

Valuing Reflection Through Portfolios

by Pamela Winsor

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The literature is replete with discussions of the value of becoming reflective practitioners. Educational philosopher and theorist John Dewey (1933) recognized that reflection on our experiences, not merely the experiences themselves, leads to learning. We learn most from experiences we think about, explore, review and question by ourselves and with others. Reflection, not experience alone, is our teacher (Costa and Garmston 2002). While little argument with this premise is raised, the question *How do I make time for reflection?* is asked repeatedly. Teachers' days are filled with planning, teaching, leading, participating in professional-development and extracurricular activities, caring for families and meeting personal commitments. There are no blank spaces on their calendars. Student teachers, too, have full schedules. They juggle classes, studying and part-time jobs. As socially conscious young adults, they seek time each day for family and friends. Those who work with student teachers in schools and universities are challenged to help them understand the value and means of making reflection part of their seemingly endless, busy days.

As experienced educators, how can we help students develop reflective practices early on, so those practices become as much a part of their professional activity as lesson planning? While modelling and portraying a positive attitude toward reflection goes a long way, students need

tools that are more specific. Professional portfolios are one such meaningful tool, because teachers can document their practice and reflect upon their work and themselves (Tierney, Carter and Desai 1991). Building a portfolio requires planning, reflecting and collecting evidence of both teaching and learning.

What follows is a description of how reflection, facilitated by portfolio development, was significant in Janessa Fowke's and Shawna Duckett's professional growth. Janessa is an art major at the University of Lethbridge in the Faculty of Education. She has just completed her second professional semester and is looking forward to her career as an educator. Shawna is a recent graduate of the University of Lethbridge's Faculty of Education. She begins her career this September as a Grade 5 teacher at the International Community School of Bangkok, Thailand. Their experiences are refreshing images of the power of reflection and the strength of reflection through writing. In this article, we share their experiences of starting and maintaining the reflection habit.

For the past decade, student teachers in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge have been exposed to and engaged with portfolios. They study the values and practices of portfolio assessment within courses devoted to evaluation of student learning, and they engage in professional-portfolio development, largely during their practicum experiences. Most, like Janessa, also engage in literacy-portfolio development as part of an initial language-education course. These experiences help student teachers understand the value of authentic, evidence-based assessment conducted over time and

realize the power that portfolios embody within their teacher development. Specifically, their experiences lead to appreciation for reflection in shaping teacher identity. Janessa's and Shawna's comments mark the beginning and end of their formal teacher-education programs. They make clear that a meaningful start is a critical first step and that continuing reflective practices contribute to what students consider ultimate success: full-time employment as a professional teacher in a school of choice.

In all portfolio development, whether professional or literacy, there must be a starting point. For students in elementary schools, that starting point is often decorating a folder in which work samples will be kept. At the University of Lethbridge, the practice is similar in introductory language-education courses. Student teachers personalize their portfolios, in which they demonstrate their abilities as users and teachers of the six language arts. The focus, however, is not the folder, but the reflective commentary that accompanies their evidence. Their personalization usually begins with soul searching and sharing early-language experiences in small groups. Some recall occasions when they were honoured and proud of their literary accomplishments. Some relate tales of woe and latent fears of being language teachers. Top on their list are concerns about teaching grammar, handwriting and poetry. In this course, we help students realize that, regardless of subject major, all teachers are language teachers.

Throughout the semester, students create and contribute artifacts to both their literacy and professional portfolios. Their portfolios are tools for understanding authentic language assessment and for learning the art and skill of reflection as a foundation for professional development. Portfolios help students understand reflective thinking as a cognitive process that directly relates to professional practice (Schon 1988).

Janessa Fowke

Near the end of the semester, students in Janessa's class shared their portfolios. Janessa told of her experiences as a young writer. She

showed her early attempts to make written language work side by side with her current writing. Her display brought new meaning to *emergent literacy* and *assessment over time* for her and her classmates. Her written reflections form an integral component of her portfolio; they indicate that she has a commendable grasp of the symbiotic relationship between portfolios and teacher development.

"My attempts to create my own professional portfolio recently prompted me to dig through the boxes of elementary- and secondary-school archives that have been taking up space in my parent's garage for years. My mom and I spent the large portion of an afternoon sorting through boxes that contained almost everything I ever created. My parents are the type that tend to keep everything. Drawings, paintings, scribbles, reports, crafts, worksheets and writings—they were all there. What a riot! It was like we were piecing together a childhood that I had forgotten about. Although I was unravelling the evidence of my own learning and development, I was still oddly surprised at what I found. There were pictures plastered with scribbled markings, or as my mother describes them, expressive lines. My attempts at writing contained spelling mistake after spelling mistake after spelling mistake, many sentence fragments, and some humorous, unrealistic story lines. I think that, as adults, it is easy to forget what we were like as children and how challenging some academic tasks once were.

"Among my treasured personal creations, we unearthed my creative-writing portfolio. Inside the folded, stapled manila envelope was a collection of writings I produced throughout my elementary years. In the midst of a busy semester, with assignment dates fast approaching and my first practicum soon to begin, this precious find inspired me and gave me a hopeful perspective on my upcoming role as a teacher. A few quiet moments there in the garage, surrounded by the boxes, rereading and reconsidering my learning as a child, seemed an appropriate starting point for developing my professional portfolio.

"I had just been learning about the usefulness of portfolios in my education classes. As I poured through the contents, many thoughts went through my mind. I was curious to examine my

past writing and creative abilities as a student, my motivations for trying in school, my teachers' investments in me and—how long it must have taken to mark all of my writing assignments. (Yikes!) My favourite piece from this portfolio as shown in Figure 1, is entitled, "My Bizy Day." This small two-page writing, held together with a piece of Scotch tape in the corner, is my favourite not only because of its humorous developmental spelling and sentence structure, but because it provides such a contrast to my busy life right now as a University of Lethbridge education student.

"I have just completed my first professional semester, and it has been one of the busiest times in my life as I juggled five education courses, complete with group projects and presentations, an intense practicum, work as a lifeguard and family life. There hasn't been much time for any bizy tea parties or birthday parties. Through my education classes, I have learned so much, but as I complete many courses, it seems that my learning has left me many more questions about teaching than answers. How do teachers do it all? There is so much to learn, and at times I have wondered whether I can handle the insanely busy life of teaching. Finding my portfolio was like a breath of fresh air right when I needed it. I had the starting point for creating a personal, meaningful professional portfolio.

"In my university language-arts class, I learned how encouraging students to keep portfolios of their writing can help them see how they have developed and improved as writers. I don't remember being asked or encouraged to examine my portfolio in this reflective way at the

close of my elementary years, but I'm taking it all into account now. This portfolio review reminded me that I am a lifelong learner. The learning will never stop because I will never know everything about anything. In Kindergarten, I communicated visually through drawing and colouring because I didn't yet understand how print worked. Then, in Grade 1, I could barely construct a sentence that

made sense. In Grade 2, I struggled with spelling, and so on. However, now I am a university student, writing papers and studying for difficult exams, and I can even colour in the lines now. My childhood academic efforts reminded me where I came from, what my abilities used to be, and how far I have come. Teaching is still a new thing for me at this point in my life, a source of tremendous challenge, but that's only because I need more time and experience at it.

"My bizyness now as a student is an investment in my career as a teacher.

Everyone considers herself to be bizy with something. I am bizy with learning, as I have been since that memorable day of journal writing about birthday and tea parties.

"In a year or so, I will graduate with an education degree and teacher certification, ready to begin my journey as a professional teacher. I will be instructing, making numerous lesson plans, evaluating student learning, making multiple decisions, and, I'm sure, also assigning projects that will eventually end up in portfolios, portfolios that will symbolize my students' educational journeys, collections that will

Figure 1

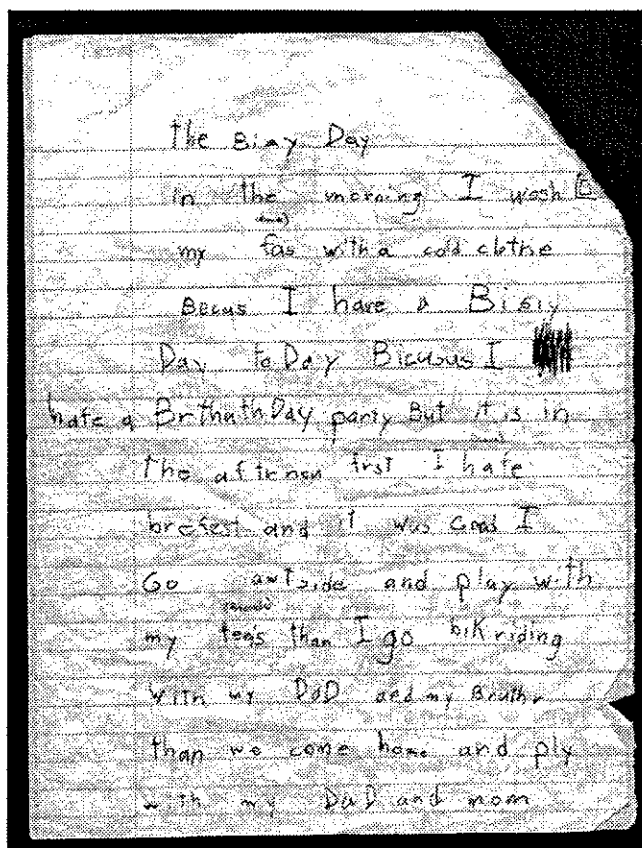


Figure 2

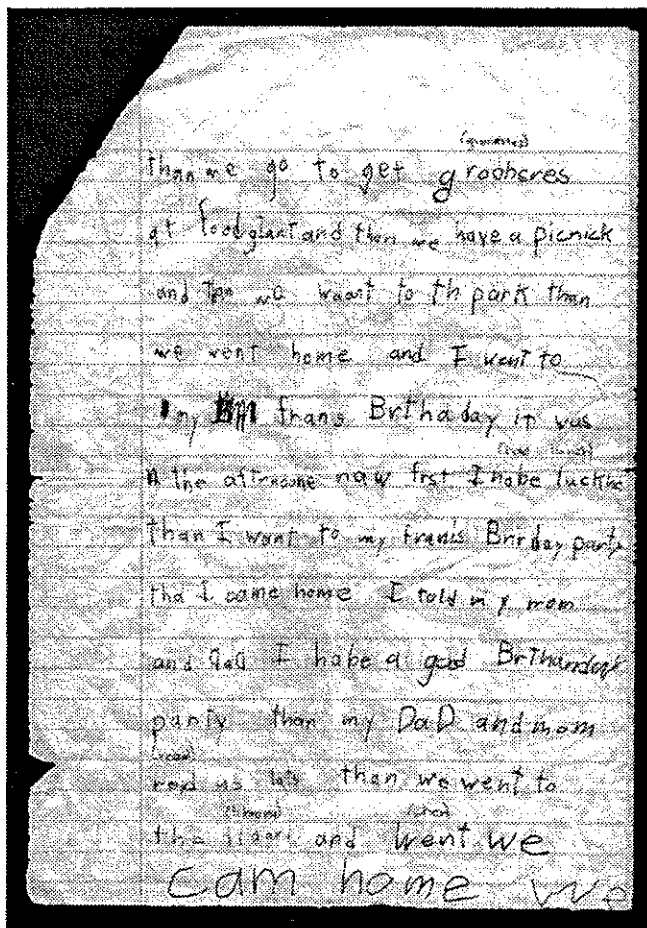
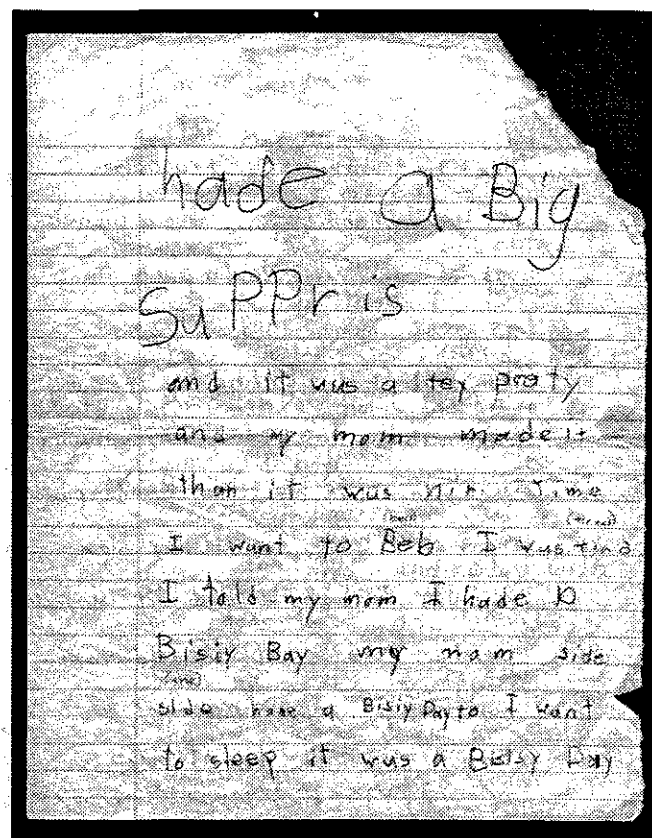


Figure 3



eventually give them reason to chuckle, to remember those that inspired them and to celebrate their progress in life.”

Janessa’s reflections are witness to the power and potential of reflective portfolios. Portfolios are influential in shaping identity; they mediate thinking and capture the development of student teachers as professionals (Antonek, McCormick and Donato 1997). Just as her writing skills flourished through experience, her ability to use reflection as a guide for her professional development will increase. A glimpse of her growth as a writer allowed her to conceptualize her growth as a teacher. As much as she delighted in reading and sharing her early writing, she understood that without reflection they comprise a simple collection. Her careful thinking about what the artifacts represented, her metacognition of the process, and her connections between past and

present shaped that experience into a meaningful, productive foundation for professional-portfolio development. Because of her meaningful start, we anticipate that reflective thinking will be significant for her as she continues her journey as a writer, learner and teacher.

Shawna Duckett

Solid beginnings pave the way for productivity. Shawna has reached the end of her journey as a student teacher. Her student days, like Janessa’s, were full and busy. She, too, learned early the value of making sense of her learning experiences through reflection. She learned that the benefits of her learning experiences were not always tangible or immediate, but with careful thinking and engagement in the portfolio processes of selection, rationalization, evaluation and reflection (Winsor and Ellefson 1995), she could shape her professional self.

As she transformed her developmental portfolio, constructed throughout her three years as a student teacher, into her display portfolio for job seeking, she came to an even greater understanding. She explained:

"Developing my portfolio has given me something concrete that shows where I've been, helps me understand where I am and helps me articulate where I am going. It's like a teaching plan. The process of planning on paper helps me think about what needs to happen in the classroom and how it will be accomplished; it gives me a reference for improvement and troubleshooting. A benefit of portfolio artifacts, particularly writing, is their visibility. It's easier to get a more complete picture of the development of something if I can see it. When I see in front of me what is happening and what is not in my professional development, I am encouraged to strengthen certain areas of my practice."

Shawna's portfolio contributed to her goals and the satisfaction she experienced from achieving them. It contributed to her knowing and articulating who she is as a professional teacher. As she neared completion of her internship, she realized that, as Martin-Kniep notes, "Thoughtfulness and the practice of articulating one's thinking in writing aids practice" (1999, 83). Her practicum students benefited from her reflective analysis and subsequent creative problem solving, which aligned her teaching with their instructional needs. Her future students will also benefit from her reflective thinking and writing.

Shawna's full realization of the value of reflective practices came as she listened to the interview team with whom she shared her professional portfolio. "We are very pleased with what you have to offer and the preparation that you bring. Both of us are impressed with your thoroughness and progress," they said (personal communication, April 2004). She knew then that it was worth the time it had taken to build her working portfolio continually and transform it into a showcase. She mused:

"This collection was the reason I received a job with the school where I most wanted to teach. It gave me choices that opened up desired new learning opportunities, instead of settling for whatever was offered. With this collection, complete

with written reflections and artifact rationales, they could see proof of what I could offer as a new teacher to their school: a reflective teacher who will continue developing. By going through the process that facilitated development in practice, I could finally articulate my learning to those who later offered me a position."

Of course, Shawna accepted the offered contract. She begins her career with an advantage: making time for skillful reflection is already part of every hectic day. To those who mentored her, she adds:

"Thanks for making portfolios mandatory. Because the portfolio tool was in university, I now have a solid tool that I am motivated to continue using. I have seen its value for present and future development. After spending time to develop the habit of reflection, it is difficult not to benefit from it. It becomes a lifestyle choice, one that guided my growth as a preservice teacher. Having it is most helpful for continuous progress toward excellent and exemplary teaching—qualities that any program would want in its graduates."

Conclusion

In the decades subsequent to Dewey's teaching, teachers and student teachers have engaged in reflective practices that have helped them maximize learning from experience. Janessa and Shawna have joined the ranks of reflective practitioners and speak emphatically of the value of reflection. Even on busy days, they consider active reflection, facilitated by portfolios, essential to ongoing teacher growth. Antonek, McCormick and Donato advise, "If the field of education is seeking a tool to mediate teacher development that is comprehensive, personal and reflective, student teacher portfolios are highly appropriate" (1997, 24). We agree.

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