Creating Your Own Professional Portfolio

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Many school districts are using professional portfolios as part of their hiring, retention, evaluation, and promotion process. This article provides educators with guidelines and resources for developing professional portfolios that reflect their experiences, training, and achievements as educators. Although the guidelines are presented in the context of educators entering the profession, they can be adapted by educators who have been teaching for several years.
You applied for a teaching position in a local school district by sending a letter of interest, a resume, and a completed employment application. A week later, the superintendent's office contacts you and asks you to come in for an interview and to bring your professional portfolio. How would you feel? What would you do?

Like the district in this vignette, many school districts are increasingly using professional portfolios as part of their hiring, retention, evaluation, and promotion processes (Green & Smyser, 1995). If you attended one of the growing number of universities that require their teacher education students to complete a professional portfolio representing their teaching experiences and training (Bloom & Bacon, 1993; McCroft, 1998; Pleasants, Johnson, & Trent, 1998), you would probably respond to this request by happily, and perhaps a little nervously, scheduling the interview and reviewing your portfolio. You may realize that sharing your portfolio with others at the interview will help you make a favorable impression and allow you to feel more comfortable as you support your oral responses with visual evidence of your skills and experiences, such as successful reading and content area lessons you have taught (Guillaume & Yopp, 1995). However, if you completed a teacher training program that did not require you to develop a professional portfolio, your excitement about being called for an interview may be combined with a bit of panic and confusion. Once you overcome your panic, you start to work on putting together your portfolio, asking yourself such questions as

- What is a professional portfolio for teachers?
- When and how should I start to develop my portfolio?
- What items should I include in my portfolio, and how should I organize them?
- How can I package my portfolio?

This article is designed to help preservice and inservice teachers and other professionals address these questions and provide them with guidelines for developing professional portfolios that reflect their experiences, training, and achievements as educators. Although the guidelines are presented in the context of educators entering the profession, these guidelines and resources can be adapted by inservice educators who want to develop professional portfolios that allow them to apply for new positions, document teaching effectiveness and professional competence as part of the teacher evaluation process, foster reflection and self-assessment, and identify and address professional development needs. The guidelines also can be used to assist teacher educators in implementing professional portfolios as part of their teacher education programs and in helping their programs move toward performance-based licensing (see the sidebar “Benefits of a Professional Portfolio”).

**What Is a Professional Teaching Portfolio?**

A professional portfolio is a thoughtful, organized, and continuous collection of a variety of authentic products that document a professional's progress, goals, efforts, attitudes, pedagogical practices, achievements, talents, interests, and development over time (Winsor & Ellefsen, 1995). Portfolios are both product- and process-oriented and involve educators in the purposeful, collaborative, and reflective process of selecting and compiling multiple sources of information that reveal their beliefs, skills, knowledge, accomplishments, unique characteristics, and commitments with respect to a variety of teaching and learning experiences (Guillaume & Yopp, 1995). Through the development of professional portfolios, prospective and practicing teaching professionals can document their development and reflections as educators and can showcase their knowledge, skills, and accomplishments (Antonelli, McCormick, & Donato, 1997).

Dietz (1994) delineated three types of professional portfolios: a presentation portfolio, a working portfolio, and a learner portfolio. A presentation portfolio is one that documents and showcases a teacher's achievements, strengths, and areas of expertise. A working portfolio is one that contains items that are selected to conform to a set of prescribed competencies and standards to meet requirements for licensure or to certify the achievements of educators seeking national certifications such as the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards or the Council for Exceptional Children's Professionally Recognized Special Educator. A learner portfolio offers a framework for reflecting on and providing evidence related to a set of learning outcomes.

**When and How Should I Start to Develop My Portfolio?**

The earlier you begin to collect items for your portfolio, the better (Heskett, 1998; May, 1997). The professional portfolio may be assembled near the completion of your teacher education program; however, you can start to select and collect items for inclusion in your portfolio each
semester. Therefore, during each semester, it is recommended that you identify and save potential portfolio items by storing them in a box or folder and dating and annotating them so that you will remember their significance when putting your portfolio together (Wolf, 1996). If you are unsure about which items to store for possible inclusion in your portfolio, you may want to speak to your professors, advisor, and peers to help identify potential portfolio items.

What Items Should I Include, and How Should I Organize Them?

The items included in and the organization of a professional portfolio will vary from individual to individual and will depend on the purpose(s) and context for developing the portfolio (Wolf, Whinery, & Hagerty, 1995). Although others may offer guidance to assist you in identifying potential items, it is your portfolio and therefore your responsibility to select the items to be included. When making these decisions, you must choose from a wide range of potential items that you have produced during your training program. Where appropriate, it is recommended that you include authentic items such as actual products you developed and implemented; work samples from your students; and photographs, recordings, and videos of classrooms and classroom activities. When including photos, video, audio recordings, and samples of students’ work, make sure you have the necessary permissions, maintain confidentiality, and use caption statements to provide the reader with a context for understanding the item.

In selecting items, carefully examine each potential item and consider what it reveals about your teaching ability, philosophy, strengths, growth, self-reflection, unique characteristics and experiences, as well as who will be looking at your portfolio and for what reasons they will be examining it (Giuliano, 1997). Briefly, in choosing portfolio items, it may be helpful to ask yourself several questions:

1. What does the item reveal about my skills, knowledge, growth, experiences, self-reflections, and attitudes?
2. Is the item consistent with my educational philosophy and best practices?
3. Does the item demonstrate my best work?
4. Is the item free of grammatical and other errors?
5. Is the item authentic, and does it showcase my skills and experiences in working with students, families, and other professionals?
6. What processes and experiences did I engage in to produce the item?
7. What does the item reveal about me on a personal level?

Benefits of a Professional Portfolio

In addition to providing a picture of your knowledge and skills to prospective employers, professional portfolios benefit educators and schools in a variety of ways. For example, professional portfolios assist educators in understanding the portfolio process and using portfolios to examine the growth and progress of their students (Gillarrane & Yopp, 1995). Portfolios help prospective teachers reflect on the complexity and subtlety of the teaching and learning process and serve as a framework for engaging in self-assessment to identify your strengths and weaknesses; to share ideas about teaching, learning, and the profession with others (Wilcox, 1996); to plan for your professional development (Green & Smyser, 1995); and to structure mentoring and collaborative activities (Wolf, 1991). Professional portfolios can also be used to evaluate teacher education programs by offering feedback to validate successful aspects of training programs as well as areas in need of revision.

Another factor affecting the selection of items is the organization of the portfolio. The organizational structure of the portfolio has a reciprocal relationship with the items selected for inclusion in the portfolio. This means that the items you select may help you determine the ways to organize your portfolio, and the ways you organize your portfolio may also guide you in selecting items to include.

Although your portfolio should be structured so that it is easy for others to follow, it can be organized in a variety of ways. Some educators organize their portfolios according to the chronological order in which items were produced; others develop theme-based portfolios (Dolaise, 1996). For example, a portfolio of a special educator might be organized around the theme of the actual roles and tasks special educators perform in schools. We propose several potential categories for organizing a professional portfolio and offer a variety of potential portfolio items that relate to these categories.

Introductory Information

To assist the reader in understanding the organization and value of the portfolio, it is suggested that you include
Background Information

The portfolio should include a section that provides background information about yourself. This section offers the reader an overview of some of your professional experiences and achievements. Potential items relating to this section include:

- an up-to-date resume;
- transcripts, national and statewide examination results, certification documents, awards, honors, fellowships, and letters of recognition;
- a narrative about yourself or an educational autobiography of your experiences as a learner and a teacher; and
- letters of recommendation.

Because many school districts are looking for staff members who can lead extracurricular clubs, teams, and activities, this section of your portfolio can also include a listing of your hobbies, interests, and special talents. In addition, because many school districts are serving students and families from linguistically diverse backgrounds, an indication of the languages you speak can also increase your chances of being hired.

Educational Philosophy and Teaching Goals

Potential employers will be particularly interested in your educational philosophy and teaching goals as these provide an understanding of the principles that guide you as an educator as well as offer insights into your personality. Because an understanding of your educational philosophy can also help you and the school district determine if you are compatible, an important part of your portfolio should be a narrative statement outlining your teaching goals and your core beliefs about education, teaching, learning, curriculum, assessment, classroom management, diversity, family involvement, technology, and collaboration. The statement can also address how you arrived at these beliefs and include the theories, principles, and experiences that have shaped your goals and beliefs, as well as the implications of these goals and principles for teaching, learning, curriculum, assessment, classroom management, family involvement, technology, and schools. The educational philosophy section of your portfolio can also be supplemented by relevant papers you have written and assignments you have completed that are consistent with or that expand on your educational philosophy and teaching goals.

Fieldwork Experiences

Potential employers also will be very interested in your experiences working with a range of students and professionals in a variety of educational settings; for this reason, I suggest that your portfolio include a section that not only lists the number of fieldwork experiences you have had but also summarizes the nature of these experiences. The section should describe each of your fieldwork experiences, your responsibilities, and the types of students and professionals with whom you worked. This section can also present your observations and reflections regarding these experiences and outline the projects and activities you completed during each fieldwork experience. The narrative summary of your fieldwork experiences can be supplemented by use of accompanying photographs, recordings, and videos of the settings in which you worked; the students, professionals, and family members with whom you worked; and the products you developed.

Educational Assessment Skills

Special educators are asked to use their educational assessment skills to participate in many important educational decisions regarding students, including determining students’ educational placement and need for related services, identifying teaching and Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and objectives, assessing students’ mastery of skills, and evaluating the effectiveness of the educational programs of their students. Because of the importance of educational assessment, school districts want information displayed in your portfolio about your ability to employ a variety of formal and informal assessment techniques to identify students’ needs, develop instructional programs that address these needs, and monitor students’ progress on a continuous basis. Your skills at using assessment techniques that are typically part of the multidisciplinary team planning process can be documented in your portfolio by including the following:

1. A comprehensive assessment report you wrote including a school observation; family, teacher, and student interviews; and the administration of several standardized tests;
2. An IEP you developed;
3. Products that reveal your participation in the process for identifying appropriate testing modifications, alternative testing techniques, and assistive technology for students;
4. examples of your use of nondiscriminatory assessment techniques with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; and
5. a summary of your experiences in differentiating cultural and linguistic differences from learning problems.

Your skills at using informal assessment techniques to demonstrate evidence of student learning can be evidenced by inclusion of such portfolio items as authentic/performance assessments and rubrics you have developed as well as copies of a curriculum-based assessment, a miscue analysis, a running record, and a functional assessment you have conducted. Including examples of a portfolio assessment performed with a student, self-evaluation questionnaires, think-aloud techniques, student journals, and learning logs also can document your ability to perform a variety of student-centered assessment techniques. Examples of teacher-made tests and testing modifications you have employed also can document your skill at designing procedures that provide students with the opportunity to perform at their optimal level. Your ability to employ a range of observational techniques such as anecdotal recording can be revealed through the inclusion of student observations, weekly progress notes on students, and summaries of student reactions to lessons. Because many school districts are using technology-based assessment techniques to evaluate their students, evidence to show your skill at using technology-based testing to tailor assessments to the skill levels of students also would be appropriate for inclusion in your portfolio.

Instructional Skills

School districts seek teachers who can link assessment and instruction and who can understand, develop, and implement developmentally appropriate instructional programs that promote student learning in a variety of content areas. They look for educators who are knowledgeable about curriculum, learning styles, and instructional resources, and skilled at using learning strategies, peer-mediated instruction, student-centered and culturally relevant instruction, and instructional adaptations. Potential items that can showcase your teaching effectiveness include

- videocassettes or audiocassettes of your teaching;
- evaluations of your teaching from students, instructors, cooperating teachers, peers, and employers;
- samples of students' work as a result of instruction they received from you;
- photographs and/or descriptions of materials, learning centers, and bulletin boards you developed; and
- evaluations of curriculum materials or software programs that you have completed.

Your instructional skills also can be demonstrated through the inclusion of product-based portfolio items such as sample lesson plans, units of instruction, instructional materials, cooperative learning activities, learning packets and IEPs you have developed, examples of your use of instructional technology (i.e., Web sites and Internet-based lessons you have developed), culturally relevant instruction, learning strategies, individualized instruction, multi-level instruction, and adapted materials for diverse learners.

Classroom Management Skills

When making hiring decisions regarding educational personnel, school districts place a high priority on a prospective educator's classroom management skills. In recognition of the importance of classroom management skills, your portfolio can provide evidence that shows you are able to create and manage effective, efficient, and appealing instructional environments that promote learning and foster appropriate behavior in all students. Your ability to design and manage effective learning environments can be demonstrated by such portfolio items as a copy of a behavior change project you conducted to increase an appropriate behavior or decrease an inappropriate behavior of a student or a group of students, graphs to demonstrate your success in helping students acquire new behaviors through use of self-management techniques, and a copy of a classroom management plan that you developed. The classroom management plan can include rules, routines, and procedures that students and teachers follow in your classroom as well as how you would organize space, time, materials, and furniture in your classroom and a drawing or photograph of a classroom you have designed. Other potential portfolio items that address your classroom management skills include self-reflections of your use of different classroom management techniques, examples of your use of student contracts, affective education strategies and peer-mediated techniques, and your analysis of a case study or incident involving classroom management issues.

Collaborative Skills

The ability to work collaboratively with families and other professionals is important for successful functioning as a special educator. While collaboration skills are employed in all types of special education positions, they are especially important when you are applying to work in inclusion and resource room programs. Therefore, your portfolio should include items that provide an indication of your ability to work collaboratively with families and other professionals, such as a summary of your interactions with families and your experiences teaching or working collaboratively with other professionals, samples of correspondence sent to families and other professionals (e.g., class newsletters and notes to parents), and examples of products you developed for families and
products developed with other professionals. Your ability to work collaboratively with others can also be revealed in your portfolio by including items that address your community-based experiences and your involvement in extracurricular activities. For example, your involvement in community events and after-school activities can be documented by copies of thank-you notes you received from community organizations and groups and a summary of your involvement in community events and extracurricular activities.

**Commitment to Professional Development**

Education, particularly special education, is a field that is constantly changing and evolving to respond to new research, model programs, instructional strategies, and legislation. In light of these changes, school districts are looking for educators who keep abreast of new developments in the field and continue to develop their skills by engaging in professional development activities. Therefore, you want your portfolio to include items that serve to document your commitment to being a lifelong learner who takes advantage of opportunities to grow professionally. Potential items relating to this section include:

1. a listing or summary of conferences and workshops attended, visits to model programs, observations of and meetings with master teachers, presentations you have given to others, and articles you have published;
2. a summary of your involvement in professional and community organizations (e.g., activities, leadership positions held, and memberships in professional organizations) and mentoring experiences;
3. an abstract of a research project you conducted;
4. copies or summaries of articles and books that inform your teaching; and
5. additional training you have received in specific areas (e.g., crisis intervention or peer-mediation training).

In addition, your portfolio can include a professional growth plan that includes personal and professional goals and activities for professional development in the future.

**Reflective Thinking Skills**

An integral aspect of a professional portfolio is evidence of your reflective thinking, “a means of reliving and recapturing experience in order to make sense of it, and to develop new understandings and appreciations” (Wade & Yarbrough, 1996, p. 64). Through the inclusion of portfolio items that reveal your reflective thinking, you can demonstrate that you are an ethical practitioner who continually examines the impact of your decisions and actions on yourself and others. In addition, examples of your reflective thinking provide prospective employers with insights into how you learn from past experiences and dilemmas, analyze these experiences and dilemmas, view them from multiple perspectives, and apply new learning and perspectives to your future endeavors, goals, and professional development activities. A reflective thinking component of your portfolio also helps connect your experiences and the items included in your portfolio and offers the reader a context for understanding it better.

You can build self-reflection into your portfolio in a variety of ways (McCrea, 1998). Each item that you select can include a caption statement reflecting on what the item reveals about your learning or growth as an educator (Fukuda, 1996). For example, attached to each portfolio item, you can include such statements as:

- Why did I select this item?
- What did I learn from this activity or experience?
- Was this activity or experience successful? Why or why not?
- What would I do differently?
- What does this show about my growth as a teacher?

(Antonek et al., 1997)

Your ability to be a thoughtful and inquiring professional can also be documented by including specific reflective thinking items in your portfolio such as reflective journal entries or self-reflective narratives examining lessons you taught, assessment and instructional strategies you implemented, interactions with others, problematic situations you encountered, reactions to case studies, and the impact of students' cultural backgrounds on learning (Dieker & Monda-Amaya, 1997).

In addition to using caption statements and including specific reflective thinking items, you can write an essay that reflects on how your portfolio as a whole demonstrates growth and changes in your skills, viewpoints, commitments, and knowledge base. In writing your reflective essay, you can consider the following:

- What is (are) the purpose(s) of your portfolio?
- What principles guided you in developing your portfolio?
- What does the portfolio reveal about you as a professional and as a person?
- What does your portfolio reveal about your experiences in your teacher education program and the skills you have developed as a special educator?
- What does the portfolio reveal about your beliefs and attitudes towards education?

**How Can I Package My Portfolio?**

Your portfolio should be neat and manageable in terms of size. It can be bound in a 2" to 3" three-ring binder or assembled using file folders, accordion file folders, and
boxes with dividers. Binders are often preferable to folders because they allow you to add or delete items easily and limit the likelihood of items being lost (Stahle & Mitchel, 1993). In packaging your portfolio, consider your organizational framework and use dividers and pages with headings to delineate sections, and place things in sections using a logical sequence such as chronological order or thematic relevance (Giuliano, 1997).

Your portfolio can be personalized, so be creative and use your imagination. For example, you may want to decorate your portfolio with photographs, logos, drawings, and other features that showcase your relevant interests, skills, and abilities. However, as you attempt to personalize your portfolio, remember to focus your displays around professionally related themes and features and avoid symbols that may be controversial or misinterpreted by others.

You can also use technology and multimedia to create an electronic portfolio. In addition to having your portfolio readily available to others on diskette and CD-ROM, an electronic portfolio has the added advantage of allowing you to display and showcase your skills at employing technology. Electronic portfolios involve using software and hardware tools to create and record portfolio items and add sound and text. For example, you can use a digital camera to take pictures of a bulletin board you created and a videocassette recorder to record various classroom activities you directed. These recordings can then be scanned into your electronic portfolio.

Resources are available to assist you in creating your own electronic portfolio. Several software-based portfolio programs are commercially available to assist you in creating your professional portfolio. These programs allow you to scan and organize portfolio items and enter sound, video clips, graphics, and text. A variety of resources on portfolios are also available through the World Wide Web.

Summary

Whether you are entering the profession or have been teaching for years, at some point you will probably be asked to develop a professional portfolio. The guidelines presented in this article are designed to assist you in developing your own professional portfolio, and you will want to adapt it to the unique skills and demands associated with your professional responsibilities.

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