

Professional teaching portfolios: tools for reflection, growth and advancement.

Beth Hurst Cindy Wilson Genny Cramer

04/01/1998

Phi Delta Kappan

578

COPYRIGHT 1998 Phi Delta Kappa Inc.

Because professional **teaching portfolios** serve as visual representations of teachers, their contents should be determined by individual teachers and should vary significantly. The authors provide guidelines for constructing such portfolios.

Our first exposure to using a portfolio outside the realm of the college classroom was provided by a student who took her portfolio with her on a job interview. When she was hired, the administrator told her that her portfolio had made her stand out from all the other applicants. As she shared with the class the impact of her portfolio on the interview, it caused a dramatic shift in our thinking about the uses for portfolios.

The change was reflected in our subsequent classes as we began to emphasize the concept of building professional **teaching portfolios** for job-seeking purposes. The number of success stories our students share with us about obtaining teaching positions because of their professional portfolios continues to multiply each year. Professional **teaching portfolios** provide teachers with vivid visual representations of themselves - self-portraits - as they apply for teaching positions.

As we continued to extend our conceptions about professional **teaching portfolios** based on our experiences and our reading in the professional literature, the following underlying ideas emerged: 1) portfolios are reflective compendiums of self-selected artifacts, 2) they are representations of teaching credentials and competencies, 3) they offer holistic views of teachers, and 4) they provide documentation for strengthening interviews.

Reflective Compendiums Of Self-Selected Artifacts

Because professional **teaching portfolios** serve as visual representations of teachers, their contents should be determined by individual teachers and should vary significantly, depending on each teacher's philosophy, values, and viewpoints as well as on teaching and collegiate experience. John Zubizarreta states that each person's portfolio will differ from others because of "signature items intended to provide a unique profile of an individual teacher." (1) Bruce Barnett contends that for a portfolio one should select "only those artifacts and reproductions that demonstrate the acquisition of a particular skill, competency, or piece of knowledge." (2) When the locus of control of the portfolio remains with the teachers, they are able to paint more complete pictures of themselves.

As a compendium, a portfolio allows teachers to gather in one place the representations they prefer of their professional and personal lives. This process allows teachers to reflect on their own growth as teachers and learners. Mary Olson states that an advantage of portfolios is that "writers, readers, or teachers who are building their portfolios can better understand their own development and then seek additional experience to further that development." She suggests that teachers ask themselves such questions as "What makes this evidence especially appropriate given the purpose for this portfolio?" (3) Robert Tierney, Mark Carter, and Laura Desai point out that creating a portfolio allows teachers an opportunity to reflect on what they are about, what goals they have, and what they have achieved. (4)

Representations of Teaching Credentials and Competencies

The portfolio provides evidence of good teaching. Teachers constructing professional portfolios can include documentation that supports their teaching, such as letters of recommendation, evaluations from supervisors, lesson plans, and photographs. Donovan Cook and Jeanne Kessler describe a professional teaching portfolio as "an organized collection of documents, letters, papers, and pictures that lauds your personal and professional achievements in a compact, concrete way." They believe that, more than the credential file or the resume, the portfolio will reflect who the teacher is and what the teacher has to offer. They consider the portfolio to be a "tool which, in addition to your credentials, will allow you to market yourself effectively." (5) For example, applicants can show interviewing administrators photographs of themselves in teaching situations, thus painting a stronger image of themselves in a classroom setting. We were told by one of our students that, when an interviewer asked questions regarding her teaching, she would respond by saying, "Do you want me to tell you, or would you like for me to show you?" She was able to answer the questions with specific documentation in her portfolio.

Visual examples supporting the individual's strengths are often more powerful to the interviewer than the mere question/answer data received in an employment conference. Teachers are not bound by select questions on an application form or by predetermined surveys but have the opportunity to highlight elements of their professional abilities.

Holistic Views of Teachers

Professional portfolios offer teachers the opportunity to show not only their teaching strengths but also their heart and soul and passion for teaching. Vito Perrone made the important point that the person with whom a portfolio is shared will be more interested in the enthusiasm displayed by the teacher than in the contents being presented. He stated that most administrators "look for a sparkle in the prospective teacher's eye" and that "it will be easier to show your enthusiasm as you show your portfolio."(6) This may be one of the most important benefits of professional **teaching portfolios** in job interviews.

Professional portfolios will provide more multidimensional representations of teachers, enlightening others as to their varied abilities and interests. Teachers can portray themselves as active community members, display aesthetic talents, highlight hobbies or interests, reveal athletic abilities, and exhibit additional evidence of their varied personal attributes that often do not show up on simple data sheets for employment. A portfolio offers an opportunity to go beyond the confines of a resume or vita.

Documentation for Strengthening Interviews

Another important benefit of a professional teaching portfolio is the greater sense of confidence it is likely to instill in an applicant for a position. Applicants will feel more comfortable knowing that they have documentation to use as interviewers ask questions about preparation and teaching practices. Donna Cole and her colleagues found that many students see the portfolio "as giving them a competitive edge in the job search."(7) One of our former students carried her portfolio with her, hoping it would give her something to do with her hands during the job interview. She was surprised to find herself continually referring to the portfolio as she was asked questions and was later asked to bring back her "pictures" when she met with the superintendent and the school board. She was eventually hired. Cook and Kessler suggest that a professional portfolio can become a "useful tool for an effective job search" because a portfolio is "a very personal advertisement."(8)

Both inservice and preservice teachers can also have more autonomy and sense of empowerment as they use professional **teaching portfolios** in the context of career evaluations or interviews for transfers or advancement. A teacher in our graduate program wishing to transfer to a different building sent her portfolio and a request for transfer to the principal at that school via the district mail system. On the day her portfolio arrived at the principal's office, the teacher was surprised to have the principal show up for an unannounced visit to her classroom. When classes were over, the principal returned the portfolio and invited her to take the transfer position. This teacher firmly believed her portfolio was the decisive factor in winning her the transfer she wanted.

Cole and her colleagues report a similar incident, documenting the success of portfolios in helping new graduates obtain teaching positions.

The Director of Laboratory Experiences at Wright State University received an out-of-state call from a school district personnel director saying that he had interviewed one of our graduates and was moderately impressed. At the end of the interview, the student applicant produced his portfolio. The personnel director looked through it and was greatly impressed by the student's initiative and by the portfolio itself. He offered him the job.(9)

By developing professional portfolios, teachers are empowered to identify positive characteristics beneficial to the employer and present them in an organized manner.

Suggestions for Creating A Professional Teaching Portfolio

Careful consideration of contents and creative displays will add to the value of a professional portfolio. It is essential that clear purposes for portfolios be kept in mind. Cook and Kessler believe that teachers should tailor their portfolios to fit the requirements of the school in which they are interviewing. While entries in professional **teaching portfolios** are strictly up to the teacher creating the portfolio, some cautionary points might be considered: 1) professional **teaching portfolios** benefit from being reflective collections, rather than scrapbooks; 2) they can be enriched with a personal touch, but the presentation needs to remain professional; and 3) the adage "less is more" might be applicable because the portfolio should not become too burdensome for people to read.

To assist preservice or job-seeking teachers in developing their professional **teaching portfolios**, we have compiled a list of items for possible inclusion. These are merely suggestions and are not intended to be followed exactly.

* Table of contents. The inclusion of a table of contents helps the developer organize the materials more clearly and helps the reader better understand the focus and content of the portfolio. Since the portfolio is a work in progress rather than a finished product, it is probably advisable not to include page numbers in the table of contents or on the pages to help keep the contents flexible and easy to rearrange.

* Resume. Beginning a portfolio with a resume or curriculum vitae provides an overview of a teacher's preparation and

experience. The specific organization and contents of the resume can vary considerably, and teachers need to select the particular form that best suits their needs.

* **Statement of philosophy.** A statement of philosophy is a written summary of professional beliefs concerning teaching. This statement can include reasons the teacher chose teaching as a career. Although some teachers prefer not to include such a statement and to let the portfolio speak for itself, the act of writing a philosophy statement helps a teacher clarify beliefs about teaching and thus can be useful as a learning tool as well as helpful to readers. Zubizarreta suggests that philosophy statements need to "put more emphasis on establishing connections between teaching philosophy and actual methods and outcomes by reflecting on the teaching craft."⁽¹⁰⁾ The philosophy statement could be a section in itself within the portfolio, or it could be incorporated throughout the portfolio by including short comments regarding teaching or learning in such places as the first page of each section or above pictures of the teacher and his or her students.

* **Official documents.** Official documents provide needed certification information about teachers. Transcripts, teaching certificates, test scores, and similar documents can be quite helpful. Teachers need to be careful in selecting documents. A teacher who wishes to emphasize a strong academic background would definitely want to include undergraduate and graduate transcripts in a portfolio. A teacher with a less than sterling academic record might prefer to emphasize lesson plans and teaching activities, forgoing the inclusion of transcripts. Teachers who have received honors but might be reluctant to mention them in interviews for fear of seeming self-serving are able to share that information without saying a word by having certificates and other documentation within their portfolios.

* **Letters of recommendation.** Letters of recommendation add strong support for teachers. These letters can be from former teachers, employers, university supervisors, or anyone professional teachers would like to ask to write a letter for them. Although the content of letters in portfolios may differ significantly from letters written confidentially, letters still give readers a better understanding of the teacher being written about. Professional portfolios provide a good excuse for teachers to ask former teachers and others to write letters. Teachers may want to be cautious about including letters of reference from nonprofessional sources. Although a letter from a member of the clergy, for instance, might be an asset in one setting, it could be a problem in another.

* **Evaluations.** Evaluations provide additional information. Evaluations of stints as a student teacher or an aide may be the only evaluations available for preservice teachers. Practicing teachers may have additional formative and summative evaluations given by principals or other administrators. Teachers will wish to omit those evaluations that contain negative information.

* **Photographs and visual documentation.** Photographs and visual documentation can provide some of the strongest support for a candidate. The most convincing photographs are those in which teachers are shown working with groups of students. The teacher needs to hand the camera to a student, an aide, or another teacher and make certain to appear frequently in photographs taken. It is important to provide captions for the photos that briefly explain their significance. Include photographs of students, bulletin boards, learning centers, games created, and so on.

* **Self-goals.** Self-goals are those things a teacher wants to achieve in the classroom or at a particular school. An example of a self-goal might be to continue learning and growing by remaining actively involved in professional organizations.

* **Goals for the students of tomorrow.** This section could be a short list of goals that the teacher has for students, such as teaching them how to learn so they will become lifelong learners or teaching them how to become reflective decision makers.

* **Student and parent sentiments.** It is important to include notes and photographs from students and parents. Administrators often find this kind of information invaluable because it provides evidence of the rapport between teacher and student or teacher and parent.

* **Samples of college work.** Sample lesson plans of a high quality can be included as evidence of good planning. Teachers find it most useful to include lesson plans that they have actually taught. While including samples of lesson plans written in education classes may be valuable, those with grades or professor's comments on them are probably less appropriate because they do not look as professional.

A teacher in one of our classes was applying for a special education position for which she was eligible for temporary certification. At the beginning of the interview, the director of special education informed her that there were several strong candidates applying who were already fully certified. During her interview, she brought out her portfolio and began showing samples of individualized education programs she had written in her graduate classes. The director was so impressed with the quality of her work that she offered her the job. Actually seeing what this candidate could do outweighed what the director could only imagine that the other candidates could do.

* **Thematic units.** Thematic units are valuable documents to include in portfolios. Since administrators are likely to be quite interested in applicants' abilities to plan and carry out instruction, these materials need to be carefully scrutinized before being chosen. It is probably better to have one outstanding unit than four poorly organized ones. Photographs of student

work and displays set up during the thematic unit will provide visual representations that may do more to sell the teacher's abilities than the written unit.

* Learning activities. Include in the portfolio any learning centers or learning activities that have been developed. Explain their use if appropriate and show pictures or samples.

* Original ideas. Include any innovative ideas for positive reinforcement, discipline, bulletin board displays, lessons, and so on.

* Examples of students' work. Teachers can include examples of their students' work to show the types of activities they use as teachers. This is also a way of showing students' progress, which reflects positively on teaching ability. A teacher who learned from fellow teachers about professional **teaching portfolios** the day before an important interview quickly assembled her portfolio, in which she included work that her students with learning disabilities had done over the course of the year, showing the progress they had made. She was offered the job over many other qualified applicants and was told it was because her students' work made it clear that she was a dedicated and effective teacher.

* Personal data. Personal data can be included at whatever point teachers consider appropriate. Teachers who want prospective employers to be aware of them as members of families will want to include photographs of themselves and other family members. Other teachers want to separate their careers from their home life and will prefer to omit photographs or other documentation from their personal lives. Some teachers want the personal data section introduced at the beginning of their portfolios to show the high priority they place on family life; others want the section later to reflect that professional concerns should take precedence; others prefer to omit such sections as inappropriate for professional portfolios. Teachers' philosophies will dictate whether or not they wish to include personal and family data. If they choose to include such information, they will probably benefit from keeping it to a page or so, in order not to detract from professional material.

* Autobiographies. Autobiographies are sometimes suggested as helpful. Cole and her colleagues noted that "many [preservice teachers'] portfolios included autobiographies, which helped faculty to know their students better and to see them as multidimensional."⁽¹¹⁾ Teachers who place autobiographies in their portfolios need to keep in mind that the intended audience is people making hiring decisions, so it would be wise to omit information that might cause readers to judge the writer negatively.

* Reflections. Reflections are an important addition to a portfolio, in that they demonstrate reflective decision making. In reflections, preservice teachers can describe episodes from their student teaching, providing insight about what was learned and how they have grown during the experiences. Inservice teachers can reflect on how they have grown during their years of teaching.

* Inspirational items. Teachers can include poems, sayings, pictures, or articles that have had an impact on them as teachers. Such items are often best incorporated throughout the portfolio.

Suggestions for Presenting Professional Portfolios

Having created a professional teaching portfolio, the teacher needs to decide how to handle it during interviews. Some teachers find that they benefit more from keeping the portfolio in their possession as they present it, rather than handing it to the prospective employer. By retaining control, the applicant can use the portfolio to answer questions. Once the portfolio is in the hands of the interviewers, the tendency might be to skim through it at random, possibly wasting valuable interview time. Conversely, some teachers have found it is better if they hand the portfolio to the prospective employer and let the employer choose which entries to discuss. In making the decision of which method to choose, teachers should first consider which method seems most comfortable to them.

While Cook and Kessler suggest that follow-up interviews rather than initial interviews are the best time to introduce professional portfolios, many teachers have felt that no follow-up interview would have been scheduled had they not introduced their portfolios in the initial interview. One interviewee had been told at the end of her interview that she was too young and inexperienced for the teaching position. At that point she asked the interviewer if she could share her portfolio, and she was subsequently hired for the position.

Another option for presenting the portfolio is for the teacher to offer to leave it for the prospective employer to peruse later, which provides an opportunity to come back for a second face-to-face interaction.

Finally, applicants are well advised to avoid sounding all-knowing as they present their portfolios. Since the portfolio provides support and documentation concerning teaching, candidates can frame their responses to questions without engaging in self-promotion. For instance, in response to the question "How would you help students learn?" the applicant could say, "Here's an example of how I try to foster learning."

Incorporating Professional Portfolios in Classrooms

Teachers can continue to take advantage of having professional **teaching portfolios** even after they have secured their teaching positions. They can make their portfolios available to parents during parent visits to the classroom, parent conferences, or open houses. Parents who see the portfolios have more information about and consequently more confidence in their child's teacher. Teachers have to be self-confident to let parents get such a close look at their teaching skills, but the rewards of doing so can be phenomenal. Moreover, teachers can feel a sense of reward and accomplishment as they continuously update and upgrade their portfolios.

Showcase portfolios can also be used by students in the classroom. They can build them for fun and enjoyment and not necessarily for assessment. A good way for teachers to introduce showcase portfolios to students is to present their own portfolios as they would to a prospective employer. Teachers can talk to their students about the thinking that went into the decisions concerning what to include. Students enjoy looking for items to put in their portfolios, and they can present their portfolios to the class, using the teacher's presentation as a model.

Within our three teacher education classrooms, we introduce professional **teaching portfolios** and require students to develop their own as a component of the coursework. We ask students to share their portfolios with the class, which gives them practice in presenting their portfolios and stimulates discussion about alternative items to include, ways to present information, and tips for interviews. The new ideas gleaned from sharing and discussing the portfolios benefit both the students and the instructors.

We have each devised our own methods for portfolio presentations. One of us uses a sign-up sheet with dates listed, which allows students to present portfolios throughout the semester. Beginning a quarter of the way through the term, each class period starts with a student sharing a portfolio. One of us, who stresses the importance of "show and tell" throughout the school year, has students share their portfolios within one or two class periods. Then the instructor collects the portfolios and writes each student a letter with positive comments and suggestions. One of us has her students brainstorm the elements of a high-quality professional portfolio. Two class periods are given to the presentation of portfolios, with peers noting on written forms strengths and suggestions. The students are quite pleased with having positive comments from 25 classmates as well as their instructor. As we continue to work with professional **teaching portfolios** each semester, the process by which we share and evaluate portfolios evolves, with continuing input from current and former students.

Final Thoughts

Our experiences and the experiences of our students with **teaching portfolios** show that they are a powerful instrument for placement or career advancement. Moreover, the process of creating **teaching portfolios** refines an individual's professional and personal goals. It often encourages reflection and creates an awareness of a teacher's professional journey. Just as teachers now emphasize a holistic view of students, taking into account the diversity of learner abilities and experiences, administrators can benefit from the same approach as they examine teachers' portfolios. Professional portfolios can provide a more holistic picture of preservice or inservice teachers, assist teachers in job interviews, document teaching strengths and competencies, and clarify future goals and objectives for the educator. Consequently, preservice or job-seeking educators may be compelled to develop a professional portfolio before beginning their search for a teaching position.

1. John Zubizarreta, "**Teaching Portfolios** and the Beginning Teacher," Phi Delta Kappan, December 1994, p. 324.
2. Bruce G. Barnett, "Using Alternative Assessment Measures in Educational Leadership Preparation Programs: Educational Platforms and Portfolios," Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education, vol. 6, 1992, p. 145.
3. Mary W. Olson, "Portfolios: Education Tools," Reading Psychology: An International Quarterly, vol. 12, 1991, pp. 74, 79.
4. Robert J. Tierney, Mark A. Carter, and Laura E. Desai, Portfolio Assessment in the Reading-Writing Classroom (Norwood, Mass.: Christopher-Gordon, 1991).
5. Donovan Cook and Jeanne Kessler, "The Professional Teaching Portfolio: A Useful Tool for an Effective Job Search," ASCUS Annual, August 1993, p. 15.
6. Vito Perrone, A Letter to Teachers: Reflections on Schooling and the Art of Teaching (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), p. 10.
7. Donna J. Cole et al., "Developing Reflection in Educational Course Work via the Professional Portfolio," GATEways to Teacher Education, vol. 4, 1991, p. 10.
8. Cook and Kessler, p. 15.

9. Cole et al., p. 10.

10. Zubizarreta, p. 324.

11. Cole et al., p. 10.

BETH HURST is an assistant professor of reading at Southwest Missouri State University, Springfield, where CINDY WILSON is an assistant professor in the Department of Early Childhood, Elementary, and Middle School Education, and GENNY CRAMER is a professor of reading.

illustration other

Copyright © 2000 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.