To efoliate or not to efoliate? The rise of the electronic portfolio in teacher education

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One warm April morning here in Manhattan, Kansas, USA, I heard the words of a colleague echo as she breezed past my office: “C’mon Lori, let’s go ‘efoliate’!” Efoliate? Where did such a word originate and what could it possibly mean? Well, its origin is a story I can easily tell.

In the summer of 2001, a small committee of teachers, students, and Kansas State University faculty members were given the task of creating an electronic portfolio system for our teacher education students. The goal was to devise a programwide assessment model wherein students would have to demonstrate that they had met the university’s goals. In addition, the university would be able to use this data to document the success or, dare I say, shortcomings of the program.

At our first meeting, we discussed whether this large endeavor was even worth the effort. Students already had to keep a variety of documents called “portfolios,” but often a portfolio was just a binder containing a collection of everything a student had completed in the course or practicum. Many students were also required to create a portfolio during their student teaching semester. The products that resulted from this assignment varied from site to site within our network of professional development schools. Once again, for the most part these portfolios were less of an assessment tool and more of a collection of everything a student had completed and arranged in a huge three-ring binder. We had many discussions about how the point of the portfolio process was being lost in the shuffle of paper, videotapes, and other various forms of documentation. Because two of our members had recently completed a pilot study of the electronic portfolio process, the committee was intrigued by the economy of a portfolio compiled and saved to a compact disc.

Furthermore, the committee was dazzled by the portfolios themselves. The documents were organized in the form of a webpage and focused on the university’s program goals. The students produced a narrative response to each of those goals, and embedded within their narratives were hyperlinks to all manner of supporting artifacts. Beyond these common characteristics, the students brought their own creativity and talents to the portfolio documents, which made each one unique. From now on, we determined, this project would be called an “efolio.”

Efoliate—A definition

In my attempt to explain the meaning of efoliate it might be helpful to defer to a similar word,
exfoliate. The verb exfoliate can be defined as follows:

- to come off the outer surface of something in thin flakes, scales, or layers;
- to remove or shed a thin outer layer from something, for example, skin, a mineral, or a bone in surgery;
- to scrub skin with a gritty substance to remove the dead surface layer; or
- to split into thin layers.

If to exfoliate is to remove an outer layer of something, then to efoliate might be to peel back the layers of learning in an electronic or technological format (wherein the creator sees unique connections throughout the process). “Efoliation” is certainly an interesting concept that allows educators to rethink many aspects of their practice and the connection between teaching and how they allow students to reveal their learning. Efoliation forces teachers to rethink writing, technology, and assessment.

Rethinking writing and reflection

What kind of writing is included in an electronic teaching portfolio? Is this a genre that we have seen before? At times it is a personal narrative. At others it becomes a memoir or technical writing. On the surface, our efolios reflect a now-familiar genre—the webpage. But within that form is a potentially unlimited set of other forms collected as artifacts. From a digital video of a student’s teaching to academic essays written for content-area courses, multimedia presentations, journal entries, Internet websites developed by the student, lesson plans, student work, standardized test data, and so on—the potential for weaving together documents to create a portrait of teaching is exciting and daunting. Students using efolios must write narratives to tell this story, but their manipulation of the technology—the way they incorporate graphics, the way the artifacts are linked together, even the color scheme selected—is also a part of the reflection process. In the traditional three-ring-binder format, a student writes a reflection and then compiles supporting documents and artifacts in predefined sections. The efolio allows students to create their own sense of the interconnections of those artifacts while arriving, we hope, at a much richer understanding of themselves and the standards against which they are being measured.

Another issue we have been forced to reconsider is audience. Who is the audience for the efolio? Can an efolio used to document a student’s learning throughout a teacher education program also be used to help that student find a job? The answer is complicated and seems to always end up with varying responses. Efolios made during teacher education could certainly be part of a “job search” efolio. However, when considering audience—the university as opposed to the administrators of a hiring school—the teacher candidate must consider form and function in each of these different situations, and that is another lesson in the writing process altogether.

From the university’s perspective, the portfolio assessment is compact, easy to store, and has a variety of opportunities for analysis. Documenting how students are meeting each of the program’s goals is essential for approval from the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, and the opportunities for the gathering of artifacts in relation to each program goal are endless. Because of these possibilities, members of the university faculty have been forced to reexamine most of their existing assumptions about the process of writing and reflection.

Rethinking assessment

We know our students are faced with a lot of tests. Students are tested for admittance to the university, tested in virtually all of their courses, and tested again to graduate from our programs. From there, they are tested to receive a state
teaching license, and many states require more testing during the second or third year of teaching in order to move beyond the initial, conditional license.

One benefit of the portfolio, whether in electronic or paper form, has been that it shows us what our students do know rather than what they don’t know. The process of collecting artifacts throughout the teacher education program, selecting appropriate artifacts that document learning in relation to the program goals, and the writing and reflection created by the student that illuminates how this particular artifact contributed to his or her development as a teacher are all ways to capture the process as opposed to the final score of a standardized test.

The portfolio process recognizes that teachers, too, are developmental beings who construct their knowledge and understanding. No two teacher candidates will have the same experience or make sense of the act of teaching and learning in the same manner. If we are going to collect data about our program’s effectiveness, it is essential to consider a strategy or method that will allow students to demonstrate their unique experience within the collective nature of program goals.

To efoliate or not to efoliate?

Is that really the question? It was obvious to our committee that the electronic teaching portfolio is definitely a worthy project. The process of efoliation, the peeling back of layers of learning and presenting it in an organized electronic format, holds tremendous promise. We believe it can be an experience that supports and encourages the developing preservice teacher—an experience that combines reflection and technology and is linked to how we know learning occurs. If we need any more evidence of the importance of efoliation, it lies in the fact that each efolio has a story to tell—no two look the same. It is evidence of a budding teacher’s learning in a combination of technological prowess, thoughtful reflection in a variety of genres, and a celebration of learning throughout a lifetime.