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Kim Flottemesch
University of Wisconsin-Stout

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Teaching Portfolios: Reflective Practice of One's Own Learning



Kim Flottemesch, Ph.D.
University of Wisconsin-Stout

ABSTRACT

Looking beyond the actual product, the process of creating a teaching portfolio can have multiple benefits for the preservice teacher. Throughout the process, the individual is able to reflect on their own needs and strengths, offering an opportunity to reflect on one's learning and to articulate who one is as a teacher. It is this personal and individual portrait of one's self as a teaching professional that is a powerful tool of inquiry of the teacher as learner. This study examined preservice teacher's personal experiences of creating their own teaching portfolio. The study concluded that the process of portfolio creation can result in greater personal confidence as a preservice teacher, it also affects the surety of their educational philosophies and classroom practices while preparing them for the job search process.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980's, portfolios in teacher education have reformed the way educators and educational institutions conduct personal assessment of one's own teaching and learning (Lyons, 1998). Portfolios are being implemented in teacher education programs across the country on a variety of different levels. Many teacher educators use portfolios as an assessment tool in their courses. Some programs, as a whole, use portfolios as a program-wide assessment tool, and many states are moving toward portfolios as a requirement in the teacher certification process (Darling, 2001; Mokhtari, Yellin, Bull, & Montgomery, 1996; Shannon & Boll, 1996). This national trend toward using portfolios as a tool to both support learning and evaluate it, can be a transformative process for the individual involved. It is through the process of portfolio creation, that one begins to see oneself

as a reflective practitioner.

Teaching portfolios are defined as purposeful collections of work that include self-reflection, growth & achievement (Reis & Villame, 2002). Through this definition, one goal of the portfolio is to demonstrate knowledge of subject matter and instruction of curriculum. However, the critical piece that is often overlooked is the ability the portfolio has in being a tool in the reflective process of one's own teaching. The actual process of creating a portfolio can be as useful as the product itself (Willis & Davies, 2002). Throughout the process, the individual is able to reflect on their own needs and strengths (Kilbane & McNergeny, 2001), offering an opportunity to reflect on one's learning and to articulate who one is as a teacher (Lyons, 1998). It is this personal and individual portrait of one's self as a teaching professional that is a powerful tool of inquiry of the teacher as learner.

Teaching portfolios provide a means for

personal reflection by offering the opportunity for critiquing one's work and evaluating the effectiveness of it. In 1997, Donald Schon introduced the concept of reflective practice as a critical process in refining one's craft in a specific discipline (Ferraro, 2000). Reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering the experience as it applies to one's practice while under the guidance of a professional in the field (Schon, 1996). The primary benefit of reflective practice for teachers is a deeper understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses and therefore, a greater effectiveness as a teacher (Ferraro, 2000).

Recognizing this benefit of reflective practice through portfolios, this study explores what strengths and weaknesses preservice teachers personally recognize after completing their own teaching portfolio. The research questions guiding the study were the following:

RQ1: How does the process of creating a teaching portfolio help to prepare preservice teachers for their own classroom?

RQ2: How do preservice teachers use the portfolio as a reflective tool of personal inquiry?

METHODOLOGY

Preservice teachers, at a land grant institution in the Northwest of the United States, were asked to complete a teaching portfolio as part of an upper division course taken concurrently during their student teaching assignment or the semester prior to student teaching. Contents of the hardcopy portfolio were categorized in the following manner:

- Cover letter
- Resume
- Teaching philosophy
- Classroom management plan
- Sample lesson plan
- Sample content activity
- Sample assessment strategy
- Other category – category of their choosing (some examples of “other categories” by students include service learning projects conducted, classroom newsletters created, professional development activities encountered,

volunteer experiences, recognition letters, and video taped lessons of one's teaching)

Students choose what content, from their experiences, best fit each category. In all categories, preservice teachers turned in their chosen content for review from the course instructor, who then provided written and verbal feedback on the items so changes could be made before the material became part of the final portfolio. Once the final portfolios were completed, preservice teachers were asked to complete a survey responding to their experience throughout the portfolio process. The survey contained 20 questions regarding their experiences and responses were gaged on a five point likert scale. For eight questions of the 20 total, respondents were asked to provide an additional written response to survey questions. An inductive analysis and comparison (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was conducted of the survey responses. Responses were examined, sorting them into initial categories. Categories were then analyzed for consistent themes.

PARTICIPANTS

Of the 58 respondents, 47% were obtaining certification in elementary education (n=27), 45% certification in secondary education (n=26) and 9% were obtaining both elementary and secondary certification (n=5). Seniors comprised 93% of the respondents (n=54) while the remaining 7% (n=4) were graduate students obtaining teaching certification. Respondents totaling 64% (n=37) indicated that they had not begun the process nor completed a teaching portfolio prior to the course. The remaining respondents indicated they had begun to collect materials for a professional portfolio prior to the course.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three major themes emerged from the data analysis: an increase in preservice teacher's self confidence, the development of a definitive set of classroom goals and methodologies, and greater awareness of the job search process.

Self Confidence

Preservice teacher's reported that the process of creating the portfolio helped them to see what teaching strengths they really possessed. This realization, through the collection of evidence in the portfolio, increased their confidence for their first teaching assignment.

By remembering my own teaching experiences, i.e. practicums, lesson plans, etc., that I have improved upon, gave me more confidence in teaching.

I saw right in front of me proof that I was ready to have my own classroom. I am more sure of myself now!

Just having the portfolio made me more confident in my teaching abilities. To see a hard copy of my teaching strengths gave me more confidence in my teaching abilities.

The portfolio showed my highlights and experiences that I didn't realize I had.

It helps you realize you have more teaching experience than you thought. I feel ready to go into the classroom.

Made me see on paper all of my accomplishments. That really gave me confidence in my teaching. I saw that I had ample teaching experiences to build on and build from.

The creation of the portfolio became a very personal experience for the preservice teachers. It helped them with the transition from student to teacher. By seeing their experiences, abilities, and preparations they've made for the classroom, helped them to visualize themselves in the role of a teacher. No longer had it become merely an assignment to complete for class, but a tool for reflection of their own teaching.

Classroom Goals & Methodologies

As a preservice teacher, one formulates and defines who one is as a teacher. Philosophies of education are solidified, classroom procedures are formed, and teaching pedagogy is constructed. Preservice teachers reported that the process of creating the portfolio gave them a

clearer picture of what their goals are for their future students and classroom. The process helped them to fine-tune their philosophy and teaching practices, or at least assisted them in seeing what areas of these items need enhancement.

It helped me by making me think more about what my actual goals would be in the classroom and how I will go about achieving those.

I was able to solidify my ideas in creating the portfolio. I was able to express effectively everything that I believe about education. It helped me to learn who I am as an educator.

By giving it thought and taking time to complete the portfolio, I came to a better understanding of what kind of teacher I want to be. It helped to reinforce what I know and believe about teaching.

After completing my portfolio, I recognized some of my teaching methods are more geared for younger students. I'm a high school teacher and sometimes I am treating students like [they are] elementary age.

It forced me to put down into words how I believe my classroom will run. That gave me focus for my student teaching experience.

Having a focus, knowing your educational philosophy, and solidifying a plan for classroom procedures are a few of the many areas of preparation needed by preservice teachers before entering a classroom of their own. The portfolio process allowed them to reflect on these concepts and determine what areas of improvement are needed before they have a classroom of their own.

Job Search

Respondents reported that the portfolio would be a useful instrument in the job search process to demonstrate their abilities to a potential district of employment.

You realize, through putting it [the portfolio] together, your strengths and what areas you should emphasize in an interview.

Made me put in writing how I will teach, in all areas. I did have an interview and felt more comfortable knowing that I have thought about most of the topics asked of me.

Because I have a better understanding of who I am as a teacher, I also know what kind of district I want to work in. Also, it helped me present myself professionally.

Preservice teachers recognized that the portfolio can not only assist in a preservice teacher being a reflective practitioner, but that it can also aid in obtaining a teaching position upon graduation.

CONCLUSION

Portfolios can provide a rich source of information to preservice teachers as they continually reconsider their pedagogy (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000) and embark on continuous professional development. This personal and transformative experience requires preservice teachers to paint a portrait of themselves as a professional educator. This reflective activity can result in greater personal confidence as a teacher, it also affects the surety of their educational philosophies and classroom practices while preparing them for the job search process. While portfolios may be used as an assessment tool of students' learning and meeting state certification standards, the process of personal inquiry is revealed as most valuable to the preservice teacher. As one responded so eloquently summarized, "I never realized it, but as a reflective teacher, this process is very important!"

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Dr. Kim Flottemesch is an assistant professor in the Dept. of Speech Communication, Foreign Languages, Theatre and Music, University of Wisconsin, Stout, Menomonie, Wisconsin, 54751-0790. Email: flottemeschk@uwstout.edu. She is also a member of the consulting editorial board for this journal.

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