School Portfolio Development: A Teacher Knowledge Approach

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SCHOOL PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT
A Teacher Knowledge Approach

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This article features a teacher knowledge approach to school portfolio development that was used with teachers on five campuses involved in a major national reform movement. The narrative method shows how teacher knowledge is made public and shared through school portfolio making. Particular emphasis is placed on the connections between and among reflection and action relating to individual, collective, and school change.

Keywords: teacher knowledge; school portfolios; school reform; reflective practice

When faculties from five schools associated with a major national reform movement asked me to act as their planning and evaluation consultant, I wondered how I could balance the agendas of the five schools, and their individual and collective reform responsibilities, with my personal research interest in how context shapes teachers’ knowledge developments over time. As it turned out, I had more in common with the desires of the schools and the reform movement than was initially apparent to me.

In conversations with the school principals, for example, I learned that the reform movement had charged campuses with identifying someone who would engage their faculties in conversations about the changes they proposed and help them to build a rich record of their school activities and experiences. I also discovered that the principals were desirous of building in-school reform evidence that was different from conventional numbered accounts. Given that the state and the school districts already focused on achievement test scores, attendance, and dropout rate data—and also ranked schools on a star system—the principals were keen to explore an alternate approach. They favored a planning and evaluation method that would capture the fine-grained detail of what their schools attempted to do, what actually happened, and how those changes influenced teachers’ learning and, ultimately, student learning. To the principals’ ways of thinking, participation as leading campuses in a national reform movement called for something other than, as one of them put it, “the same old tired approach to evaluation” (Craig, 2001). The principals’ narrative knowledge of their situations caused them to seek me out as someone who could work with their faculties and themselves to dialogue about productive school change, to enact ideas that appeared most fruitful, and to reflectively analyze and portray their school experiences of reform. They were emphatic that they wanted someone to assist them with research accounts that would reflect people’s understandings of educational situations and illuminate the reform experience from the perspective of those closest to it.

The sense the principals were beginning to make of their school situations with respect to school reform and participation in a national movement was close to my personal reading of...
what I consider the school reform paradox. Although the rhetoric of reform emphasizes schools as units of change, the reality is that such an approach is totally reliant on individual educators as personal and collective agents of change (Fullan, 1994). To my way of thinking, the focus on schools is somewhat of a misguided notion. It occurred to me that the principals tacitly understood how problematic the school as a unit of analysis was when they requested an approach that would enlist faculty participation and honor human contributions to the school reform process. The challenge for the reform movement, the principals, and me was to bridge the abyss between schools as institutions of change and educators as personal and collective agents of change. In the numerous discussions that ensued, portfolio work emerged as the substance, method, and form best suited to addressing the reform paradox in which all of our work was situated. From the beginning, we envisioned school portfolios as repositories of personal and shared meaning that could continually be held open to scrutiny as student learning, teachers’ practices, and school contexts came in contact with the organized reform effort.

In this article, I center on how school portfolio development connects teachers’ knowledge with the experience of school reform. To begin, I introduce the schools, the teachers, and myself. Next, I build a theoretical base for this particular version of school portfolio construction and for the narrative view of teacher knowledge as expressed in context. I then present examples of how the teachers and administrators consciously analyzed their school situations and progress with respect to organized school reform. After that, I reflectively turn (Schön, 1991) on school portfolios as the substance, method, and form that comes closest to bridging the gap between schools as inhuman units of change and educators as knowing and knowledgeable agents of change. I end by discussing how school portfolios assist in determining additional avenues of reflection and lead to more informed decision making and action within school contexts in the future.

INTRODUCING THE SCHOOLS

The five schools with which I work are all ethnically diverse, each exhibiting a unique composition and located in the Midsouthern United States. Yaeger Middle School has slightly more Caucasian students than African Americans and Hispanics whereas Cochrane Academy and Hardy Academy have more African American students than other groups. Immigrant Hispanic students mainly populate Heights Community Learning Center, whereas Eagle High School, the fifth school, is a 2,500-student, comprehensive high school with more African American than Hispanic students, followed by slightly more Caucasian than Asian students. Yaeger and Heights are situated in one school district, whereas Cochrane, Hardy, and Eagle are located in another. When combined, these schools reflect the cultural mosaic present in American public schools.

INTRODUCING THE TEACHERS IN THE PORTFOLIO GROUP

The lead teachers in the portfolio group were teams of individuals from each of the five schools that initially joined of their own accord or participated due to a principal’s recommendation. They attended half-day meetings held at a nearby university once a month. These educators coordinated the portfolio effort on their campuses and integrated the portfolio entries developed by their colleagues into the school portfolio documents. I worked with the representatives of the five schools collectively, and met with the individual campus groups as well. At the monthly meetings, the teams of teachers presented portfolio entries to the group for reflection, analysis, and feedback. As one might anticipate, common topics discussed at these group meetings were issues relating to school portfolio development, reform movement requirements for documentation, and how to mentor the portfolio development process at the individual school sites. Where the individual campus meetings were concerned, reflective discussions often pertained to the content of particular entries, making connections between
multiple portfolio entries prepared by different teachers, the portfolio form that would best capture the subtle nuances of particular school contexts, and ways to integrate critical information required by the reform movement.

INTRODUCING MYSELF

A former Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada doctoral and post-doctoral fellow, I had earlier conducted personal practical knowledge and professional knowledge landscape studies in Canada. Although I had previously contextualized teacher knowledge in a variety of school settings (i.e., Craig, 1998), I had no prior experience of working with organized reform movements or firsthand knowledge of their influences on school contexts. Even though I had not worked with school portfolios before, I had assisted students and teachers in creating reflective portfolios similar to those advocated by Lyons (1998) and her colleagues. These prior experiences, along with my research background centering on teachers’ knowledge developments in context, enabled me to see possibilities as well as limitations inherent in approaching school portfolio making in this manner.

Having recently been employed in the American context, I was highly desirous of working collaboratively with the school-based educators but understandably hesitant about the reform movement association and its agenda. At the same time as the school-based educators were intrigued by my different background and knowledge, I was drawn to the different forces shaping their knowing. This reciprocal attraction reinforced our shared desire to understand school reform from an insider perspective and bound us together in the common portfolio work.

INTRODUCING THE REFORM MOVEMENT

School reform is a local, regional, and national passion in the United States. Although all school reform initiatives are generally considered to be the same, each functions from its own “theory of action,” its own assessment of systemic educational problems that need to be comprehensively addressed in the educational enterprise (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Hatch, 1998; McDonald, 1996; Schön & McDonald, 1998).

The reform movement that philosophically and financially supported the change efforts at Cochrane, Eagle, Hardy, Heights, and Yaeger took one of the least intrusive approaches from a fiduciary and a philosophical standpoint. Philanthropic funds were awarded to local organizations that, in turn, distributed awards to worthy schools and networks of schools based on their reform plans. School plans were individually determined and were not altered unless the schools did not identify substantive changes they would undergo. The individual faculties and the communities they served determined the nature of the school changes, not the reform movement.

The underlying purpose of the reform movement was to promote teacher learning, to break down isolation between and among individuals, schools, and communities, and to address size issues so that all individuals in schools could become better known. These imperatives were developed to support student learning, the foremost goal of the reform movement.

One key feature of the particular reform initiative was its Critical Friends Groups (Cushman, 1999). These were formed to develop teacher leadership and to systematically look at student work. As the teachers in the schools became further immersed in the Critical Friends work, they would prepare teacher portfolios. Some schools also included student portfolio development as part of their campus reform plans. Eagle High School, for example, initiated a capstone project that was field tested in 1999 to 2000. This version of a portfolio involved graduation by exhibition. A second campus, Cochrane Academy, was highly involved in the development of arts-based student portfolios. As can be seen, the portfolio process was present— and projected—in multiple forms and to varying degrees within the five school sites.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Because my research focuses on the contextualization of teacher knowledge, I turned to that
literature base as a matter of philosophy and habit in framing an approach to school portfolio development. At the same time, I was keenly aware of the existing literature concerning portfolios created by preservice and in-service teachers. As my thinking and the work developed, I merged the two strands, both of which focused on reflective practice, in ways that made sense to me.

**SITUATING THE WORK IN THE TEACHER KNOWLEDGE LITERATURE**

A particular view of teacher knowledge is integral to the portfolio making process in which I engage with the school-based educators. Understanding the phrase *personal practical knowledge* is essential to making sense of how the teachers and I approach the portfolio work. Deweyan in nature (1916, 1934, 1938), personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) is a term designed to capture the idea of experience in a way that allows us to talk about teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons. Personal practical knowledge is in the teacher’s past experience, in the teacher’s present mind and body, and in the future plans and actions. Personal practical knowledge is found in the teacher’s practice. It is, for any teacher, a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation. (p. 25)

In this view of teacher knowledge, teachers filter their reform experience through their personal practical knowledge (Olson & Craig, 2001). Furthermore, the entries they choose to include in their school portfolios are expressions of their personal practical knowledge. Thus, teachers’ personal practical knowledge is central to school portfolio development in first- and second-order ways.

A second conceptualization that forms a critical underpinning of school portfolio development is Clandinin and Connelly’s professional knowledge landscape metaphor (1995, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). It connects teachers’ personal knowledge with the contexts of teaching. The metaphor of teacher knowledge constituting a professional knowledge landscape offers a way to think and talk about schools as units of change without taking the critical role of teachers and the centrality of relationships in the educational enterprise for granted. In Clandinin and Connelly’s (1995) words,

>A landscape metaphor is particularly well suited to our purpose. It allows us to talk about space, place, and time. Furthermore, it has a sense of expansiveness and the possibility of being filled with diverse people, things, and events in different relationships.

Understanding professional knowledge as comprising a landscape calls for a notion of professional knowledge as composed of a wide variety of components and influenced by a wide variety of people, places, and things. Because we see the professional knowledge landscape as composed of relationships among people, places, and things, we see it as both an intellectual and a moral landscape. (p. 4-5)

Teachers’ professional knowledge landscapes are composed of both in-classroom and out-of-classroom places. In previous research (Craig, 1995c), I outlined critical differences between these places as follows:

As a teacher, I live in two different professional places. One is the relational world inside the classroom where I co-construct meaning with my students. The other is the abstract world where I live with everyone outside my classroom, a world where I meet all the other aspects of the educational enterprise such as the philosophies, the techniques, the materials, and the expectations that I will enact certain educational practices. Although each of these places is distinctive, neither is totally self-contained. Together these places form the professional knowledge landscape that frames my work as an educator. (p. 16)

A key challenge in developing school portfolios is to cohesively link these multiple, often conflicting, sites of teacher inquiry in productive ways to illuminate the complexities of the situations.

A number of sets of stories characterize school landscapes. Stories of school—the stories that educators are expected to live and tell about schools—and school stories—the stories educators personally tell about schools—are vital. Also important are stories of reform—the stories that teachers are expected to live and tell about school reform and reform stories—the stories teachers personally tell about their experiences of school reform (Craig, 2001).
dynamic interplay between and among these multiple narratives forming a story constellation (Craig, in revision, 2001) on teachers’ professional knowledge landscapes is fundamental to school portfolio development. In short, these stories sit at the heart of school portfolio construction and reconstruction because they offer important perspectives concerning what works, why, and the meanings held by those who live in the tensions between and among the multiple story constellations shaping school landscapes.

Two additional conceptualizations relating to teacher knowledge contribute to this research framework. They show how the portfolio development process unfolds. One, the narrative authority of teacher knowledge (Olson, 1993, 1995), explains how teachers develop their knowledge transactionally. The concept of narrative authority offers an alternative to the dominant authority of positivism (Tom & Valli, 1990) that separates the knower and the known (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). The narrative authority conceptualization provides justification for teachers telling stories of their reform experience, the narrative view of teacher knowledge, and school portfolios as chronicles of reform experiences.

The second conceptualization, the notion that teachers have knowledge communities in which they negotiate the meaning of their experiences, shows how personal meaning becomes public and shared (Craig, 1995a, 1995b). The creation of school portfolios provides an additional commonplace of experience (Lane, 1988) that brings educators lodged in different places in the educational enterprise together around a shared purpose. In their knowledge communities, teachers develop and express the narrative authority of their personal practical knowledge in the company of others. Knowledge is mediated through the narrative authority of those who participate in relational conversations involving dialogue, analysis, and reflection. Such an approach is pivotal to the personal and collective creation of teacher knowledge and to school portfolio development because it counters retreats into solipsism from institutional, personal, and collective perspectives.

The aforementioned conceptual ideas—personal practical knowledge, professional knowledge landscapes, story constellations, the narrative authority of teacher knowledge, and teachers’ knowledge communities—are all narrative terms that set the stage for important connections to be made between teacher knowledge and school portfolio development. In the next section, I locate school portfolio development in the portfolio literature then elucidate the particular portfolio development method I used with the teacher teams from the five schools.

**SITUATING THE WORK IN THE PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT LITERATURE**

In my planning and evaluation work with teachers and schools, I subscribe to a portfolio definition proposed by Lyons (1998) who refers to portfolios as

> The dynamic process of teachers documenting the evidence of their work and growth, gathered and authored by them through careful reflection, shared with colleagues and students, and presented for public discussion and debate about their conceptions in good teaching. (p. ix)

To this definition, I add that, in school portfolio development, administrators are also included in the dynamic process and that the portfolios present not only evidence of good teaching but also offer conceptions of productive school contexts that support good teaching and good learning, notions that are, in themselves, problematic terms. Furthermore, as portfolio work expands, school district, personnel, reform agency representatives, parents, and the public at large may be invited into the process of school portfolio making because they too are shaping forces that impact the professional knowledge landscapes of schools.

Like Shulman (1994), I regard school portfolio construction as an act of teacher theory making. “What is declared worth documenting, worth reflecting on, what is deemed to be portfolio-worthy, is a theoretical act,” (1998, p. 24) claimed Shulman. In school portfolio development, the process publicly involves teachers and administrators working together in a collaborative manner to determine evidentiary
material reflecting their notions of good teaching and good schools. Embedded in this idea is the presentation of student work and student stories that portray how the school-based educators’ theories become realized in their practical work with students. In short, the development of a school portfolio embodies not only the continuous life of a school, it demonstrates—in powerful and connected ways—the continuous growth of individuals—administrators, teachers, and students—within. Furthermore, because the portfolio as a document is in a constant state of construction and reconstruction, it demands that school life be examined both longitudinally and episodically to ascertain the degree to which beliefs about good teaching and good schools are reflected in individual and collective actions.

In addition to drawing on the work of Lyons and Shulman in the research framework, Freidus’s notion of portfolio mentoring is also included in the theoretical base. Referring to Shulman’s account of a failed portfolio experiment, Freidus noted that the presence of mentors is a necessary prerequisite to portfolio success. Freidus (1998) described the mentoring process in the following manner:

Mentoring . . . becomes the nexus of trust building and accountability. Mentors . . . validate . . . experience on both professional and personal levels without being judgmental . . . they articulate not only the strength . . . of the work but also the way in which they see the work as professionally substantive. (p. 58)

In the school portfolio development process outlined in this article, the mentoring that took place was a layered process in which I worked directly with the portfolio group of teachers, and also with the overall reform teams of the schools and with the principals in an evaluation group. I also met informally in the schools with other faculty members. The portfolio group of teachers directly worked with their teaching colleagues and administrators, and also with the portfolio lead teachers from the other schools. In the mentoring process, the notions of the narrative authority of teacher knowledge and the idea of teachers forming knowledge communities to negotiate meanings for experiences figured largely. At this critical juncture, vital links between school portfolio development and teacher knowledge are forged.

THE SCHOOL PORTFOLIO METHOD

The method that guides the school portfolio development approach I take arises from many diverse sources. First, Chatman’s (1990) work is very instructive because it outlines different kinds of text and shows how they can be used in service of one another. Chatman’s scholarship reminds me that because the schools were associated with a reform movement, the narratives the teachers choose to support the school reform stories will always serve the purpose of argument: the argument that the campuses are good schools, the argument that the schools are worthy of future funding. This was a reality—and a problematic—that neither the teachers nor I could forget in the portfolio-making process. It sat in the background even when the work took on a life of its own.

A second notion that deeply informs the portfolio method I use with school-based educators is White’s idea (1981) of annals, chronicles, and narratives. In mapping out narrative ways of knowing (as opposed to logico-scientific ways of knowing), Bruner (1986) posited that annals represent the blow-by-blow accounts of what happened during a particular period of time whereas chronicles compose descriptions of the particular events. Narratives, in the meantime, penetrate selected events to illuminate people’s experiences of them. It seemed to me that White’s conceptualization of multiple kinds of text and Bruner’s anchoring of these texts in narrative ways of knowing addressed some of the manifold complexities present in school portfolio creation. First, the annals could account for all the reform activities undertaken by the schools, a requirement of the reform movement in the budget, documentation, and review processes. Second, the chronicles could offer enough description to the annals to render them meaningful. Third, the narratives represent highly developed portfolio entries that connect teacher knowledge with student learning set within the backdrop of a reforming school context. The first type of text meets the
reform movement’s compliance requirements whereas the third type centers on learning. The middle one merges the other two and rounds out the overall accounts of personal, collective, and school growth.

Another source that greatly influences the portfolio work with the school-based educators is the series of stories that Clandinin and Connelly use to describe the professional knowledge landscape of schools. These stories (to which I have added) address the school reform paradox by illuminating a complex maze of stories on school landscapes and intentionally revealing points of tension and conflict as well as points of convergence and shared energy to which the teachers and I must be alert.

The fourth source that guides my portfolio work with the teachers and the schools arises from Grant and Huebner’s research (1998). Grant and Huebner stated that portfolio construction above all involves the cultivation of two important habits of mind: one, the view that teaching as an ongoing inquiry, another, the notion that collaboration is a valuable way of coming to know teaching. Their orientation reminds me that growth will be evident in the created document but more so embodied in the hearts and minds of the educators who participated in the process.

The method I employ, then, draws on several sources: Chatman’s discussion of different kinds of text and their uses, White’s notion of annals, chronicles, and narratives (and by Bruner’s interpretation of it), Clandinin and Connelly’s storied landscape of schools, and Grant and Huebner’s habits of mind. These bodies of thought, together with my “telling stories” (1997), “parallel stories” (1999), and “story constellations” (in revision, 2001) research methods, form the methodological foundation from which I draw as I engage in the portfolio-making process with the educators on five campuses.

THE SCHOOL PORTFOLIO-MAKING PROCESS BEGINS: YEAR 1, CRAFTING SCHOOL NARRATIVES

The portfolio creation process began in the first year of the five schools’ participation in the reform movement. The groups of teachers from each school and I took up the task of researching and writing school narratives from the teachers’ points of view. These narratives portrayed their campuses to the point at which new stories of reform were introduced to their contexts. In this section, narrative exemplars (Kuhn, 1962/1970; Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002; Mishler, 1990) excerpted from two of the participating campuses are shared. Following that, a short analysis of how Connelly and Clandinin’s “stories of school” and “school stories” conceptualizations informed the work is provided.

SCHOOL NARRATIVE: HEIGHTS LEARNING CENTER

Teachers at Heights Learning Center, an elementary school serving a high-risk, immigrant Hispanic, Spanish-speaking population, captured the particularities of their context in the following excerpt from a portfolio entry:

Located in the Heights neighborhood, Heights Learning Center recently celebrated its eightieth year as a school. The Heights school building was beginning to take on the appearance of neglect. Peeling paint, missing floor tiles, and leaking ceilings were all too common features. Then, in 1997, the Heights community received a torrential downpour of rain. Eighty-five percent (85%) of the school received water damage and . . . had to be restored. . . .

Evolved from a middle class neighborhood of Anglo-English speakers to one in which ninety-five (95%) of the students are predominately Hispanic Spanish-speakers, Heights Community Learning Center has been deeply affected by societal shifts from urban to suburban living and from public to private schooling. However, because a reform effort [focusing on a dual language program] began, the school has increased its number of Hispanic children from ninety (90%) to its current ninety-five percent (95%). . . . These students are of a very low socioeconomic status with a high at risk school drop-out percentage (64%). Ninety percent (90%) of Heights’ students are on the free and/or reduced lunch program. (Heights Learning Center School Portfolio, 1998, 1-2)

SCHOOL NARRATIVE: EAGLE HIGH SCHOOL

The teachers in the Eagle High School portfolio group described the shifting context of the Eagle campus in the following manner:
TABLE 1  Eagle High School Portfolio (Year 1, p. 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of students</td>
<td>1,242</td>
<td>2,150</td>
<td>3,104</td>
<td>2,480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of students in Free or Reduced Lunch Programs</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage ethnic composition of student body</td>
<td>Black, 17</td>
<td>Black, 31</td>
<td>Black, 55</td>
<td>Black, 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anglo, 80</td>
<td>Anglo, 48</td>
<td>Anglo, 16</td>
<td>Anglo, 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic, 3</td>
<td>Hispanic, 12</td>
<td>Hispanic, 22</td>
<td>Hispanic, 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asian, N/A</td>
<td>Asian, 9</td>
<td>Asian, 8</td>
<td>Asian, 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eagle High School, located in the northwest part of the major urban center, is one of five high schools in a large school district. Eagle serves a community that is suburban by geography and urban by demography. Built in 1977, the school began as a small suburban high school. The downturn in the economy in the mid-1980s hit the golf course community around Eagle particularly hard. Many families, who had bought the new executive houses and whose incomes flourished during the boom in the 1970s and early 1980s, lost their jobs. Unable to make house payments, they simply walked away, abandoning homes to foreclosure sales. This change, coupled with a tremendous increase in the building of area apartments, including those subsidized by the government, caused a shift in the demographics of both the community and the school. During the last decade, the community around Eagle has undergone rapid economic changes that have resulted in Eagle’s transformation to a large school with a culturally, ethnically and economically diverse population. (Eagle High School Portfolio, 1998, p. 6)

ANALYSIS OF THE HEIGHTS COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTER AND EAGLE HIGH SCHOOL EXCERPTS

In the examples offered, the teacher portfolio makers at Heights Community Learning Center and Eagle High School blended Clandinin and Connelly’s two conceptualizations, stories of school and school stories, in the narratives that were written. Only in the recounting of historical detail do the original stories given to the schools begin to appear. What do come across clearly are the economic and environmental factors that shaped each school’s circumstance in particular ways. Where both Heights and Eagle were concerned, huge socioeconomic shifts in populations and racial composition of citizens in the surrounding neighborhoods are evident. For Heights, there was also “a torrential downpour,” an aberrant event, which called attention to the school’s worn state.

In both narratives, the teachers included numbered data to make their points. Quantitative evidence successfully supported qualitative assessments of their schools’ situations. Here, the requirements of the reform movement shaped how the stories would be told. The school people were well aware that the peer reviewers who would also visit their schools would only read so much text. They furthermore knew that justifications—in the conventional sense—were critically important, particularly from a funding perspective. The discussion of narrative serving the purpose of argument (Chatman, 1990), a point introduced earlier, is especially reflected in this text. By portraying enormous societal shifts and an intense desire to meet the needs of the children currently attending the campuses, the two schools argued their cases—through stories.

EXCAVATING A SCHOOL’S HISTORY OF REFORM

In this second section, an example of how teachers from T. P. Yaeger Middle School documented the recent history of school reform on their campus is made public. Reflections on how they used the stories of reform and reform stories conceptualizations follow.

ORIGINS OF SCHOOL REFORM: T. P. YAEGER MIDDLE SCHOOL

Yaeger’s path to school reform began in 1989, when the model science laboratory, a project made possible through a partnership gift, was established in the school. The lab presented sci-
ence curriculum in a dynamic, integrated manner and made the educative experiences of students academically rich and relevant to their lives. Lessons in the lab seized the attention of the student population, and neighborhood students began achieving at levels commonly associated with gifted and talented students. The lab offered the school a prototypical example of how the school might be restructured to meet the learning needs of a student population that had begun to skip, loiter, and act in sullen and worldly-beyond-their-years ways. The lab provided the staff and administration with a way to improve the tone and academic performance of students at Yaeger. The stark contrast between what was happening in the lab and what was happening elsewhere in the school suggested that Yaeger had not been as effective as it might have been in addressing the challenges that the malaise of modernity were posing in students’ lives. The creation of the model laboratory, with its child-centered, integrated approach to student learning and teacher development, represented a key juncture in Yaeger’s reform history. The lab’s early success formed a foundation on which all other changes were built. Attention was then turned toward systemic changes that would reorganize space and people and break down teacher and student isolation in ways that would make initiatives like the lab project possible. (T. P. Yaeger Middle School Portfolio, 1998, p. 5-6)

ANALYSIS OF YAEGER’S “ORIGINS OF SCHOOL REFORM” NARRATIVE

In the aforementioned passage, an innovative lab introduced to Yaeger Middle School is depicted as positively influencing the school’s reform trajectory. In the excerpt, the narrative reads like a story of reform as intended, whereas the remainder of the text projects a lack of reform story. Here, the Yaeger educators included what one might have anticipated in a portfolio entry with a candidness one would not expect to find in an entry submitted by a lead campus in a reform movement. In this way, Yaeger Middle School began a piercing self-study. Through the use of narrative, the teachers pinpointed and made visible significant challenges, some of which were “sacred stories” (Cladinning & Connelly, 1995) that had not previously been shared publicly.

APPROACHING SCHOOLS AS SITES OF INQUIRY

In this third section, texts from two campuses, Hardy Academy and Eagle High School are featured. These portfolio excerpts present the inquiry questions that the teachers framed of their own accord. As before, an analytical section follows.

HARDY ACADEMY: INQUIRY QUESTIONS

A newly formed campus located in an old school that was closed, then used for alternate behavior purposes during the early desegregation years, Hardy Academy, and its partner school, Cochrane Academy, are magnet campuses. These magnet schools were created when one of the most historical African American communities in the United States and its school district returned to court for failure to desegregate properly reasons (Cochrane Academy, 1998; Hardy Academy, 1998).

1995 to 1996
Problem experienced: Named a magnet school, but was more of a neighborhood school.
Inquiry question: How does a school become a magnet campus?

1996 to 1997
Problem experienced: Students at Hardy had five or six different schedules trying to accommodate the fine arts strand, teacher certification, and block scheduling.
Inquiry question: How does a magnet school become more flexible in its scheduling?

1997 to 1998
Problem experienced: Involvement of full staff; school reform, technology, and curriculum grants pulled people in seemingly opposing directions; few people did much of the work.
Inquiry questions: How does Hardy Academy get reform going? How can we strengthen the magnet theme? How can technology be used more effectively?

1998 to 1999
Problem experienced: Scheduling for magnet strands and new leadership.
Inquiry questions: How does Hardy Academy accommodate the strands of the magnet program? What can new leadership do to help increase the magnet theme, school reform efforts, the use of technology, and promote academic education? (Hardy Academy School Portfolio, 1998, p. 5-6)

Eagle High School: Inquiry questions
- Can a school serving an “attendance zone,” rather than a community, be the “glue” that creates and holds together a community where no natural community exists?
- Can a school maintain academic excellence through demographic and economic transition of its student body?
- Is it possible to institutionalize reform in a particular site so that school reform is not dependent on a particular charismatic leader?
- Can a large faculty re-shape itself into a mutually supporting learning community? (Eagle High School Portfolio, 1998, p. 6)

ANALYSIS OF THE INQUIRY QUESTIONS

Here, the Hardy Academy and Eagle High School teachers took two very different approaches to framing inquiry questions to drive their school portfolio-making process. Interestingly, the ages of their schools may have greatly influenced the decisions that were made. Although Hardy Academy (and its feeder pattern equivalent, Cochrane Academy) were recently reconstituted campuses (1995) and their most recent pasts were well known, Eagle High School (1972) was more established, and a wide-angle lens approach to framing inquiry questions was taken. It goes without saying that the questions the teachers posed shaped the purview of the inquiry stance—and what would be seen and not seen—from that point onward.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PORTFOLIO-MAKING PROCESS

In previous sections, readers were introduced to a sampling of entries excerpted from the first year school portfolios. In this next part of the work, the teachers’ reflections on the school portfolio creation process will be summarized.

The ongoing challenge of including more educators in the portfolio opinion development process was a shared opinion voiced by teachers on all five campuses. Although the number of teachers engaged in the work increased steadily, the desire to include more educators was commonly and longingly expressed. At the same time, the portfolio group of teachers recognized how important the invitational quality of the work was and the negative impact that acts of coercion would have on the overall reception of portfolios—of all kinds—within their school contexts.

A second challenge identified by the teachers was the duplicity of purpose embedded in the origin and evolution of the particular portfolio endeavor. The tensions between balancing the learning focus and the ever-present accountability agenda continued to be recognized, despite the fact the teachers overwhelmingly favored school portfolios as vehicles to feature learning. As can be seen, the educators found inventive ways to thread required information into their narratives. At the same time, this compromise inevitably placed constraints on the narrative impulse and bounded their knowing in particular ways.

A third response the teachers had to the school portfolio work was that it awakened them to “the hundredfold complexities of human experiences.” Participation in the in-school and across-school conversations and activities brought perspectives individuals had not imagined to the surface. Although this greatly enriched the teachers’ learning and enhanced their horizons of knowing, it also made them increasingly mindful of how difficult it is to capture the fullness of human experience in a portfolio document. They were especially desirous of helping others to see and value the multidimensional experiences they had come to know about their particular contexts.

If the teachers had their horizon expanded with respect to the complexities of human experiences, they also had their perspective altered with respect to the complexities of their schools contexts. As each teacher brought events of
classroom life and student learning to the table, the professional knowledge landscapes of particular schools became storied and restoried. Furthermore, teachers’ understandings of their schools became increasingly refined through contact with educators who brought different contextual experiences and readings of these experiences to the meetings.

New issues such as whose voice represents the voice of the school and who should decide what is portfolio worthy in a school context also rose to the surface. Additional matters that were discussed had to do with the representation of conflicting theories of actions present in school buildings and the need to align school portfolio development with other student and teacher portfolio work taking place in the schools. For example, how could entries contained in individual student and teacher portfolios be included in the school portfolio? What criteria would guide the choices that would be made? And how could progress in school portfolio making, for example, be used to advance teacher and student portfolio development (and vice versa)?

The aforementioned issues, challenges, questions, and wonders articulated by the teachers represent matters that will receive careful attention in the next round of school portfolio making. These reflections in and on the portfolio-making experiences will deeply influence how further generations of portfolios are developed and the way they will serve as exemplars for other campuses seeking a teacher knowledge approach to school portfolio development.

LIMITATIONS OF MERGING NARRATIVE AND SCHOOL PORTFOLIO MAKING WITHIN THE BACKDROP OF A REFORM MOVEMENT

Even though the school portfolio development process proved to be a productive activity for the teachers and the five schools engaged in the organized school reform movement, it does not follow that the approach would work well for all teachers and/or should be mandated for every school involved in a change effort. In this particular case, a number of factors laid essential groundwork for the success of the portfolio work: the advocacy of the founding principals, the need for alternatives to the existing accountability system, the nature of the five school contexts, the enthusiasm and creativity of the teachers, and the presence of a mentor to work closely in the schools and with the school-based educators. In the background, the organized reform association movement served as a catalyst to bring these conditions together and provided a forum within which they could become known.

At the same time as the organized school reform association enabled school portfolio development on the campuses, it constrained the portfolio-making process in other ways. For example, requirements for entries to be connected to the imperatives of the reform movement (as opposed to embedded in the nature of the overall school context) placed limitations on creativity, as did the demand for numbered accounts, particularly data relating to student achievement. Sometimes the requirements did not fit as cleanly as we would have liked with the narrative approach or with the manner in which the portfolio method was conceptualized and designed. However, the teachers soon discovered twists and bends that could be taken to maintain the teacher knowledge perspective. As we improvised, we worked especially hard to retain the reconstruction of meaning purpose so integral to the school portfolio development work.

Another dilemma we needed to manage had to do with the common perception of portfolios being frozen in time. To counteract this influence, we placed a great deal of emphasis on teachers and other school-based educators storying and restorying their experiences, and connected this idea with the idea of portfolios serving as safe deposit boxes for reconstructed experiences that will be revisited. Here, the habit of continuing to deliberate on the reflections contained within the portfolios and to reflect on the ongoing portfolio-making process helped us press toward the future rather than getting stuck in a past that had been ably recorded and was easy and comfortable to settle into.
PARTING COMMENTS

In this article, I have highlighted school portfolios as a way to feature teachers’ knowledge of their professional knowledge landscapes, particularly with respect to stories of reform (Craig, 2001) being introduced to stories of school (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). I began by introducing the schools, the teachers, the reform movement, and myself. I then built a theoretical framework for teacher knowledge and school portfolio development work that gave rise to the particular method that was employed. This led me to share excerpts from the Year 1 school portfolios that included school narratives, histories of school reform, and inquiry questions relating to school as sites of inquiry as articulated by participating teachers. After that, I included analytical sections relating to conceptualizations introduced in the theoretical framework. I ended with a discussion of the issues, questions, and wonders that the portfolio group of teachers named at the conclusion of their first year immersed in the portfolio-creation process and the strengths and limitations of a narrative approach to portfolio making lodged within an organized reform effort. Together with creating the human systems and associations necessary to facilitate and extend the school portfolio-making process, this was the sum and total of what the teachers and I were able to accomplish in Year 1.

It is fitting, then, that I conclude this longitudinal inquiry at the first year juncture with words from a framed statement given to me by one of the teachers in the portfolio group. The expression aptly portrays not only school and individual development but also the portfolio creation process in which we collaboratively engaged: “Changes . . . there are no endings just new beginnings.” Such was our experience of personal change, school change, and the portfolio-making process. In this experiential commonplace, critical connections between teacher knowledge and school portfolio construction were forged.

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NOTE

1. In this article, the word state means 1 of the 50 states in the United States. It does not mean central or national.

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