

Portfolio Conversation: A Mentored Journey

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The Vision: Teacher as Professional

Teaching is challenging, complex work. What teachers know and are able to impart to students determines how well our children will be educated. A recent national commission report highlights the well-documented connections between teaching expertise and student learning, indicating that well-prepared teachers need to have a deep knowledge of subject matter, student learning, and teaching methods (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996).

Research also demonstrates that good teaching develops over time as teachers move along a continuum from beginner to expert levels of professional development (Berliner, 1994; Goodlad, 1990; Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990; Shulman, 1986). Teacher education is no longer viewed as something that occurs prior to beginning to teach in a four- or five-year program of professional preparation. Good teachers, even those who graduate from the most thorough and

comprehensive preparation programs, recognize that they will continue to learn, develop, and update their knowledge and skills as they practice and perfect their craft.

National and state policies are changing to better recognize the complex demands as well as the developmental nature of the teaching profession. Professional standards have been advanced as one vehicle for expressing collective agreement about what constitutes good teaching. Other articles in this issue have cited the work on national standards for teachers as reflected in the model standards for beginning teachers designed by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (1992) and the advanced certification standards of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (1989). Many states have used or adapted these standards for their own use in preparation, certification, induction, or for professional development.

While this work was occurring, California had a parallel effort underway, and the state has recently adopted a set of standards that were pilot tested and validated in a variety of settings with teachers at all levels of expertise. The *California Standards for the Teaching Profession* (1997) are based on current research and expert advice pertaining to best teaching practice. While drawing on the national standards, California has approved standards that represent a developmental, holistic view of teaching, and are intended to meet the needs of diverse teachers and students in the state and are aligned with expectations for California students.

Accreditation standards that define the content of teacher preparation programs also include strong statements about what it is that teachers should know and be able to do when they complete these programs and require an overall assessment of each candidate's performance. For example, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards require "that a candidate's competency to begin his/her professional role in schools is assessed prior to completion of the program and/or recommendation for licensure" (1994, p. 10). The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) expects that "prior to recommending each candidate for a teaching credential, one or more persons who are responsible for the program determine, on the basis of thorough documentation and written verification...that the candidate has satisfied each standard" (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 1994, p. 33).

The new national standards for teachers and those designed for California underscore the professional nature of teaching and the ongoing need for attention to teacher development and assessment of that development. The standards also create a need for a new dialogue about teaching among teachers and other educators. The standards help to frame that dialogue and to map the journey to accomplished teaching.

Mapping the Journey

This new standards-driven vision of teacher as developing professional demands a language to discuss that development and a way to assess and document

teacher growth. Superficial checklists of performances or skills cannot begin to capture the complexities and richness of teacher development over time.

The portfolio has emerged as an alternative form of assessment that is better suited as a vehicle for both formative and summative assessment by self and others and for elevating the dialogue about teaching practice. Green and Smyser (1996) observe that purposeful, well-constructed portfolios:

- ◆ Give teaching a context;
- ◆ Accommodate diversity;
- ◆ Encourage teachers to capitalize on strengths;
- ◆ Allow teachers to self identify for improvement;
- ◆ Promote reflectivity;
- ◆ Encourage professional dialogue; and
- ◆ Integrate all aspects of teaching.

Portfolio documentation allows teachers to present artifacts or representations of teaching that demonstrate the variety of ways they meet the new standards. The portfolio serves as the vehicle for demonstrating progress in an ongoing and personal way.

Research on teacher development and standards for the profession has given us the direction and new forms of assessment have helped us to better document the journey. Some key questions about the connections between standards and portfolio evidence remain. How can portfolios be used to advance practice rather than merely document what is occurring? How do we move from standards as lofty goals, to standards that become real for teachers in guiding their reflections and discussions of practice?

Traveling in the Company of Others

Others articles in this issue have stressed the value of portfolio reflection and collaboration (Grant & Huebner; Wolf & Dietz). More has been written, however, about the self-reflective aspect of portfolios than about the collaborative process or the conversations that take place when portfolio evidence is examined, discussed, and reflected upon in the company of others.

We suggest that conversations about portfolio entries offer the richest opportunity to grow, learn, and develop teaching expertise. This professional dialogue with a mentor, colleague, or "critical friend" is the point at which the crucial questions are posed, reflections are shared, ideas are tested, and new challenges are put forth.

Mentoring is a powerful concept, often lauded but not well-practiced in the education profession. We define mentoring quite broadly, as "a dynamic, reciprocal relationship in a work environment between an advanced career incumbent (mentor) and a beginner (protégé) aimed at promoting the career development of both" (Healy & Welchert, 1990).

Collegial, developmental mentoring does not occur naturally among teachers

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in this very demanding, highly isolated profession. Because teachers spend most of their working hours with their own students in their own classrooms, they lack the opportunity to consult with one another, share ideas and approaches, and receive feedback. The mentoring the teacher received as student in the university classroom, in fieldwork, and in the student teaching experience usually stops once the teacher takes over his or her own classroom. However, in California and elsewhere, we have been working to continue that mentoring experience through a variety of formal mentoring arrangements. There is a natural connection between mentoring and conversations about teaching centered around artifacts of teacher work.

Although the person and the role of mentor can change over time, there is a place for collegial conversation and dialogue at each stage of development. Portfolios have been used as a basis for conversations about teaching practice in California at the undergraduate (or subject matter) preparation level, during the "fifth year" or professional preparation program, during student teaching, in employment interviews, in a statewide induction experience, and in ongoing professional development programs. They are used to document, assess, stimulate reflection, present qualifications, and showcase accomplishments. At each point of use and for each purpose, the portfolio gives us a way to better understand teaching practice.

Figure 1 suggests key reflection points in teacher career development at which portfolio conversation might occur. These include: undergraduate preservice; professional preparation; entry to the profession; professional induction; and ongoing professional growth and development. The figure also suggests the focus

Figure 1
Portfolio Conversations for Key Teacher Reflection Points

<i>Point of Teacher Reflection</i>	<i>Portfolio Conversation</i>
Undergraduate preservice	◆ Career exploration ◆ Subject matter learning ◆ Knowledge of students
Professional preparation	◆ Professional knowledge ◆ Knowledge of practice ◆ Emerging skills
Entry to the profession	◆ Integration of prior learning and experience ◆ Presentation of self as teacher
Induction	◆ Developing teaching repertoire ◆ Application of knowledge to classroom context
Professional development	◆ Refining practice ◆ New knowledge and skills ◆ Renewal

of the mentoring conversation that might be appropriate at each phase of the teacher education continuum. The portfolio is the stimulus to the conversation.

Mentors by definition guide, support, enlighten, and help others improve and extend practice. Portfolios provide an vehicle and an opportunity for the conversations and keep them focused on practice. More detailed descriptions of portfolio conversations and three different development points follow.

Portfolio Conversation I

Portfolio Across the Preparation Program

Historically, the preservice teacher is evaluated by professors, cooperating classroom teachers, and university supervisors. Most often, ongoing observations and conferences as well as the final student teaching written evaluations provide the student teacher with feedback related to his/her level of competencies. Missing links are ways to include students in a process that:

1. Provides prospective teachers with opportunities to reflect on their professional competence; and
2. Produces a product that demonstrates evidence of teaching effectiveness and growth.

A teacher-constructed portfolio is one tool that can be used to assess as well as guide the development of prospective teachers, and to encourage reflection about professional development. The material in a portfolio provides the prospective teacher with organized, tangible evidence of growth and accomplishments. This evidence of competencies can serve as documentation for certification by state agencies—as prospective teachers are evaluated in relation to a predetermined list of competencies required of them before they are recommended for a teaching credential.

The Division of Curriculum and Instruction faculty at California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA) began to examine the process of portfolio development as a means to guide prospective teachers as they progress through the credential program. Since all students must register in an introduction to teaching course before they are officially admitted to the credential program, it was determined that this is the appropriate place to introduce all education students to the format/purpose/use of teacher-constructed portfolios. Although the focus is on beginning the portfolio in the introduction to teaching class, portfolio development continues as students progress through the subsequent course work and student teaching experiences. Each required class embodies the knowledge and competencies stated in the CTC as well as in the NCATE standards. The students are expected to include evidence of these teaching competencies as they progress through the required course work. Since the responsibility of guiding prospective teachers belongs to all faculty, it is helpful to reflect on specific, existing course requirements that might be included in a portfolio as “evidence” of competence gained from each class. In

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addition to the inclusion of evidence that illustrates teaching competencies, the prospective teachers should include evidence of professional development experiences as well as resource information gathered during student teaching. The prospective teacher is expected to write a reflection page related to the purpose and effectiveness of all included "pieces of evidence."

Although the Charter School of Education faculty at CSULA is committed to guiding prospective teachers as they develop portfolios, they also see the need for an ongoing effort to improve the way in which students show evidence of teaching competencies. During faculty discussions, issues related to faculty advisement were raised. The faculty agreed that each professor should be responsible for providing student support related to specific course content and requirements. Additional portfolio checkpoints and advisement will occur during the student teaching assignments. Periodically, informational seminars have been offered to provide opportunities for ongoing evaluation of the implementation plans, and to allow faculty and adjunct supervisors to share practices they may have discovered related to different and more effective ways to guide students during the development of their portfolios.

The value of portfolio development appears to be widely accepted by prospective teachers as well as by faculty. One example is a pilot program in which a professor taught course work and advised a selected group of students as they made connections between their required course work and the subsequent student teaching experiences. It provided opportunities for students and faculty to make connections between theory and classroom application. This continued contact provided an opportunity to elicit student thought related to the value of portfolio development. The following comments were made by students at various points in the credential program.

Lisa—a prospective teacher completing her last student teaching experience: Portfolio development provides an opportunity to reflect on what I tried and on what was successful. It provides an opportunity to revise and adapt to new and different situations and levels. In every lesson I find something to change—something I would do a bit different. When you reflect—and write it down—you do not lose the potential for professional growth.

Sarah—a prospective teacher completing her last student teaching assignment: A portfolio is a way to showcase my best efforts. It provides an opportunity to reflect—assess—and modify lessons during student teaching. As a prospective teacher it provides concrete examples of my teaching competencies. It is an ongoing organizational tool during the credential program—one that can be carried on to the realities of my classroom.

Daniel—a new CSULA graduate who is currently teaching children with special learning needs: The portfolio benefited me as a student teacher as it helped me organize. Now it helps me look at long term goals to assess where I've been and where I'm going in my career.

Jessica—a new teacher just beginning her job search: *The value of developing a portfolio is it helped me organize and analyze my areas of strengths and weaknesses. Recently she shared her portfolio at an Education Fair on Campus. She felt the interviewers were quite impressed with her portfolio. She said, it was easy to present myself during interviews; the portfolio is a tool to show my competencies; it made me feel comfortable to interview.*

These student reactions serve to illustrate that the greatest value of a portfolio may be its usefulness as a process that elicits reflection on present skills as well as on ways in which teachers might continue to grow through self-assessment. It appears to be a effective, alternate evaluation tool that can be used effectively to guide teachers at all levels in their careers. The faculty at CSULA is continuing their own on-going conversations and reflections as they advise students and discover more effective ways to help students show their professional growth as competent, reflective teachers.

Portfolio Conversation 2

The Employment Interview

School personnel involved in the hiring of new teachers indicate that a portfolio can be a useful vehicle for presenting one's qualifications and discussing teaching in the employment interview. The portfolio allows the teacher to present a collection of teaching artifacts (such as a video tape of teaching, lesson and unit plans, samples and critiques of student work, reflective statements) that represent examples of "best practice."

Although the use of portfolios in employment interviews is not well-researched, as Kenneth Wolf and Mary Dietz (this issue, pages 9-22) report, the practice is becoming widespread. Graduates of our respective institutions (and the personnel involved in hiring them) report that they can be useful in helping students integrate their preparation experience and discuss their own particular vision of teaching and the strengths they would bring to the role. The dialogue between interviewer and applicant becomes focused on teacher knowledge, reflections, and actual practice.

Portfolios help a candidate highlight special talents and life and career experience, and show its relevance to the teaching assignment. This may be especially so for the non-traditional candidate, or person entering teaching through an alternate preparation route. Kennedy and Kaye (1996) studied Returning Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCV) who were pursuing entry to teaching. These candidates for teaching positions found that they were able to personalize the professional interview process through the use of their portfolios. Portfolios helped them to address some of their own questions about the interview process, such as:

◆ *How can I reflect on my experience?*

The portfolio became a documentation of growth and experience within the Peace

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Corps classroom, particularly in celebrating the culture of the students in the classroom environment and implementing innovative teaching activities.

◆ *How can I raise questions?*

The portfolio became an organized focus for critical inquiry into the RPCV's own professional development as a teacher. The applicants were able to articulate learning within the portfolio material of their own responses to ongoing dilemmas of combining theory and practice.

◆ *How can I redefine the experiences I have had?*

The portfolio became an instrument that gave a unique direction to questions during the interview process and allowed the RPCV to discuss their unique experiences as Peace Corps teachers within a viable context.

The employment interview can often be very intimidating and depersonalizing. Candidates often feel they lack opportunity to fully present their qualifications and their work. The portfolio allows for and encourages the personal response and representation in this interview setting. The discussion becomes focused on teacher knowledge, reflections, experience, and actual practice.

Prospective teachers should be guided in both the preparation and presentation of their interview portfolio. The mentoring conversation here revolves around what is selected as representative of "best work" and why it is selected.

Portfolio Conversation 3

Early Years of Teaching

A teacher's entry into the profession marks a period in which habits of mind are formed and approaches to practice are tried, tested, refined, and developed. This journey can be a lonely one, or it can be guided and informed by others in a well-designed plan to induct new members the profession.

Kaye and Ragusa (1996) found that one of the numerous mentoring roles of teacher educators must be that of "culture guide" for the transition from teacher preparation program to public school classroom. Although student teaching approaches are designed to accommodate this notion in concrete formats, the more abstract transmission of ideals of the educator's culture often results in only a fragmented assimilation into the educational community.

For more than a decade, California has been redefining professional entry for teachers. In the California Mentor Program, the California New Teacher Project, and the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment Program much has been learned about those crucial early years, the difficulties new teachers encounter, the guidance that is appropriate, and the successful components of a planned induction period.

Standards-driven portfolios have been used extensively in the California induction experience. The *California Standards* were, in fact, an outgrowth from that experience which served as the "testing ground" for their development. The standards were developed, modified, and refined in the actual examination of

evidence, artifacts of teaching, and conversations between novice and support provider (mentor).

Consider a conversation that might occur in relation to the "Standard for Engaging and Supporting All Students in Learning." A key element of this is engaging students in problem solving, critical thinking, and other activities that make subject matter meaningful. The *California Standards* suggest questions that teachers might consider in reflection and conversation with others.

As teachers develop, they may ask, "How do I..." or "Why do I..."

- ◆ Provide opportunities for all students to think, discuss, interact, reflect, and evaluate content?
- ◆ Help all students to learn, practice, internalize, and apply subject-specific learning strategies and procedures?
- ◆ Support all students in critically investigating subject matter concepts and questions?
- ◆ Engage all students in problem solving activities and encourage multiple approaches and solutions?
- ◆ Encourage all students to ask critical questions and consider diverse perspectives about subject matter?
- ◆ Provide opportunities for all students to learn and practice skills in meaningful contexts?
- ◆ Help all students to analyze and draw valid conclusions about content being learned?

The questions accompanying each element encourage teachers to examine the rationale for key aspects of their teaching. Novice teachers, in consultation with their mentors, select from the standards the areas of teaching they wish to pursue and document in their portfolios.

The teacher struggling to "make subject matter meaningful to students," as suggested in this element, might begin with a lesson plan designed for a particular subject area such as reading. Portfolio entries might include materials related to the lesson, student work, student assessments, a description of strategies employed, observations by the mentor, and personal reflections on the lesson. The portfolio evidence, then, is gathered, examined, reflected upon, and discussed with reference to the related questions.

Teachers (and their mentors) who were originally intimidated by the portfolio process have come to value it highly. They report having deeper, richer conversations, more sustained growth, and higher satisfaction with their entry into teaching (Bartell & Ownby, 1994).

Conclusion

The natural link between standards for a profession and better ways to discuss, examine, and document the practice of a profession has been largely unexplored. We have attempted to initiate that dialogue. If we can name our expectations for

what teachers should know and be able to do, we should raise the level of discourse about how we and why such knowledge and action is important.

One of the important challenges in education continues to be the need to increase understanding of the human connection between those who have been successful in the school culture and those who are crossing the threshold into this exciting profession. Mentoring dialogue at each stage or phase of development is a professional responsibility. Portfolios as a basis for strengthening this dialogue continue to be a valuable resource to tap.

Paulo Freire (1970) argued that education, as a practice of freedom, is the opportunity to name life as one knows it. The portfolio becomes such a practice for those who wish to respond to such questions with the guidance of a mentor as their journey continues in their chosen profession of teaching.

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