This article describes how portfolios enrich teaching and learning for elementary credential students in one setting, at California State University, Fullerton.

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The Context for Teaching Portfolios

In addition to providing for the development of pedagogical skills, the Professional Development School (PDS) at California State University, Fullerton, aims to induct prospective elementary teachers into the profession of education systematically and throughout the entire length of their program. Students in this program are asked to take part in professional activities and to reflect on their teaching and

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learning (see Yopp, Guillaume, & Savage, 1993-94, for a description of the PDS model). Activities that may distinguish this program from others include peer coaching exercises and other collaborative assignments, elementary site-based seminars, and expectations of professional involvement. Thus, the development of portfolios is included as an assignment to aid students in their ability to critically reflect upon their own work. Teaching portfolios are consistent with the larger PDS goal of developing self-analytical teachers who are vitally interested in directing their own growth as educators. Any teacher educator who holds this same goal may find teaching portfolios a worthwhile assignment, regardless of programmatic setting.

Functions of the Teaching Portfolios

Portfolios are used across many populations and for many purposes (*e.g.*, Belanoff & Dickson, 1991; Wolf, 1991b). Even within our program, teaching portfolios serve a number of functions. They allow students to tell the stories of their growth, they provide an avenue for reflection, they prepare student teachers for their future responsibilities, and they allow faculty to assess their own progress.

Stories of Growth

The stories teachers tell capture the richness of their experiences and the complexity of their understandings of teaching (Carter, 1993), and portfolios provide elementary credential students with an opportunity to tell the story of their development as teachers. Because students have some freedom to select what to include in their portfolios and construct them according to their own personal preferences and understandings, the finished portfolios tell the best stories from each author's voice. Each portfolio reflects its author's outlook and personal style. Cathy's direct approach and her sense of humor are apparent as she relates the tale of an early lesson:

This lesson was a complete flop! I included it in my portfolio because it really showed me how important it is to have a good objective. I was not really clear throughout my whole lesson about what exactly it was that I was trying to get across to the students...I also could tell it was a failure when I started sweating profusely in the middle of the lesson for no apparent reason! Even though this lesson was not very successful, I did learn the real importance of having a clear cut objective.

Cathy's perspective can be contrasted with Jolie's somewhat gentler, more contemplative one as she writes about a similar early learning experience:

This lesson is the first I ever taught my class. In fact, it was the first experience I had being in front of my class. This lesson shows my personal growth as a teacher in several ways. First, I wrote the lesson before we had learned about the structure of lesson plans. I have seen my growth in my ability to write objectives and plans.

Secondly, I was not focused on one objective in this lesson. I have since been able to narrow my lessons to specific objectives. Finally, although this cannot be measured, my comfort level has increased dramatically since this lesson. Being my first time with the students ever, I had the normal nerves that made me talk fast and forget to say important things. It's funny to think how much I have learned since this lesson. One important thing I learned here is to not be so hard on myself...Kids are so understanding and flexible that it doesn't really matter if I have **one** weak lesson. Thank goodness.

The accumulation of entries like these trace the personal histories of student teacher authors, and the stories provide texture to experience so that individual meanings and perspectives resound.

Reflection

Portfolios allow students the opportunity to reflect on their assignments and teaching at a number of levels. On one level, students analyze individual course assignments and lessons. These analyses provide an opportunity for students to appreciate the gains they make. As Peggy notes:

This [case study of an elementary child's reading abilities] was an incredible learning experience for me. I was always worried about how I would be able to assess where a child was in his or her stage of reading, along with what kind of progress that child made throughout the year. This case study gave me some of the answers that I was looking for. I now have a starting point, somewhere to begin in my challenge to help children...It also gives me much more confidence in my decisions as a teacher because I know that I have the capabilities to assess students' abilities using a consistent test.

Students also take the opportunity to rethink troubling lessons in their portfolios, as does Mary:

The math lesson I taught in [the methods] class showed me many things about teaching. The first was that I had a tendency to move through the lesson much too fast...I included far too many examples of what I was teaching. In retrospect, I could see that I needed to focus my lesson much more and concentrate on a few examples rather than rushing through a lot of examples. Later, when I began to teach math lessons to my own [student teaching] class, I never forgot this experience and remembered to take my time and check for understanding along the way.

On another level, portfolios aid students in examining their experiences as whole. In the crush of a demanding program, credential students may view individual course assignments and teaching experiences as encapsulated and separate. By examining those phenomena and gathering them into a portfolio, students connect experiences and construct a cohesive structure. In the unsolicited rationale he provides for his portfolio, Jose notes:

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[This portfolio serves] as a gauge of my professional development as an educator. Before I created this portfolio, it was difficult for me to assess how much I developed over the course of this past semester. However, as I began to develop the portfolio and pull out old lessons that I had taught to my students and assess those lessons, I clearly began to notice positive gains in my professional development. This portfolio provided me with a unique opportunity to self-evaluate my growth and to make improvements wherever necessary.

This broader reflection aids students in extracting meaning from experience, a mechanism to propel development.

Preparation for Future Responsibilities

Two additional purposes are more directly tied to the working world of elementary education. Because student teachers are expected to use portfolio assessment in their future classrooms, completing portfolios to document their professional education provides valuable experiences for the students. Having constructed a record of their own learning, student teachers may be more aware of the scope of the process, of potential trouble spots, and of the rewards that accompany portfolio development. Thus, student teachers will better serve as coaches for their own learners who seek to trace their progress through portfolios.

Student teachers frequently modify their completed portfolios to take with them to job interviews. These portfolios allow them to exercise control of portions of the interview as students provide visual evidence of their best lessons, their approach to reading instruction, or their strategies for classroom management. Informal reports from previous student teachers indicate that many administrators are impressed by the initiative displayed by student teachers' efforts to compose portfolios and that interviewers welcome the portfolios as vehicles to encourage professional discourse during interviews. Angelo Collins (1990), through the Teacher Assessment Project at Stanford, reports similar reactions from administrators.

Faculty Assessment

In addition to the many purposes portfolios serve for student teachers, they serve university faculty as well. The act of studying students' portfolios allows faculty the valuable opportunity to assess our program and instruction. Although each portfolio tells an impressive story, a whole set of them provides us with valuable insights into the kinds of experiences we are offering to our students. An example will demonstrate one such learning opportunity for us.

One of our central assignments is the demonstration lesson cycle. Student teachers observe a site teacher lead a lesson with elementary students that illustrates some strategy or topic from a methods course. They then teach a similar lesson in the demonstration classroom as their peers observe. This assignment is typically very well received by students. In her portfolio, Liz reflects the majority opinion:

The demonstration lessons were one of the most effective parts of this semester's program. Not only was I able to see the theories discussed in class carried out by professional teachers in a class with real students, but I was allowed to teach two lessons with a fellow student, see five other lessons presented by student teams, and participate in post discussion. In general these lessons gave me courage to try other methods, and warned me of the problems that can arise and ways to deal with them.

However, a few students analyzed the demonstration lesson cycle in their portfolios in more guarded terms. Cassandra notes:

I missed out on really judging the effectiveness of the lesson by not being able to achieve a sense of closure or finality with the class. The situation was somewhat artificial, since the behavior and responses were geared to a one-time session with me, the teacher.

Through her well-reasoned perspective, Cassandra presents an opportunity for faculty to reconsider the assignment and modify it to better mirror classroom circumstance. Thus, student teachers' reflections provide us with valuable information as we ponder program revisions and changes in the assignments we make in our methods courses. Portfolios, then, serve the function of more closely linking instruction and assessment (Gomez, Graue, & Bloch, 1991).

Further, students' portfolios allow us to glimpse our progress in addressing our department's mission or theme of preparing humane, informed decision makers who are life-long learners, reflective practitioners, and change agents. Although progress toward such lofty goals is often difficult to assess, portfolios provide evidence of the kind necessary to examine our efforts toward this end. Student teachers' pedagogical knowledge base, their professional involvement, and their philosophies of education can be traced in their entries. As Brad considers his position on discipline in his portfolio, for example, his humane approach shines through:

The most important thing I learned from writing a position paper on discipline is that my plan should be designed to preserve the dignity of the student and must be personalized without being unfair. When teaching, I try to think about how my actions affect the children and not if they will help me get control of the class.

Because of these numerous purposes served by student teachers' portfolios, we find that the requisite time investment has a large yield. How do students develop their portfolios?

The Process of Constructing Portfolios

The literature provides clear direction for teachers wishing to begin portfolio development. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards has identified five key propositions that crystallize the domains of knowledge and practice in

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teaching; these propositions are:

- (a) Teachers are committed to students and their learning;
- (b) teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students;
- (c) teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning;
- (d) teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience; and
- (e) teachers are members of learning communities. (Haertel, 1991, p. 11)

Several types of evidence that seem to parallel these propositions have been proposed. Seldin (1991) suggests that teachers include three types of evidence: materials from oneself including self-evaluations and reflective statements, materials from others including outside observations and evidence of professional activity, and the products of good teaching including student work samples. Bird (1990) offers the five areas of teaching, preparation, evaluation, interaction with other educators, and interaction parents and community members. Wolf (1991b) suggests that teachers provide evidence of the key areas of planning, teaching, evaluation, and professional activity. These are the areas evident in our student teachers' portfolios.

On the first day of the year's instruction, we explain the assignment using this set of written instructions:

Over the course of this year, you will construct a portfolio that traces your development as a professional educator. This portfolio will help you to analyze your growth, and it will allow your instructors to view your progress holistically...Include all required assignments from your methods and foundations courses and your choice of additional items. Suggestions for additional items include lesson plans (with your evaluations) that represent some significant strength or areas of growth for you, evidence of professional involvement, and samples of children's work...This portfolio should show your expertise and growth as a teacher, so compose a cover sheet to accompany each entry that explains: a) What this piece shows about your learning or growth as a teacher, and b) What the piece says to others about you as a teacher.

In discussing the assignment, we show sample portfolios, including ones from past student teachers and sometimes those from faculty. In fact, although faculty portfolios are shown for the purpose of providing an example, past students have remarked that leafing through an instructor's portfolio is a useful way to understand her instruction and become acquainted with her as a person. Having viewed samples and studied written instructions, student teachers collect materials and begin analyzing them over the course of the semester.

Students typically include, in addition to the short list of required assignments, self-selected lesson plans and master teacher or supervisor evaluations of those plans for their best lessons. Some students choose to include their "worst" lessons

and give the most illuminating descriptions of their struggles in learning to teach; the portfolio allows students to crystallize and make public their knowledge of the painful experiences that most of us encounter in growing as teachers.

In addition to lesson plans and evaluations that document their teaching, students also include other artifacts like photographs of themselves working with their diverse groups and of their favorite bulletin boards, learning centers, or culminating activities. They additionally include children's work samples, "love letters," and evidence of professional involvement beyond classroom teaching like volunteer work at local educational events. Each of these entries is accompanied by a cover sheet, and we have found, as has Wolf (1991a), that:

Taken together, classroom artifacts, framed by the teacher's explanations and reflections, [provide] an authentic and multitextured view of the actual teaching that [takes] place, as well as some insight into the thinking behind the teaching (p. 132).

Students collect their entries and reflections into three-ring binders and devise some organizational scheme to make review easier for the reader. We encourage students to personalize their portfolios, and many do so by adding a statement of purpose or a reflective statement that addresses their growth and changing perspectives for the entire year or semester.

What We Do With Portfolios

These portfolios are collected twice a year. University supervisors collect the portfolios during semesters' end conferences, and the portfolios can be used during those conferences to reflect on growth and set goals for the coming semester or year. Then all block faculty circulate the portfolios and read them. This allows us a good opportunity to know students beyond the confines of our own university classrooms—and according to students' self-selected experiences. It also allows us as faculty to view students' learning in other courses in the program, providing an opportunity to develop cohesion between courses and experiences.

Students' portfolios are returned shortly after they are submitted at the year's end to accompany students on their job interviews.

Future Directions for Our Portfolios

As faculty, we have experienced many benefits from having student teachers compose professional portfolios. However, as our program develops, so will our use of the portfolios. Two goals are most prominent.

First, portfolio development offers the greatest opportunity for learning when it is a collaborative effort. Currently our students develop their portfolios outside of instructional time and as a solitary activity. By providing structured time for students to work with mentors from the university and/or school sites, students

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would use portfolios to better instructional advantage. Preparation would occur under guidance, and portfolios could be used more explicitly to steer growth in learning about excellence in teaching (McRobbie, 1992).

Second, student teachers' learning about teaching could also be enhanced through sharing of the professional portfolios. We faculty can devise opportunities for students to begin to critically examine and appreciate the products and stories of good teaching found in their peers' portfolios. Structured, guided opportunities for peers to study each others' portfolios could expand or refine students' notions of excellence in teaching.

As a final note, we faculty need to wrestle with the fact that, though critically connected to our instructional program, portfolios are nonetheless a low-stakes endeavor for our students. Students' successful completion of the credential program does not depend upon the quality of their professional portfolios. This is as we would have it; it frees our students from worrying excessively about the form of the final product and allows them to concentrate on documenting and studying their growth.

However, the implicit message may be that what "really counts" are the traditional grades and field evaluations. Perhaps portfolios should be used as a rich data source to inform formal student teacher assessment, particularly because prospective teachers are involved in a profession where their development, reflection, and commitment to learning are indeed high-stakes matters. With a move to incorporate student portfolios into formal assessment plans comes the careful consideration of the psychometric properties of portfolios as an evaluation measure (Linn, Baker, & Dunbar, 1991). Whether ultimately used in formal assessment or not, professional portfolios have the tremendous potential of enhancing student teachers' professional growth and have been a highly successful experience for California State University, Fullerton, faculty and students alike.

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