

Theme

Professional Portfolios: Monitoring and Documenting Professional Development of Student Teachers

by Pamela Winsor and Bryan Ellefson

Becoming a teacher is somewhat like being a traveler in foreign territory. The surroundings are unfamiliar, and the language may be unknown. The journey can be long, challenging, sometimes arduous, sometimes easy and frequently rewarding. The route is often unmarked, and travelers must venture forth to cut their own trail. The helpful assistance of knowledgeable tour guides is sometimes, but not always, available. Sign posts en route are frequently unclear and require interpretation. The final destination is an unfixed point, making measurement of progress difficult. Like the traveler's journey, teachers' professional development is complex, and its progress, too, is difficult to assess in a meaningful way.

To judge professional achievement, the teaching profession relies heavily on observations of performance by members of the profession, usually those holding supervisory responsibility. In schools, principals observe and report the teaching of their staff; in teacher education programs, university faculty and teacher associates judge and record the performance of student teachers. This model of monitoring professional growth largely excludes, or at best minimizes, the input of the most important stakeholder—the teacher. That is, it considers assessment of professional performance and development something done to teachers rather than something done by teachers in partnership with supervisors. The introduction of professional portfolios to the

monitoring of professional development makes possible a significant shift in emphasis.

For the past three years, we have been exploring the value of portfolios as a means of monitoring the professional growth of our student teachers—English majors in their second professional semester at the University of Lethbridge. Together with the students, we have come to know portfolios as powerful vehicles of reflection, self-evaluation and collaborative evaluation.

What Is a Professional Portfolio?

For us, a *professional portfolio* is a thoughtfully organized array or collection of artifacts that illustrates professional development, pedagogical expertise, subject matter knowledge, child development knowledge, and professional and personal attributes that contribute to teaching. Our professional portfolios are a fusion of process and product: the assembled collections are the result of reflection, selection, rationalization and evaluation.

Unlike portfolios traditionally associated with such professionals as artists and architects, our professional portfolios are not merely showcases of best work but also records of growth and achievement. We have designed our portfolios to demonstrate growth because one key to

teachers being committed to career-long professional development is recognizing and reflecting on their growth as it occurs, not simply recognizing outstanding achievements.

Our exploration of professional portfolios with student teachers has been one of risk taking and trial and error for all concerned. Our students have been conscientious experimenters and informants. Although current knowledge of portfolios as a means of assessment in classrooms is burgeoning, knowledge and experience are limited when it comes to our conception of professional portfolios.

Our recent survey of 28 Canadian teacher education programs revealed no similar implementations. Most teacher education programs, like ours, engage their students in activities that facilitate reflection on practice. Most programs link those reflection activities directly to student teaching experience. Some programs encourage students to structure their reflections as logs or journals that also contain samples of such things as their best lesson plans. Some programs refer to those logs as portfolios, but no Canadian program identified goals similar to ours. We therefore began from what we knew of portfolios in classrooms, what we knew of the nature of professional development and what we knew of teacher evaluation. We used these ideas as the starting point from which to develop assessment that recognizes evaluation of professional growth as an individual and a shared responsibility.

Goals for Professional Portfolios

As we began implementing portfolios with our students, four goals emerged. First, we saw them as vehicles of self-evaluation and goal setting for each student teacher: self-evaluation through reflection on practice and beliefs is a critical foundation for continuous

professional growth. Second, we saw the portfolios as facilitators of collaborative evaluation and goal setting: the portfolio entries could become the focus of a dialogue among university faculty, teacher associates and student teachers. Third, we saw them as the foundation for the student teachers' career-long commitment to continuous professional growth. We hoped that by developing professional portfolios at this time, student teachers would come to know the value of engaging in reflective and collaborative evaluation and goal setting and would continue to monitor their growth as their careers progressed. Finally, we determined that there is a growing place for professional portfolios when graduates seek employment, and we wanted our students to be able to showcase themselves on completion of their formal teacher education.

As we began to appreciate the goals that portfolios could potentially achieve, we became increasingly concerned with refining the portfolio-related practices so that our students would get the most out of the experience.

Introducing Professional Portfolios

In total, we have attempted the development of portfolios with three groups of student teachers. Subsequent to each attempt we have revised our thinking about portfolios and have altered our expectations, practices and products. Without doubt, the professional portfolios (process and product) of the spring 1994 semester are the most sophisticated, so we will focus on those. We will, however, briefly review our first attempts and what we learned from them to set a context for our current portfolios.

The first semester we introduced portfolios to student teachers, we focused largely on their engaging in and demonstrating self-evaluation. We asked

students to show themselves as language learners, users and teachers. Our primary purpose was to have student teachers come to know from firsthand experience the processes and practices associated with portfolios as a means of assessment. We felt this would prepare them for portfolio use in their classrooms, particularly regarding the evaluation of language arts. Our secondary purpose was for students to come to see the value of reflection on themselves as language learners and users as a foundation for being teachers of English language arts. We established broad goals for the portfolios and gave the students a list of some required items, but otherwise students developed their portfolios largely independently, outside of class. Through our lack of specificity, we intended to encourage creativity in showing learning and talents.

The products from that semester were an odd assortment of binders, boxes and overflowing files in which student teachers portrayed their early literacy juxtaposed with their newly acquired teaching expertise. They included everything from Grade 1 report cards and medals earned to Mother's Day cards and lesson plans! Those portfolios also represented much frustration and effort. In addition, they posed many questions, but, more important, they represented learning.

From that experience, we learned that portfolios were potentially much more than a way to help student teachers gain familiarity with a relatively novel approach to assessment; they held much promise in fostering self-evaluation and reflection as leads to professional development. We also learned a great deal about the process and practice, but two points were especially clear. First, if we were to maximize the value of portfolios, we had to be much more involved with their development. We had to teach more about the processes of selecting and rationalizing entries, and we had to talk with the students individually regarding the personal and professional qualities

their portfolios illustrated. Second, we had to be much more clear about the purpose of the portfolios and, accordingly, to help the students streamline their entries. With a new group of student teachers the following spring semester, we made plans to implement some of the changes we deemed necessary.

Second Semester Portfolios

Our second implementation of portfolios was more successful. In general, we were working from a better understanding of what the portfolio process involved. Subsequently, we provided the students with much more helpful guidance in both the theoretical foundations of portfolio assessment and the actual procedures of developing portfolios. One substantial change involved encouraging students to focus on themselves as language teachers, giving less attention to their personal literacy development. Another substantial change concerned conferences with students. We engaged in conferences at mid-semester and end-of-semester, at which time we heard from students what they deemed their pivotal learning points and their strengths as teachers. In turn, we responded, asked questions and made suggestions for future directions and goals. To overcome imposed scheduling difficulties, we did these conferences by audio recordings. The students walked us through their portfolios on tape, explaining each entry and the rationale for its inclusion. We responded and returned the portfolios (and tapes) while the students completed their practicum in local schools.

Through our conferences with these students and our contacts with some American colleagues, we came to appreciate the potential of portfolios. We came to see that if we broadened our purposes and shifted our emphasis from literacy development to professional development, portfolios could serve many

purposes. During this semester, we established our previously noted four goals—self-evaluation, collaborative evaluation, professional development and job-seeking support. We did not, however, identify these goals by ourselves.

We asked student teachers for their impressions, and we asked experienced administrators to help us refine our process. Students commented largely on the process, noting the time involved and their need for better understanding from the beginning concerning the purpose and procedures. Overall, they were supportive. Cathy's note at the end of the semester summarizes the opinion of many: "I was sceptical . . . [but] the more involved I got the more important it became for me. You sucked me in and now I'm hooked. It became more important for me personally than to meet the criteria for the course!"

The experienced administrators pointed us in a direction that would maximize the value of portfolios. At the end of this semester, we presented a sample set of six portfolios together with six standard applications for teaching positions (as required by local school boards) to three "superintendents"—a principal, a recently retired superintendent and the acting dean of Field Experience. We asked them to first read the application, then the portfolio for each candidate. We then asked them to comment generally regarding the impression created by each type of information and specifically to rate the likelihood of their hiring that teacher. The superintendents agreed that the portfolios enhanced their knowledge and impressions of the candidates. In addition, the portfolios confirmed their initial impressions and answered some questions raised by the application forms. In no case did the portfolios change a superintendent's decision from "not hire" to "hire," but they occasionally changed initial tentativeness ("maybe hire") to a firm decision one way or the other. These administrators seemed to find increased

confidence in their decision making with access to the portfolios. The superintendents also made suggestions regarding portfolio contents. We coupled this valued commentary from the students and acting superintendents with our reflections and insights regarding how portfolios might be part of the way the professional growth of student teachers is monitored.

Third Semester Portfolios

In our third semester, we wanted the portfolio process to involve the students, their teacher associates (in practicum) and university faculty advisors. We wanted the portfolios and the associated processes to be a more significant part of the students' program than they had been. In particular, we wanted the students to assume greater responsibility for monitoring their growth, using their portfolios as vehicles to guide and record reflection, evaluation and goals. To help them, we developed a *Guide to Professional Portfolio Development*, in which we outlined the purposes and procedures we expected. It should be noted, however, that this guide was not intended to script behavior, but rather to share what we had learned from our first two semesters with these students and those involved with them. From the beginning, the students were aware of the trial nature of procedures and were strongly encouraged to suggest revisions. In addition, we held brief orientation discussions with the teacher associates to acquaint them with the professional portfolios.

The *Guide to Professional Portfolio Development* outlines the five categories of information, as shown (with examples) in Table 1, to be included in each portfolio. From our experience, these are informative and workable categories that provide student teachers with ample leeway for individualization, yet they address the concerns of all stakeholders.

Table 1

Categories of Portfolio Contents and Examples of Each

- A. Professional development
Examples: philosophy statement, practicum reports, log entries, portfolio conference records
- B. Teaching competencies
Examples: lesson plans for a variety of types of lessons, overview of unit plans, evaluation plans, teacher associate/faculty comments, peer observations of teaching, video of teaching
- C. Knowledge of child development and learning processes
Examples: summaries of case studies, observations of students, log entries
- D. Content knowledge of one or more subject areas
Examples: Essay, lab report, materials developed that reflect content
- E. Professional attributes and experiences
Examples: concert program with name as performer, picture as team coach, letter acknowledging executive position in professional association, outline of workshop given
- F. Personal attributes and experiences that contribute to teaching
Examples: Certificates of achievement, letters from previous employers, membership in organizations or teams

The *Guide* also addresses issues of organization and format. Our students were asked to arrange their materials in three-ring binders with one section for each category of information. Each section was to be preceded by an index that

named, described and provided a rationale for each entry. The sample entry from the Teaching Competencies section of Laurie's portfolio shown in Table 2 demonstrates the information expected.

Table 2

Sample Portfolio Index Entry Showing Context and Rationale

Name and Context

Science lesson plan (Grade 2) that involves cooperative learning—part of a Light and Shadows unit taught during first practicum.

Rationale

This lesson demonstrates consideration for different ability levels to make modifications to assist students to complete experiment.

To meet our goals of making the portfolios a more vital part of evaluation of the semester's work (particularly the practicum) and of shifting some responsibility for assessment to the student teachers, we met with most students three times to review their portfolios. The intent of the initial review early in the semester (on campus) was to assist students in getting started—we discussed organization, their choice of entries and the principles of self-evaluation. The second and third reviews were held near the middle and at the end of their practicum. For the most part, student teachers led these conferences that included their teacher associates and university faculty advisors.

During a typical conference, individual student teachers sequentially presented each section of their portfolios along with an assessment of their professional development in that area. Teacher associates and faculty advisors commented as they felt appropriate during and following the student's presentation. Most comments affirmed the student's self-assessment, and some contributed additional observations of the student's teaching. When the student teachers had presented all sections of the portfolio, the student teachers proposed individual goals for further development based on assessment and reflection. Discussion of goals usually ensued, and sometimes revisions were made. The goals agreed on were recorded and included, along with a summary of the conference, in the Professional Development section of the portfolio.

Because this was the first time engaging in portfolio conferences, there was much variation in the participants' understanding of the purpose of the conferences and the actual procedures undertaken. For the most part, participants willingly adopted a trial-and-learn attitude, allowing us to gain perspective on and insights into the value of the portfolio process and the specific procedures to recommend. In general, we were

delighted with, and admittedly sometimes surprised by, the efficient, thorough and insightful self-assessment of each student. Most of the portfolios are exemplary documents. They are well-organized, thoughtfully rationalized collections of interesting data that tell the stories of aspiring teachers' growth, achievements and attributes.

Response to Professional Portfolios

Student Response

At the end of the semester (and after grades were submitted), we asked our students to share their thinking about the professional portfolios. In particular, we asked them to comment on their effect as instruments of guiding reflective practice now and in their future careers. We also asked them to comment on the process and the *Guide* and to give us direction so that we might more effectively assist other students.

All students supported the concept of developing professional portfolios. They felt they were valuable vehicles of self- and collaborative evaluation, including reflection on their practice and personal growth. They also felt that portfolios helped them realize the responsibility teachers bear for continued professional growth. Cindy's comments reflect her thinking and that of her colleagues: "Developing a professional portfolio is valuable and essential for showcasing strengths, goals and philosophies of professionals. In putting one together, we celebrate our successes and acquire confidence in our growth."

Regarding procedures, students unanimously told us that the portfolios were time-consuming. The other point on which all agreed was that making decisions about what to include and writing the rationale for each entry was tough. Writing the rationale for each entry

required them to be reflective, decisive and evaluative. These university students, who are constantly encouraged to reflect, found it strange to engage in extensive self-evaluation and subsequently to identify the attributes they wanted to represent. They also initially struggled with the idea that each entry represented a much larger concept, and they found it difficult to express that rationale in clear, precise terms. Although they found it demanding, they agreed that choosing and rationalizing entries is the heart of portfolio development.

Finally, those who had been fully engaged in the process told us that they had benefited and hoped to continue the process as interns and teachers; the few who had not fully participated expressed some regret, speculating that they had missed out on a worthwhile experience.

Teacher Associate Response

We also sought responses to the concept of professional portfolios from our teacher associates, the majority of whom are junior high or high school English teachers. The teacher associates had a wide range of experiences with portfolios. We tried to establish some common ground by providing an informational session prior to the practicum.

Most teacher associates agreed that portfolios could be of value. Most agreed that reviewing the portfolios early in the practicum provided them with a personal introduction to their student teacher and helped them to recognize the student's strengths and concerns. There was some sense that portfolios were consistent with what these teachers knew about professional growth. One teacher associate felt that, as a result of portfolios, "student teachers will view teaching as a continuous learning experience that doesn't end at graduation."

Generally, they appreciated the opportunity that portfolios provided for the reflection necessary for growth but were

concerned that this reflection could interfere with the job at hand. They feared that the time involved detracted from preparation for teaching; some perceived the portfolios as an ill-placed assignment and did not appreciate its dynamic, assessment value; some felt it inappropriate to emphasize self-evaluation; and some feared that we were setting students up with documents that would not be considered in their eventual job seeking.

Superintendent Response

Following our third semester working with professional portfolios, we conducted a mail survey of the superintendents of Zone 6—southern Alberta. Their responses regarding the current and future use of portfolios during the hiring process supported our work with student teachers. While many stated that they had little experience with portfolios, overwhelmingly they responded "yes" to the question, "Would you examine a well-organized illustrative portfolio if an applicant were to present it during an interview?" We were particularly encouraged by the following comments: "Portfolios will be received positively, but they will not be a requirement (for employment)" and "A good move for University of Lethbridge to promote professional portfolios."

Our Response

Our three-semester exploration of the value, purposes and practicalities of professional portfolios has been enlightening and exciting. Our work has spawned as many questions as answers. We have only begun to realize their possibilities and impact, but each experience has informed its successor to the point that we are now prepared to recommend their adoption for all students in our faculty. By moving beyond the literacy portfolios with which we started to the broader professional portfolios, we have involved student teachers in demonstration and evaluation

of their growth as novices. We have allowed them to build a solid foundation for future reflective practice. In addition, the portfolios have given us opportunity for collaborative evaluation in the face of compelling, authentic evidence. Finally, we believe the professional portfolios hold promise for all of us as vehicles of communication—among teachers, their colleagues and their supervisors.

Like travelers in foreign territory, over time we have come to know some aspects of the land and its culture. Professional portfolios—the processes and products—are an as yet underused form of evaluation of professional development. We began with knowledge that might be likened to an aerial photograph of the terrain, and, through our experience, we have developed crude road maps. The

route to monitoring professional development is a divergent one, but en route portfolios support authentic assessment of growth and achievement and point the direction for future development.

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