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The Evolution Of Portfolios In Teacher Education

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Abstract

Portfolios have been used in many fields of study to highlight the best work of individuals. In teacher education, portfolios serve as an authentic assessment, in that they contain artifacts representative of the preservice teacher's performance in the classroom. As teachers are accountable for an in-depth understanding and implementation of teaching standards, portfolios can become the avenue for documenting how these standards are being met. The teacher preparation program at Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana has utilized portfolios since 1994. Over the years, these portfolios have evolved from their inception to a performance-based evidence that indicates the attainment of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to be a teacher.

The Evolution of Portfolios in Teacher Education

There is a growing literacy about the teaching profession among preservice teachers at Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana. From the early stages of professional preparation throughout the student teaching experience, students reflect, write, and dialogue about their experiences in classrooms. They become decision-makers about curriculum, instruction, and the teaching/learning environment. They integrate theoretical perspectives with classroom application to become more skillful, thoughtful practitioners. The avenue for this metamorphosis is the teaching portfolio.

This article will describe the process undertaken in the Education Department at this Midwestern, liberal arts college for women to develop use of the teaching portfolio. The definition, rationale, and practices used at this college will be shared, following an overview of the state of portfolio use at a variety of educational levels.

Portfolio Background

The use of portfolios for assessment purposes is not a new endeavor. They have long been used by artists working in various mediums who want to showcase their work. The portfolios are often reviewed by other professionals who value certain qualities. The reviews do not necessarily use quantifiable evaluative indicators nor do they evaluate using criteria that is the same as other reviewers (Brandt, 1987). Portfolios used in this context allow observers "to make up their own minds about the uniqueness and value of their talents" (Rhodes & Shankline, 1993, p. 416).

It can be said that, from its inception, the portfolio was a means of documenting an individual's performance in realistic situations. The notion embraces more constructivist positions towards learning and knowledge acquisition --that the individual formulates his/her own concept of reality based on experiences (Bruner, 1990; Gardner, 1983). A type of performance-based assessment, the portfolio involves the integration of several processes, skills, and concepts to yield a demonstration of what the student knows and/or is able to do. This idea has been applied in varying capacities to learning at all levels, from preschool through postgraduate school to professors attempting to improve teaching and/or attain promotion/tenure status (Seldin, 1993).

There are many conceptualizations of the portfolio as utilized at these different levels. At the elementary level, the information a teacher wants to collect may not be the same for every student; it may vary depending on the overall goals set for that student. At all levels, there is more emphasis on student-, rather than teacher-selection of work. In this way, the development of a portfolio shifts the ownership of learning to the student (Wiggins, 1989, 1992; Winograd, Paris, & Bridge, 1991). While some (e.g., Barton & Collins, 1993; Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991) endorse the use of portfolios as a means to document growth and change in the learner over time, others (e.g., Wolf, 1991; Shulman, 1988; Bloom & Bacon, 1995) envision the portfolio as a display of best work. Many practitioners (e.g., Arter & Spandel, 1992; Winsor & Ellefson, 1995) value the reflective characteristic of the portfolio; work samples are accompanied by commentary or explanation that reveals not only what was taught but why. Along with this, Edgerton, Hutchings, and Quinlan (1993) view the portfolio as a means of documenting the scholarship of teaching for higher education faculty development.

Assessment of development in teacher education programs and proficiency in teaching is a challenge currently being addressed in many colleges and universities. Not only must feedback be of benefit to the student, it must find its way into a systematic process for program improvement (Snyder, Elliott, Bhavnagri, & Boyer, 1993-94). While the comprehensive exam and/or the assignment of trained professionals to observe students in school settings is beneficial in some ways, it is not enough to capture the complexity of the teaching situation and the student's adaptation and learning in the specific environment.

Lee Shulman, professor of education and psychology at Stanford University, led an in-depth study of how teachers might be assessed. This four-year effort, the Stanford Teacher Assessment Project, developed prototypes for assessing schoolteachers that could inform the work of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Shulman (1988) espoused the use of teaching portfolios and believes that they provide a connection to the personal histories that characterize real teaching and make it possible to document the development of teaching and learning over time. More recent research on teacher preparation programs (Ford & Ohlhausen, 1991; Mokhtari, Yellin, Bull, & Montgomery, 1996) suggests that exposure to and use of portfolios in teacher education can play a critical role in positively influencing preservice teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward using portfolios in their own classrooms.

Portfolios as the Link Between Teacher Education and Professional Standards

Campbell, Melenyzer, Nettles, and Wyman (2000) contend that portfolios, which are organized around established standards for teaching, not only make preservice teachers familiar with these guidelines, but facilitate an in-depth understanding of them. Students are constantly asking, “What would competence in this standard look like in actual teacher behavior?” (Campbell et al., 2000, p. 18).

How have standards for teachers developed? Educational reform efforts within the last ten years have focused on the outcomes of public education and on designing new programs to assist students in meeting these outcomes. The National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC) supports this movement, and furthermore, developed outcome-based teaching standards for elementary, middle, and high school levels (NASDTEC, 1994). These standards were developed such that knowledge of curriculum content can no longer be the defining outcome of teacher education programs. Rather, “NASDTEC outcomes are role performances derived from job analyses of beginning teachers and expected of prospective teachers completing state approved teacher education programs” (NASDTEC, p. 8). In keeping with the purposes of context-based assessment, “authentic performance and portfolio...would require the demonstrated ability to apply pedagogical knowledge and skills in real classroom situations” (NASDTEC, p. 11).

The standards established by NASDTEC were influential in the development of standards set forth in 1992 by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), a group comprised of representatives of the teaching profession from various states across the country. In 1998, the Indiana Professional Standards Board (IPSB) integrated these guidelines into a set of ten standards for teachers at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels in the state of Indiana. INTASC and IPSB have been integral in developing a coherent approach to educating and licensing teachers based upon shared views of what constitutes professional teaching. The ten standards are also compatible with the advanced certification standards of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. These principles capture the essence of effective teaching in that they address 1) content knowledge, 2) understanding of human development, 3) diversity awareness, 4) instructional capabilities, 5) creation of a positive learning environment, 6) effective communication, 7) instructional planning, 8) knowledge of assessment strategies, 9) professionalism, and 10) collaboration with colleagues. The knowledge, dispositions, and performances, which each standard addresses, serve as an inclusive set of guidelines to which all facets of teacher preparation should adhere. The work of Shulman and the INTASC (eventually the INTASC/IPSB) standards were influential in the development of guidelines for teaching portfolios at Saint Mary’s College.

Portfolio Development at Saint Mary’s College

During the summer of 1994, a group of three faculty members in the Education Department met regularly to discuss the student and program assessment system in place at that time and to plan for a more authentic method of feedback about student learning. Out of these meetings came a decision to develop a portfolio system of three tiers which would be aligned with the goals of the department and the INTASC/IPSB. Tier I of the teacher education program (sophomore year) consists of general education requirements together with the introductory education course, Foundations of Teaching in a Multicultural Society. Tier II (junior year) includes

two blocks of methods courses for elementary education majors and five education courses for the secondary program participants. Tier III for both groups is student teaching.

The Guide to the Student Teaching Portfolio handbook was written that summer by the three faculty members. It was determined that this portfolio should include three sections: Background Information, Selected Entries, and Professional Evaluation. Background Information consisted of a professional resume, a hand-written philosophy, and a student teaching site ethnography. Shulman's (cited in Mills, 1993) four-component format (course planning and preparation, actual teaching, evaluating student learning and providing feedback, and professional development in areas related to teaching) was adopted for the Selected Entries section. It was emphasized that student teachers should choose items for Section Two that represented their best work over the semester (this changed in subsequent years as described below). There was no limit to the number of entries in this section, but each of the four parts had to be represented at least once. The Professional Evaluation section consisted of copies of observation evaluations by both the college supervisor and cooperating teacher. All entries in the student teaching portfolio were to be accompanied by a context which explained the circumstances surrounding the development of the entry and the Education Department goal or INTASC/IPSB standard it addressed; a reflective commentary which captured the thoughts of the student teacher about the experiences was also included with each entry.

The first guide served as the prototype for those subsequently developed for each of the other two tiers. The three sections (Background Information, Selected Entries, and Professional Evaluation) were the same for portfolios at each level, although the specific entries within these sections varied. The "Initial Teaching Portfolio" (Tier I) included course and field placement assignments such as an educational history, a school site ethnography, a family ethnography, and a journal completed by the student regarding both the course and field. The "Methods and Materials Portfolio" (Tier II) included assignments completed for both the field and course component of all of the methods courses, educational psychology, and/or any course in the minor/endorsement area. While there was not much room for choice of artifact in the Initial Teaching Portfolio, the Methods and Materials Portfolio allowed for the student to choose from many alternatives which would be suitable and which would best represent their work.

In addition to information about the definition, purpose, goals, and format of the portfolio, the guides for each level also included an evaluation rubric; this rubric was comprised of two parts: 1) a presentation evaluation, and 2) a written component evaluation. It was determined that students would present and submit these portfolios at the end of each semester to two faculty and a small group of fellow student presenters.

The three guides were field tested during the 1994-95 academic school year. To prepare students for development of these portfolios, two faculty offered "Ultimate Portfolio Workshops" which delineated research support for portfolios, the importance of alternative assessment, and the format for entries with accompanying contexts and reflective commentaries. With the use of the guides and information from the workshops, students completed their portfolios in the various tier levels with minimal difficulty. At the end of the fall semester in 1994, students proudly presented the first portfolios.

Changes: Year One to Year Seven

As with any new implementation in teacher education, it is critical to continually evaluate ideas and to make necessary changes to keep up with the status of the profession. In the case of portfolio development at Saint Mary's College, all three guidebooks have been revised several times to reflect changing conceptions about assessment and the evolution of professional standards as described above.

The INTASC/IPSB standards for teaching were adapted by Saint Mary's College to what is now called the Saint Mary's College Performance-Based Standards. These standards are included in each guidebook with a clear identification of specific standards which should be addressed through each portfolio. Instead of identifying the department goals or INTASC/IPSB standards met through an entry, students now delineate the Saint Mary's College standard(s) met and how the artifact demonstrates proficiency in the standard(s). Most recently, the evaluation rubric has been organized much more specifically around the standards. Evaluators indicate the extent to which students have attained a proficient level of understanding of the teaching standards. In addition, students do a self-evaluation on level of mastery of the standards. This data is being collected and analyzed in an effort to improve the program and continually refine the portfolios.

In addition, some of the portfolio requirements changed as a result of feedback from cooperating teachers, principals, and the students themselves. For example, Section Two of the Student Teaching Portfolio, which was originally comprised of artifacts chosen by students, now includes some required entries, such as a unit and a videotaped lesson. While student self-selection is still largely dominant for all three portfolios, it has been emphasized that the students are very selective in their choice of artifacts; a solid representation of knowledge and teaching performance through a "less is more" sampling of work is critical to the student's reflection on him/herself as a unique teacher.

As the department continues to work with standards and performance-based assessment, new questions continually arise which are being addressed. Should every course have designated assignments (meeting certain standards) as potential portfolio entries with the idea that students choose items for inclusion based on a common "pool" of artifacts? Should classroom teachers also become evaluators of the portfolios? How can students who are not evaluated as proficient in a certain area be remediated? These and other questions are currently being addressed by faculty in the Education Department.

Reflective Critique

Teacher education programs are striving to become more performance based so that teachers entering the profession in the twenty-first century have the knowledge, dispositions, and performances necessary to succeed. The Education Department at Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana has integrated the development of portfolios into all phases of the program as one means of documenting and demonstrating teaching performances according to standards set by the state and the department.

Not only do portfolios in teacher education document this proficiency, they serve to prepare preservice teachers for changes in licensing that will occur in the very near future. Beginning teaching licenses in Indiana will soon concur with an “induction” period of two years during which time the individual will have a mentor and must compile a teaching portfolio composed of certain artifacts, such as a series of lesson plans, a videotape of self teaching, etc. These portfolios also require articulation about the way in which teaching standards are addressed. If this portfolio is deemed acceptable, the teacher is granted the next five-year license. Documentation and reflection will continue to be a part of continued licensing throughout a teacher’s professional career.

Several other benefits have emerged from the use of portfolios. Over the years, program evaluation at Saint Mary’s has been facilitated; a close examination of standards met has revealed gaps in the program that have been remediated. Another advantage is that portfolios have provided students with marketing tools as they seek employment. The department has received good feedback about them from school administrators, personnel directors, etc. as they review teaching candidates; these individuals indicate that they learn much more about the abilities of the candidate through his/ her portfolio. Finally and most importantly, portfolios enable students to be more reflective as a student and hopefully throughout their careers. Portfolios have aided in the formation of articulate, self-confident, and well-prepared preservice teachers.

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