

Portfolio Use in Twenty-Four Teacher Education Programs

By Rebecca S. Anderson & Lisa DeMeulle

Currently there are many teacher educators who are using and studying portfolios (Barton & Collins, 1993; Carroll, Potthoff & Huber, 1996; McLaughlin & Vogt, 1996; Mokhtari, Yellin, Bull & Montgomery, 1996; Morin, 1995; Ryan & Kuhs, 1993; Wilcox, 1996; Wolf, 1989; Wolf & Siu-Runyan, 1996). The majority of this work describes how portfolios are used, why they are used, and how they are put together. During a relatively short period of time, we as teacher educators have learned much about portfolios. The time has come, however, for us to shift our attention away from "how to put a portfolio together" toward a systematic look at the implications of portfolio use in teacher education (Herman & Winters, 1994). What are teacher educators learning from using portfolios in their programs? This study was designed to answer this question.

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Research Design

We mailed an open-ended questionnaire to 127 teacher educators around the country asking them to

describe their use of portfolios with preservice teachers. Respondents were chosen based on their work with portfolios and were located using references in journals, conference programs, and the American Educational Research Association Portfolio Special Interest Group. A criteria for selecting respondents was that they were using portfolios in connection with a practicum experience. We borrow Kenneth Zeichner's (1992) definition of practicum: "...all varieties of observation and teaching experiences in a preservice teacher education program: field experiences that precede education course work, early field experiences that are tied to professional courses, and student teaching and internship experiences" (p. 297).

Twenty-four completed questionnaires were returned representing 22 universities and 13 states. Vancouver and The Netherlands were also represented. Open-ended questions were deemed appropriate because the research examined an innovative practice that assumes a variety of ambiguous forms, and this approach allowed the respondents to elaborate more fully on their experience than other research methods would allow (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Specifically, this study was designed to address the following questions:

- What is the purpose(s) of using portfolios in teacher education programs?
- How has portfolio use impacted students?
- How has portfolio use impacted teacher educators?
- How has portfolio use impacted teacher education programs?
- What problems are associated with using portfolios during practicum experiences?

We also requested examples of documents, assignments, and guidelines that are used in connection with portfolios. We received documentation such as published articles on portfolios, portfolio program guidelines, and state frameworks. In addition, follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with 13 respondents. These conversations allowed us to further explore the themes that were generated early in the analysis process. Examples of questions included: "We found that one issue associated with portfolios was the need for all faculty to buy in to the concept as well as to share a common understanding. Can you discuss how this is being played out at your institution?" and "There appears to be a growing awareness/clarification among teacher educators about the importance of professional teaching standards as a result of developing portfolios. Can you comment on this?"

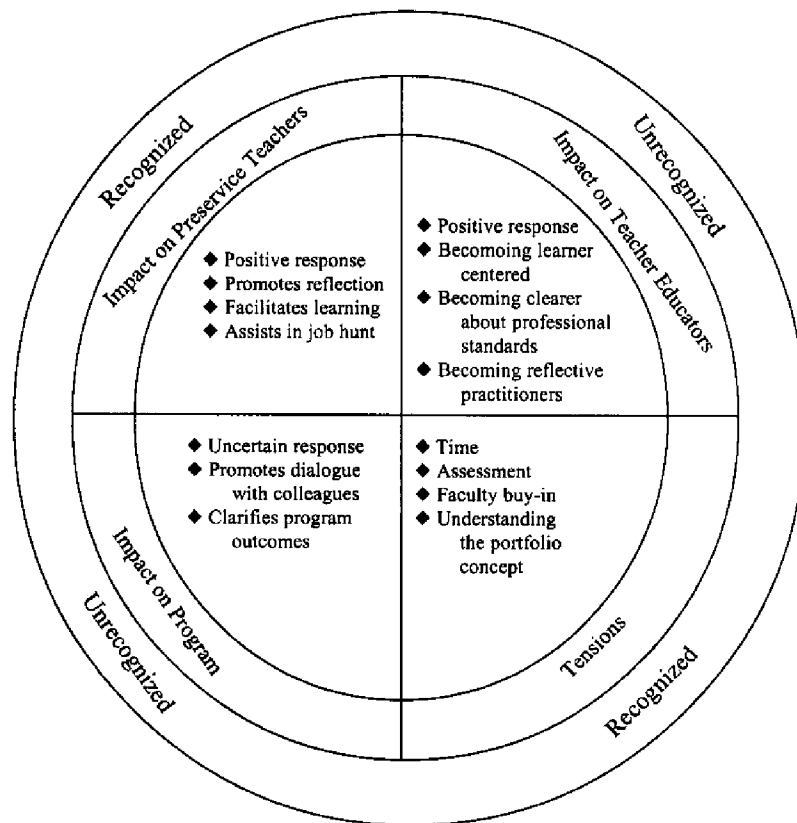
Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), analysis proceeded by first sorting responses to each question. We next examined the responses and documents to inductively generate initial categories of understanding and then identified common underlying themes. These categories and themes were developed and refined through our ongoing conversations and by continually returning to the data set for confirmation of hypotheses. An effort was placed on triangulating findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) using multiple data sources, and by each researcher analyzing individually as well as meeting regularly as a research team.

Findings

Our findings indicate that respondents have used portfolios for a range of six months to 17 years, with an average of 4.75 years. Portfolios are used in undergraduate, graduate, and in alternative licensure programs. Eighteen respondents, 75 percent, stated that portfolios are a program requirement for their preservice teachers.

Selected findings are presented here, categorized as: (a) the recognized purposes for using portfolios; (b) the unrecognized purposes for using portfolios; and (c) the tensions associated with using portfolios (see Figure 1). We present what is most significant for moving beyond "how to put a portfolio together" toward

Figure 1
Recognized Purposes, Unrecognized Purposes, and Tensions of Portfolio Use



understanding the implications of portfolio use in teacher education. Our findings represent general trends as reported by our respondents and are not meant to be generalized to all teacher education programs using portfolios.

Recognized Purposes of Using Portfolios

According to our respondents, the primary purpose for using portfolios is to impact student learning. When specifically asked, "What is your purpose(s) for using portfolios?" our respondents were consistent with others in the field (Barton & Collins, 1993; Carroll, Potthoff, & Huber, 1996; Mokhtari, Yellin, Bull & Montgomery, 1996; Morin, 1995; Snyder, Lippincott, & Bower, Wade & Yarbrough, 1996; Wilcox, 1996; Wolf, 1989; Wolf & Siu-Runyan, 1996) and report using portfolios in teacher education programs for multiple purposes:

- ◆ Promoting student learning and development (96 percent);
- ◆ Encouraging student self-assessment and reflection (92 percent);
- ◆ Providing evidence for assessment and accountability (88 percent);
- ◆ Documenting growth of preservice teachers (88 percent).

Indeed, the respondents in our study stated that the ability to serve multiple purposes was a strength of portfolios as an assessment tool. As one teacher educator noted: "The purpose of portfolios is for assessment and evaluation primarily, but the underlying theme is to encourage students to reflect on their teaching and to demonstrate their ability to see teaching as on-going inquiry."

Impact on preservice teachers. Ninety-two percent of the respondents stated that portfolios are having a positive impact on their preservice teachers. This impact occurs in three ways: (a) promotes reflection; (b) facilitates learning; and (c) assists in the job search. First, as stated above, portfolios appear to encourage preservice teachers to reflect and think about their work in deeper and more thoughtful ways than they have in the past. For instance, one respondent claimed, "Students tend to be more reflective of their practice and more tuned into the importance of documenting professional growth and articulating their philosophy and beliefs about teaching and learning."

Second, portfolios are viewed as self-empowering tools that encourage preservice teachers to assume more responsibility for their learning. Respondents feel that preservice teachers who use portfolios are more knowledgeable about issues related to the complexities of teaching, about using portfolios as an assessment tool, and about understanding that learning is an on-going process. For example, one respondent wrote, "Students have come to see themselves as developing professionals who are confident enough to reflect on their own learning. They no longer see my course in the sense of assignments to 'get done.' They see learning as a process."

Third, portfolios provide preservice teachers the opportunity to practice for the interview process. When preservice teachers later used their program portfolios during a job interview, they received positive feedback from the interviewers. As

this teacher educator stated, "most school districts are very impressed with the preservice teachers' portfolios."

Unrecognized Purposes of Using Portfolios

It is interesting to note that in response to the purpose question, none of the respondents explicitly mentioned using portfolios to benefit teacher educators or teacher education programs. Rather, all of the above mentioned purposes only focus on what preservice teachers gain from the experience. We were intrigued, however, that embedded in our respondents' comments elsewhere in the questionnaire was evidence that portfolios are influencing both teacher education programs and teacher educators practices.

Impact on teacher educators. Ninety-two percent of the respondents replied "yes" to the question, "Has using portfolios had an impact on your teaching practice?" Respondents indicated that portfolio use had changed their practice so that it was more: (a) student-centered; (b) clearly defined by professional standards; and (c) reflective.

First, the teacher educators discussed how they are becoming more student-centered. They reported that they are more flexible in their interactions with preservice teachers, more open to preservice teachers developing and evaluating their own work, and more willing to relinquish control to the students. For instance, one teacher educator wrote, "Portfolios as a process have caused me to see the value of having the student take responsibility for evaluation and to negotiate that in reciprocal dialogue with me."

Second, we noticed a growing awareness and clarity among faculty regarding professional standards. They shared how their programs are using state and national standards as part of the portfolio development, and how they themselves are becoming clearer about the need for standards in the profession.

Finally, the teacher educators indicated that they are reflecting on their own teaching and using student assessment to inform their practice in new ways. For example, one respondent talked about changing her instruction: "I have refocused on learners' perceptions of relevant work and more deliberately emphasized learners' sense of worth for both teaching and assessing." Five respondents shared they are developing their own portfolios to both model the process for preservice teachers and to gain insight about the process. For instance, one teacher educator wrote: "I am compiling my own portfolio, and struggle just as they do."

Impact on program. The majority, 83 percent, of respondents reported they are uncertain about the impact that portfolios have on their teacher education programs. Responses were tentative: "too early to tell," "not yet." Many mentioned, however, that portfolio use will continue to grow, "We anticipate that the use of portfolios will become the primary vehicle to assess program outcomes for each student."

Although respondents expressed uncertainty about the impact of portfolios on teacher education programs, they reported two areas of positive impact. First, they

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claimed that collaboration and collegiality is developing with other faculty as a result of using portfolios: "Dialogue around portfolios and issues of teaching are constantly at hand." Second, they suggested that faculties are moving closer to reaching agreement about program outcomes. For instance, one respondent noted: "Portfolios helped focus our mission, values, and exit criteria." Another respondent added, "In less than a year, we have decided that portfolios and the domains of the draft framework should be the backbone of our students' experience. It has given us a common language for this work."

Tensions

Numerous tensions are associated with using portfolios, including: (a) time; (b) understanding the portfolio concept; (c) buy-in of all faculty; and (d) assessment. Time is a problem for both preservice students and faculty. As one respondent noted, portfolios become "another task in a very crowded certification year." Likewise, portfolios are problematic for faculty because "time is needed to read carefully and thoughtfully, to prepare responses to portfolios, and to confer with students."

The second tension, understanding the portfolio concept, involves the problem of understanding the purpose, logistics, and value of using portfolios. For instance, one respondent claimed,

Lots of folks are using the term portfolio to mean very different things.

Other concerns mentioned were:

The size and bulkiness of the portfolio.
The unusual sizes of some of the artifacts.
How to use in conjunction with other elements of assessment.
How do you help preservice teachers reflect on their work.
[How] to assist students to stay engaged overtime and see the process as ongoing.

Respondents also questioned the value of portfolios. Questions asked were:

Do they make a difference?
And if so, how?
And in what way?
Are they worth the effort?
To what extent do portfolios provide important information about teaching practice?

The third tension with portfolio use is faculty buy-in. As one respondent warned, "Obviously, the faculty needs to be equally supportive of the innovation; otherwise some students might be shortchanged during the process." In addition, respondents are concerned about faculty having a shared understanding of the concept, "Not all professors are 'on the same page' when it comes to portfolios."

The final tension deals with assessing portfolios. This is the greatest problem area for teacher educators. Respondents asked numerous questions, such as "Can

portfolios survive institutionally if they don't serve an external assessment function—should they?" "How do the use of portfolios compare to traditional teacher directed assignments/assessment and what difference do they make?" and "How can a portfolio truly capture the individuality of the learner and still be used as a 'high-stake' assessment?" Many of the assessment questions are related to reliability and validity. For example, questions such as "How have others 'controlled' or accounted for reliability and validity?" are common. Uncertainty surrounds how to grade portfolios. As one respondent asked: "What counts? How do we judge that? Whose standards?"

Conclusions and Implications

Our findings lead us to offer two conclusions with accompanying implications for the practice of teacher educators: (a) the full value of portfolios has not been explicitly recognized by teacher educators; and (b) the use of portfolios as an assessment tool is reflective of a constructivist paradigm.

The Full Value of Portfolios Has Not Been Explicitly Recognized by Teacher Educators

Portfolios are no longer a new idea in teacher education. Our respondents averaged 4.75 years of using portfolios. When specifically asked about the purposes of using portfolios, respondents focused on traditionally discussed purposes such as students' learning and assessment. Yet, in contrast, we noted additional benefits when the teacher educators discussed the impact portfolios are having on their practice or program. For example, teacher educators are studying their own practice in new and different ways. Many are developing their own portfolios. They discuss how relationships with their preservice teachers are changing, how they are relinquishing control, and how they are more willing to negotiate curriculum and assessment procedures with their preservice teachers. Many teacher educators are having dialogue and conversations with other faculty about their programs. As a result, faculty as a whole are becoming clearer about the vision of their program. The teacher educators also reported having a greater understanding of the content, use, and importance of professional standards.

The current trend toward accountability, especially in teacher education, is leading many programs to adopt portfolios as an assessment tool for preservice teachers. However, our data indicates two additional valid reasons for teacher educators to consider. First, portfolios are a tool that teacher educators can use to inform and reshape their own practice. Portfolios help teacher educators who are committed to making changes in their practice reconceptualize their role as instructor and foster their movement toward more student-centered instruction. Second, because portfolios can provide program feedback and create faculty cohesion, teacher education programs that are considering restructuring may consider using portfolios to facilitate that process.

***The Use of Portfolios as an Assessment Tool
Is Reflective of a Constructivist Paradigm***

Although our respondents did not explicitly state that their portfolios are grounded in a constructivist philosophy, we interpreted the majority of responses as reflecting this paradigm. Constructivism, the self-construction of knowledge within a social context (Vygotsky, 1978), embraces active student learning, fosters a sense of community, and views ongoing assessment as part of the learning process. We saw examples of this in our data. The respondents are encouraging preservice teachers to reflect on their learning and engage in self-assessment practices. Teacher educators are promoting attitudes of lifelong learning and dialectic interactions with peers, faculty, and community members.

If a program is grounded in, or moving toward, a constructivist paradigm, could portfolios be a valuable tool for helping *faculty* co-construct knowledge about teaching and learning? Recall that teacher educators state benefits of using portfolios included aligning beliefs with assessment practices, coordinating program goals with professional standards, and assisting faculty to co-construct their knowledge about teaching and learning. This type of constructivist collaboration among faculty has the potential to overcome the previously mentioned tensions of time, faculty buy-in, and assessment with the portfolio philosophy. Perhaps the time has come for teacher educators to deliberately choose to use portfolios for these purposes and not just student learning. To do so, however, faculty will need appropriate administrative support, professional development, and time allocated for dialogue and implementation. Alternatively, if a program is not grounded in a constructivist perspective, the use of portfolios may serve only to increase the types of tensions mentioned above.

Summary

In trying to move beyond "how to put a portfolio together," we began this inquiry by asking what teacher educators are learning from using portfolios in their programs. The respondents from 24 teacher education programs validated current research in two areas. First, these teacher educators recognized portfolios have a positive impact on preservice teachers because they promote reflection, facilitate learning, and assist in the job hunt. Second, respondents emphasized well-known tensions associated with portfolio use such as time, assessment issues, faculty buy-in, and understanding the portfolio concept in general.

In addition we found that portfolios are impacting teacher educators and teacher education programs. Teacher educators reported becoming learner centered, clearer about professional standards, and reflecting more on their practice. In terms of programs, portfolios are promoting dialogue with colleagues and assisting in clarification of program outcomes. Interestingly, however, the respondents did

not explicitly identify these two areas as reasons for using portfolios. This led us to conclude that the full value of portfolios has yet to be recognized.

According to this study, teacher educators are learning that the benefits of portfolios outweigh the drawbacks. As more faculty gain experience with portfolios, and as portfolios are required in more programs, we envision additional benefits and purposes for using portfolios being recognized. We see the use of portfolios as representative of the larger shift toward constructivism in education, and if more teacher educators embrace this perspective and understand what they are doing with portfolios and why, many of the existing tensions may be resolved.

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