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ABSTRACT

Secondary teacher education students should be given clear instruction in the assembling and assessment of professional teaching portfolios. In the teacher education program at the University of Louisville (Kentucky), student teachers are asked to prepare portfolios, exactly as all secondary students must in the state of Kentucky, meaning that the student teachers discover "how students feel." For professional portfolios, students should be provided with detailed writing assignments. Examples from numerous portfolio entries and the "letters to portfolio readers," which were written by the student teachers as reflections on what they were doing, illustrate criteria against which personal and professional growth can be assessed. Criteria for judging the portfolios can be developed and decided upon jointly with the participants. The prospective teachers' reflections on accomplishments, values, goals, interests, learning strategies, and their understanding of what they are learning about teaching indicate the importance of professional portfolios in teacher preparation. Examples taken directly from student portfolios serve as illustrations of the students' own reflections on five topics: (1) what they did well; (2) what they valued in their teaching; (3) their goals, interests, and agendas as teachers; (4) their strategies and processes for learning and teaching; and (5) their understanding of what they learned about teaching. Portfolios are powerful learning devices for all students enrolled in teacher education programs, and should be encouraged for their many positive results. (HB)

"Now You Know What Your Students Will Be Feeling" : Reflections from Teacher Education Students' Portfolios

a presentation at the Miami University
New Directions in Portfolio Assessment Conference
October 1992

by Elizabeth J. Stroble
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Abstract:

This presentation describes procedures used to help secondary teacher education students assemble and assess portfolios of professional work. Examples from their portfolio entries and letters to portfolio readers illustrate criteria against which we jointly assessed personal and professional growth. The prospective teachers' reflections on accomplishments, values, goals, interests, learning strategies, and their understanding of what they are learning about teaching indicate the importance of professional portfolios in teacher preparation. The presentation also describes the instructor's shifting of portfolio procedure decisions from shared ownership with students to student ownership of those decisions.

"Now You Know What Your Students Will Be Feeling": Reflections from Teacher Education Students' Portfolios

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As writing teachers implement portfolio systems in their classrooms, they find that a number of tough questions must be negotiated for the system to meet the needs of teacher and students and to reflect theoretical assumptions about language and learning (Sommers, 1991, Weinbaum, 1991). As a teacher educator implementing professional portfolios in preservice secondary education courses, I, too, have faced questions that challenge my ability to align theory and practice in my classroom. Because "a portfolio pedagogy supports an open classroom and relies upon a genuinely academic environment" (Yancey, 1992, p. 18), I have found that a process I once owned now must be owned by my students. The shift I have made in my classroom from shared decision-making to student-owned decision-making has been one of the serendipitous results of a portfolio system, one that I believe results in increased opportunities for teacher education students to reflect on personal and professional growth.

Professional Portfolios: The Context

The secondary education department at the University of Louisville currently offers the four courses required prior to student teaching in two six-hour blocks team-taught by university faculty on site at local high schools. Based on planning with high school teachers and several years' experience operating an alternative certification program, we immerse our students in

social service agencies and in local high school classrooms early in their program, foregoing "observation" in favor of actual teaching experiences in partnership with high school teachers. Class projects connect theory and practice, with reflection on practice as a primary goal of the course.

Because of the context provided by legislative mandates in the form of the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), the entire state is undergoing changes in school governance, finance, curriculum, and assessment. The statewide emphasis on performance assessments--especially the portfolio assessment of learning in writing, math, social studies, and science--dovetails nicely with portfolio instruction and assessment in teacher education classes. All K-12 performance assessments are rated according to categories that describe students' work as novice, apprentice, proficient, or distinguished. Figure 1 displays the general category descriptions. Specific rubrics are used to assess students' performances in areas such as writing and problem-solving. Teacher education students must become skilled and comfortable with these assessments. Thus, the professional portfolios that our preservice teachers prepare provide an opportunity to "know how students feel" when they must assemble their own portfolios.

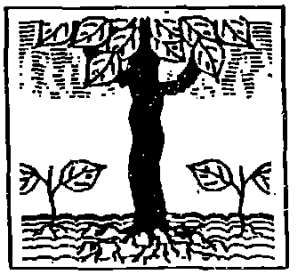
As a result of my experiences with professional portfolios, I have changed the following structuring procedures to increase students' professional reflections: contents, criteria, assessment, and reflection requirements. The shift in ownership of those structuring procedures has fostered prospective teachers' thinking about teaching and learning. As a result, the clearest evidence of my professional worth as a teacher educator--what I would include in my own professional portfolio--is my students' reflective work in the form of portfolios they have assembled and the record of the decisions they made to structure the portfolios they created.

Figure 1

QUICK GUIDE to Student Assessment in Kentucky

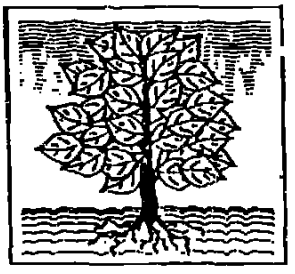
Thomas C. Boysen, Commissioner of Education

PERFORMANCE LEVELS



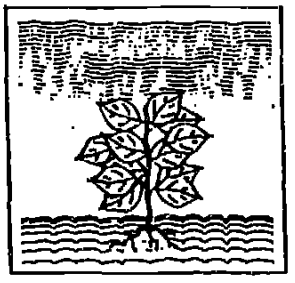
Distinguished

At this highest level, the student has deep understanding of the concept or process and can complete all important parts of the task. The student can communicate well, think concretely and abstractly, and analyze and interpret data.



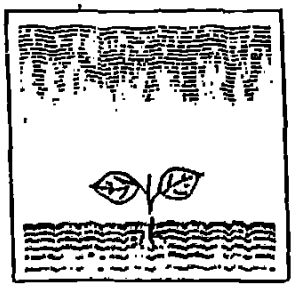
Proficient

The student understands the major concepts, can do almost all of the task, and can communicate concepts clearly.



Apprentice

The student has gained more understanding, can do some important parts of the task.



Novice

The student is beginning to show an understanding of new information or skills.

printed with state funds

Portfolio Structuring Decisions: A Shift in Role

Shared decision-making

Although I first used portfolios as an instructional and assessment tool in an English methods class three semesters ago, I have altered the portfolio procedures most as a result of two semesters' use in the site-based general methods and instructionalmedia course. At first I alone made many of the decisions about the contents, criteria, assessment, and reflection procedures, including the decision about how much my students could contribute to the decisions. I required the following contents in the English methods portfolio: one unit plan, six lesson plans, five writing samples, six journal entries, and a letter to the portfolio reader. The criteria by which the students and I assessed the contents were jointly determined. I provided checklists for the design of unit and lesson plans. Additionally, students wrote principles to guide their instructional planning in these categories: meeting diverse students' needs, teaching literature, and teaching writing. The guiding principles, a few of which follow, provided another set of criteria by which the portfolio contents were assessed:

- Use universally relevant themes in order to connect with the literature.
- Be cautious when selecting materials; evaluate the content, not just the author's race or gender.
- Create an environment where the students have a voice in the choices made in the classroom.
- During revision and editing stages, shift the burden from the teacher to the student through response groups.

Finally, students addressed the Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts (NCTE, 1986) in their letters to portfolio readers. They identified which items in their portfolios provided the best evidence of their growth in the knowledge of language development, composing and analyzing language, reading and literature, nonprint and instructional media, evaluation, and research. They assessed their pedagogical strengths and weaknesses in

instructional planning; instructional performance; instructional assessment; instruction in oral and written language; instruction in reading, literature, and nonprint media; instructional uses of emerging technologies; and instruction in language for learning. They discussed their developing attitudes regarding concern for students, adaptability, and a professional perspective.

The English methods students completed a sociogram that I used to pair compatible readers for assessment purposes. Each pair traded portfolios, rated unit and lesson plans, responded to ideas in the writing samples and journal entries, and wrote a letter responding to the portfolio author. I did the same for each student and also responded to each student's assessment of the peer's portfolio.

The students' reflections were limited to the letter to the portfolio reader. Students explained their growth in preparing to teach English, as defined by the jointly determined standards, and directed the reader to specific examples indicating the strongest work and areas that needed improvement. While writing samples and journal entries also contained thoughtful statements about teaching and learning English, the reflections were not as explicit, as personal, nor as comprehensive as those found in the portfolio letters.

As I reflected on those insightful reflections in the letters my students wrote to each other and to me as portfolio readers, I realized that I wanted to extend the power of the portfolio by encouraging reflection throughout the semester's course work and by encouraging greater student ownership of the process of structuring, developing, and assessing. Shared decision-making gave way to student-owned decision making.

Student-owned decision-making

In the second semester of teaching the site-based general methods and instructional media class, those of us who taught it dramatically shifted to the teacher education students the decision-making about portfolio contents, criteria, assessment, and reflection requirements. The students in these team-taught courses selected the contents (twelve items total, with at least

two non-print items) to correlate with the six course goals:

1. understanding the complex lives of students and adults in schools
2. planning, organizing, and teaching lessons in a positive classroom environment
3. designing and administering assessm :nt strategies and methods
4. nurturing personal growth and professional development
5. improving self assessment and peer feedback processes
6. organizing for student teaching

In a letter to the portfolio reader, students addressed the course goals point by point, explaining how the contents of the portfolio conveyed their growth in learning to teach. Students also assessed their strengths and weaknesses as a teacher, pointing to evidence in the portfolio, and identifying their best and worst pieces of work in the portfolio with explanations.

As one of the first class projects, students developed the criteria by which the portfolios were assessed at the end of the term. Working in small groups, they synthesized individual suggestions to develop specifications for assessing the portfolio in terms of course goals and in the presentation of the portfolio. As an example, students suggested these criteria for assessing goal five, improving self assessment and peer feedback processes:

- evidence of acceptance of criticism from peers and instructors
- using failures/successes as opportunity for growth
- evidence of introspection

For presentation criteria, students recommended that we assess portfolios for:

- neatness
- organization
- thoroughness
- relevancy
- logical planning
- evidence of growth apparent

These criteria were then mapped onto a KERA-style rubric that defined novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished performances in the methods/media classes. Distinguished work was considered to be a rich, distinctive, or creative performance according to the criteria set for the task. Components had to be focused, clear, and precise. The task would be complex in thought and insight as well as well-written/produced, and well-organized. By contrast, a novice performance was characterized by minimal performance according to the established criteria. It might lack key components, be filled with errors, and be organized incoherently.

In one of the final classes, students brought their portfolios complete with a self-assessment, based on the established criteria. They paired with peers to trade and assess portfolios. The four instructors for the two sections of the course responded to the self and peer assessments, balancing those student assessments with their own judgements to make a final determination of novice, apprentice, proficient, or distinguished performance. In almost every case, the self, peer, and professor ratings matched.

In addition to shifting decision-making responsibility for portfolio contents, criteria, and assessment even more to class members, the team teachers for these courses also made our goal of student reflection more explicit and comprehensive. For example, two course goals emphasized personal and professional growth and improving self assessment processes. The work of the course was organized around twelve projects which included teaching in high school classrooms, completing reflective essays, researching and writing case studies, microteaching, and collaborative research agendas related to course goals. Students self-assessed and reflected on each of the individual assignments within these twelve projects and rated the work of each project holistically, using the KERA-style rubric. They also explained which component of the project was their best work and weakest. Reflection permeated the written work which stood alone or accompanied performances such as teaching peers or high school students. As a result, students wrote rich personal and professional reflections as the course progressed, even before they composed letters to the portfolio readers at the end of the semester.

As I examined students' reflections in the portfolio letters and in individual assignments, I found Camp's (1990) categories useful for describing the nature of the students' comments. I have selected examples to illustrate the students' reflections on 1) what they did well, 2) what they valued in their teaching, 3) their own goals and interests--their agendas as teachers, 4) their strategies and processes for learning about teaching, and 5) their understanding of what they learned about teaching.

1)What they did well

When students described their successes, they often related general feelings of accomplishment. This history major described what the portfolio demonstrated: "The following is a product of months of hard work. It should demonstrate strengths, weaknesses, and growth. Above all, it should be the story of how one young student became one young teacher." An art major cited particular strengths: "My strengths as a teacher include my ability to do reflective assessment of both myself and others, my ideas for authentic assessment strategies, my concern for the affective domain, and my positive attitude." Occasionally, a preservice teacher described a specific classroom event and its personal meaning: "When Sarah and I taught class I realized that I can be unbiased as long as I am constantly trying to overcome it--sort of like fighting an endless battle with yourself. But, it is only through this battle that one can treat a student and all the other students fairly. In class with Sarah I tried to be evenhanded in my treatment. I tried to do the best I could for the class as a whole. And, most of all, I tried to be kind to all the kids without regard to race, intelligence, or gender. I found that as the day went along I became better at asking questions and letting the kids answer to better suit my own goals of fair treatment." These student had increased their awareness of themselves as teachers.

2. What they valued in their teaching

Preservice teachers' reflections on their classroom teaching experiences revealed the aspects of teaching they valued and what they hoped to continue in the future. An art teacher wrote "I came away from the day thinking how very, very important it is to develop sensitivity to students' needs and abilities. Though I'd like to have all the understanding, now I realize that it will be gained step by step, effort by effort. Though it is important to have plans, I will always need to be sensitive and flexible in carrying out my lesson." More specifically, an English major asserted: "I will write with my students. By modeling, I hope to encourage my students to become more active in the writing process." A physical educator thought: "I like to be active and creative in my lessons and encourage students to strive for the best. I feel that I am responsible to provide the student with the baseline data and engrain it in their minds and bodies, willfully." These values were expressed even more strongly in the agendas they set for themselves as teachers.

3. Their own goals and interests--their agendas as teachers

The students' reflections illustrated their awareness of the work ahead. After teaching an algebra class, this student wrote: "There is something else that I can see that I need to work on. That is to build some positive ideas or concepts out of wrong answers. Don't just dismiss them, or ignore them. After all, how can you encourage risk taking if you completely ignore the wrong answers? If you try to take the answer and build on it, more of a discussion might ensue, getting more students involved and thereby encouraging the students to take more risks in answering. This would eventually increase the students' problem solving abilities and build their self confidence." Another math major wrote this: "I did, however, learn from this experience. One thing I discovered and something which I need to work on is motivating students. I had a difficult time getting the students to participate and share ideas." Another preservice teacher set this agenda: "I do feel that I could try to incorporate more multicultural literature into my lessons as

well as developing a more sympathetic ear for culturally diverse students." Reflections on their goals and interests often focused on what they could do to insure greater success for their students. Their strategies and processes for learning those strategies also appeared in their reflective writings.

4)Their strategies and processes for learning about teaching, including their awareness of those strategies

A student in the English methods class wrote this general statement: "Today I understand more fully the science behind teaching, the need for teachers to analyze, to investigate, to create and to function as problem solvers." Another shared this event as an illustration of her learning about teaching: ". . . but it was In the Middle that taught me the most about how to teach. I found myself this semester confident with teaching drama and literature and treading water when teaching composition and mythology. This text offered a view of looking at all teaching as teaching. Though this sounds extremely simple, it made getting through these difficult subjects much easier. It was all communication and that was a level on which I have always felt comfortable. By increasing my comfort level, I was able to teach and learn from these students." After teaching a Spanish class, this student explained: "The teacher liked the game and she thought it was good. She felt the students had fun with it. I personally prefer, as I previously stated, that a game where there are only winners would be better. There is also the possibility that when games are frequently played that the students would be "winners" an equal amount of time and they would not become discouraged with Spanish because of it. This hypothesis would take time to prove and I have yet to have enough time to test it." Students often attributed their learning to careful analysis of classroom events.

5)Their understanding of what they learned about teaching

As the preservice teachers wrote about their own learning, they related present to past

views. One English major wrote: "I realize that the idea that inspired me to teach (that I might sit around and talk about books with people) is only a tenth of what teaching requires. The class so far has encouraged me to see how reading, writing, and speaking deserve equal focus." Another commented: "To me, the class has changed my previous teaching viewpoint of doing the best you can, to one of encouraging, prodding, and if necessary, benignly manipulating the students into doing the best they can. This is a move in focus from me to the students and it is in this class that this shift has taken place." In a letter to the portfolio reader, this student reflected on how her portfolio represented her: "This collection represents, for me, a great deal of careful planning, hard work, and analysis of my own thoughts, feelings, and priorities. I'm not sure I'm completely satisfied with the message it sends about me, but I don't think that is from lack of work, or effort, but rather from the feeling that I have that the work is unfinished. It is unfinished mostly because even now, at the end of the semester, I feel myself growing--absorbing new ideas and ways of thinking. I am far from reaching the point where I am the teacher I want to be, and yet I have grown a great deal in thought over the semester." The openness reflected in their writings offers promise for continued learning about teaching.

Final Reflections: Who Needs Portfolios?

After we incorporated reflective writing in every course assignment, I was not sure we still needed a portfolio to accomplish our goal of improving students' personal and professional reflections. Portfolio pedagogy--with its emphasis on student selection and representation--helped me share with students the decisions about portfolio procedures and eventually to share with students the ownership of decisions about portfolio procedures. I realized that reflection could not wait until the letter to the portfolio reader. Reflection had to be an explicit course goal. In my current English methods class, students have designed the content, form, criteria, and rubrics for five of the eight class projects. One of their projects

calls for students to determine the form of final course assessment. Will they select a portfolio process? Have they tired of the portfolios created in two previous teacher education courses? While I may no longer need the portfolio to reflect on how I will restructure my classroom, my students may need it to represent their professional and personal selves. What is clear is the insights that preservice teachers can gain when prompted to reflect.

My reflections on portfolio instruction and assessment have led me to significant decisions about the structure of my classroom, transferring to teacher education students portfolio procedure decisions designed to enhance their opportunities to reflect on their personal and professional growth. Are the portfolio procedures working, and more importantly, is the restructuring of my classroom working, to promote greater reflection? The preliminary results are positive and the kind of evidence I'll gladly include in my own professional portfolio.

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