The teaching portfolio in US teacher education programs:
what we know and what we need to know

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Abstract

Teaching portfolios have become commonplace in the US in teacher education programs, in the process of granting an initial teaching license, in teacher recertification, and in National Board certification. This paper focuses on the use of teaching portfolios in preservice teacher education programs and analyzes the various ways in which portfolios have been conceptualized and implemented. A conceptual framework is proposed to enable researchers to describe the conditions of portfolio use. A presentation of the conditions of portfolio use will enable a greater understanding of the ways in which teaching portfolios impact teacher development and the quality of teacher assessments under different conditions of use. The paper concludes with a discussion of the key issues that have emerged in the use of teaching portfolios in preservice teacher education in the US. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Completing the school-site portfolio for the early adolescence generalist certification was, quite simply, the single most powerful professional development experience of my career. Never before have I thought so deeply about what I do with children and why I do it. I looked critically at my practice, judging it against a set of high and rigorous standards. Often in daily work, I found myself rethinking my goals, correcting my course, moving in new directions. I am not the same teacher as I was before the assessment ... (Haynes, 1995).

In recent years, teaching portfolios have been commonplace in preservice teacher education programs and in the lives of practicing teachers throughout the US.1 Along with the transformation of many preservice teacher education programs in the US to a performance-based mode of assessment (Diez, 1998) has come the increased use of teaching portfolios to assess the readiness of prospective teachers to receive an initial teaching license (Porter, Youngs, & Odden, 2001). States are beginning to require the use of portfolios


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with preservice teacher education students and increasingly want to examine sample student portfolios as part of the process of accrediting teacher education programs. Also, given the increased emphasis on preparing and developing teachers to be reflective and analytic about their work (Zeichner & Liston, 1996), teacher educators and staff developers have increasingly used teaching portfolios as one of a number of vehicles to stimulate greater reflection and analysis by teachers. In preservice teacher education programs, portfolios have been used within individual courses (e.g., Winsor, 1994), for continuation within a program and admission to student teaching (e.g., Zeichner, 2000), within practicums and student teaching (Borko, Michalec, Timmons, & Siddle, 1997), and across entire teacher education programs. Finally, with the advent of National Board Certification for teachers in the US, teaching portfolios have been increasingly used as one of several ways to assess experienced teachers who seek National Board certification or equivalent recognition as a master teacher. States also are increasingly utilizing the examination of teaching portfolios for the purpose of relicensing teachers.

1. Teaching portfolios and professional development

From the very beginning of the use of teaching portfolios in the 1980s, there has been the hope that they would contribute both to the development and growth of individual teachers and to a more deliberate and cumulative improvement of the teaching profession (Bird, 1990). Within the literature on teaching portfolios, numerous claims have been made about the benefits for teachers and their students of constructing a teaching portfolio. For example, it has been asserted that teaching portfolios encourage student teachers and teachers to think more deeply about their teaching and about subject matter content, to become more conscious of the theories and assumptions that guide their practices, and to develop a greater desire to engage in collaborative dialogues about teaching. It has also been argued that the use of teaching portfolios creates a situation where teachers become more self-confident about their practice (e.g., Anderson & DeMeulle, 1998; Bartell, Kaye, & Morin, 1998; Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000; Richert, 1990). These influences on the learning of teachers are thought to come from three areas: (a) the process of constructing a portfolio, (b) the mentoring and collaboration that is often associated with the process of portfolio construction, and (c) the feedback given on the completed portfolio (Wolf, 1994).

Finally, it has also been asserted that constructing a teaching portfolio influences teachers' classroom practices in various ways. For example, teachers who have participated in the National Board Certification process have reported using more varied forms of pupil assessment and keeping more detailed records of student performance after the certification process. For example,

The highly structured National Board portfolios have sometimes asked some teachers to engage in practices (e.g., in literacy) that are very different than their ordinary approaches. There is some evidence that these new practices are maintained beyond the certification process (Athanases, 1994). In addition to new teaching practices being maintained beyond the portfolio construction experience, claims have also been made about habits of reflection and analysis continuing on well after the initial experience of constructing a portfolio. For example, it has been concluded in conjunction with previous work done with

2 Some states that have required the use of teaching portfolios in performance assessment systems for initial licensure have stipulated that the assessments take place "over time."

3 Although the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards offers the only nationally recognized advanced certification for teachers, several states such as Wisconsin recognize alternative ways of demonstrating master teacher status through the use of teaching portfolios.
teaching portfolios in Stanford University’s teacher education program that:

Three years after completing the portfolio project Lucy, Bruce, and Michio continue to incorporate the cognitive strategies of inquiry and collaborative learning in their professional work. Our conversations reveal that the most powerful patterns of thinking taken from the portfolio project were the habits of mind which view teaching as inquiry and which incorporate talk about practice as a regular occurrence (Grant & Huebner, 1998).  

Despite the current popularity of teaching portfolios, there have been very few systematic studies of the nature and consequences of their use for either assessment or development purposes. There has been a lack of research on the portfolio construction process (Borko et al., 1997). Although many teacher education students have found great value in the intellectual struggles that are often associated with constructing a teaching portfolio, some have experienced frustration and confusion and found little value in the experience (Wade & Yarbrough, 1996). Lyons (1998) has concluded, “there is not yet a body of systematic data documenting their uses or their long-term consequences.” (p. 247). The teaching portfolio is a relatively recent tool in teaching and teacher education having been introduced only as recently as the 1980s with the work of Lee Shulman and his colleagues at Stanford in the Teacher Assessment Project (e.g., Shulman, 1988; Shulman, Haertel, & Bird, 1988).

Because of the high degree of variability in the way in which teaching portfolios have been conceptualized and implemented in teaching and teacher education, there is a need to gain greater clarity about the different ways in which they have been used to assess and help teachers develop. It makes little sense to talk about the consequences of using teaching portfolios in general, without an understanding of the particular conditions under which they are constructed and the purposes toward which they are directed. This paper focuses on the use of the teaching portfolio as an assessment and development tool in preservice teacher education programs in the US. In it we propose a conceptual framework for situating the use of teaching portfolios in particular instances within a broader array of possibilities. This framework can be used by researchers to describe the approach to teaching portfolios in particular settings as they explore the consequences of using teaching portfolios in those settings. A fuller description of the nature and quality of portfolio use will enable us to gain a greater understanding in the future of the relationships between the way in which the teaching portfolio is conceptualized and implemented and its value as an assessment and/or professional development tool. This paper also examines some of the conclusions that have been reached by teacher educators as they have begun to work with teaching portfolios in their programs.

2. Varied purposes and forms of teaching portfolios

One critical issue of variation among teaching portfolios is the different purposes toward which they are directed. Several different kinds of teaching portfolios have been identified in the literature. For example, one purpose of a teaching portfolio is to engage student teachers in inquiry about their teaching and to document growth in teaching over time. This type of portfolio, frequently referred to as a “learning portfolio” (Wolf & Dietz, 1998), is often used throughout the duration of a preservice teacher education program. Another purpose of teaching portfolios in today’s standards-based environment in teacher education is to assess prospective teachers’ readiness to receive an initial teaching license. Here the “credential portfolio” is often used to determine whether student teachers have demonstrated some level of proficiency on a set of teaching standards that are increasingly being defined at the state level (e.g., Snyder, Lippincott, & Bower, 1998). Yet another use of the teaching portfolio that has become more common in recent years is for employment purposes. Here many university job

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4 At the time of this study student teaching portfolios at Stanford were structured around the self-designed questions of student teachers.
placement units are assisting their teacher education graduates in preparing “showcase” portfolios representing students’ best work that they use when they apply for teaching positions. Some programs like those at Wichita State University (Carroll, Potthoff, & Huber, 1996) have attempted to combine different purposes within a single teaching portfolio for each student while others like the program at the University of California-Santa Barbara require separate portfolios for different purposes (Snyder et al., 1998).

A second critical dimension of variation in teaching portfolios is who determines what goes into the portfolio and the degree to which this is specified beforehand or left to the portfolio compiler to determine. Along this dimension, portfolios range from idiosyncratic collections of materials by individual teachers (sometimes referred to as “scrapbook” portfolios) to standardized presentations of particular kinds of evidence determined by teacher educators and assessors such as the portfolios used for National Board certification. Snyder et al. (1998) at the University of California-Santa Barbara have developed a framework for describing the multiple sources of evidence that are often included in teaching portfolios. They outline three different kinds of evidence that are included in the portfolios of their student teachers: (a) test and test-like events (tasks assigned by others to be completed within a set time frame); (b) observations (a record of what other people note when they watch a student teacher in action); and (c) performance work samples (direct evidence of a student teacher’s work). A similar framework was developed in Stanford’s teacher assessment project that includes: (a) artifacts—documents produced in the normal course of teaching; (b) reproductions—documents about typical events in someone’s teaching; (c) attestations—documents about someone’s teaching prepared by someone other than the portfolio developer; and (d) productions—documents prepared especially for the portfolio such as captions and reflective statements (Collins, 1991).

Programs vary greatly in terms of both how much they structure the teaching portfolio for their students and in terms of what they require to be included. Some programs like those at the University of New Hampshire have given student teachers/interns a great deal of latitude in determining what goes into their portfolios (e.g., Schram & Mills, 1995). Others prescribe the particular amount and or kinds of evidence that should go into the portfolios such as the particular number or kinds of artifacts that need to be included and the kinds of commentary and analysis that need to accompany the artifacts. Probably most programs include a combination of prescribed and student self-selected evidence (Barton & Collins, 1993).

Programs also vary in the way in which they encourage or require their students to organize the evidence that is placed in their teaching portfolios. For example, some of the work at Stanford has involved a model similar to action research and required students to organize their teaching portfolios around a self-designed question that is investigated during the field experience (Grant & Huebner, 1998). Other programs have asked students to organize their portfolios around themes chosen by students (e.g., Freidus, 1998), around program goals (e.g., Dollase, 1996) or teaching standards approved by the state (e.g., Snyder et al., 1998). Most of the portfolios that have been constructed in teacher education programs have been compiled into a notebook format using paper and photographs. Recently, a number of institutions, including our own and the University of Washington, have been experimenting with electronic teaching portfolios. There is very little literature available that discusses the nature and consequences of using electronic as opposed to traditional paper and pencil portfolios with student teachers. The little literature that does exist and that discusses the consequences of using teaching portfolios in teacher education programs looks very much like that on paper portfolios with general claims being made about the value of the process in promoting reflection, in building teacher confidence, etc. (e.g., McKinney, 1998). Also, although there are discussions in the literature about the opportunities presented by the use of electronic technology, there are also discussions of the limitations that are posed by particular varieties of available software and of the challenges involved in providing prospective teachers...
with the skills they need to be able to construct electronic teaching portfolios. Despite the current ambiguity about the consequences of employing electronic technology with teaching portfolios, whether or not teacher educators employ electronic, paper, or some combination in their portfolio assignments needs to be described in presenting an institution’s approach to using teaching portfolios.

It is becoming increasingly common for states to require the demonstration in a teaching portfolio of an acceptable level of proficiency on a set of externally defined teaching standards as part of the process of awarding an initial teaching license. Some version of the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards (INTASC, 1992) has become the most commonly used set of standards for the licensing of beginning teachers, although some states like California have developed their own teaching standards. Even when teacher education programs require their students to include evidence of proficiency on a set of teaching standards there is still much variation. For example, the vision of good teaching embedded in the standards varies across programs, as does the nature of the requirements for the kinds of evidence that show mastery of a set of standards. Some programs encourage the presentation of student teachers' best work in relation to a set of standards. Others may require that students show evidence of growth over time which means that some less than exemplary examples of teaching will be included in the portfolio. Still other programs such as those in the state of Oregon require student teachers to show evidence of student learning (McConney, Schalock, & Schalock, 1998; Schalock & Myton, 1989).

Examples of the kinds of artifacts that programs have asked their students to include in their teaching portfolios are narrative statements of teaching goals and philosophies, lesson and unit plans, pupil work samples, cooperating teacher and/or university supervisor observation notes and evaluations, excerpts from student teaching journals, communications with parents, photographs, video taped teaching samples, action research projects, and sample pupil assessments. Frequently, student teachers are urged or required to include a caption analyzing each portfolio entry to avoid a scrapbook portfolio where the focus is mainly on the form and attractiveness of the presentation rather than on the substance of the work.

Another dimension along which the use of portfolios in teacher education varies is the nature and quality of the social interactions that student teachers experience in the process of portfolio construction. It has been argued that the value of teaching portfolios is greatly enhanced when teachers are given opportunities to interact with others on a regular basis in their construction. For example,

While acknowledging their potential value for a school teacher's personal reflection and development, one may argue that portfolio entries prepared by the teacher alone have limited prospects either for improving teaching or for evaluating school teachers. These entries call for little or none of the collegial or supervisory support that a program of teacher development would imply. They provide little or none of the control or corroboration of evidence that may be needed to sustain personal actions. They do not clearly engage teachers and others in substantial conversations... (Bird, 1990, p. 247–248).

Practices range from those situations where student teachers work largely on their own in constructing a portfolio to those such as in the teacher education programs at Bank Street College and the University of Southern Maine where significant peer and teacher educator mentoring has been incorporated into the portfolio development process (Freidus, 1998; Davis & Honan, 1998; Whitford, Ruscoe, & Fickel, 2000). One common way for peer mentoring to be included in a teacher education program is for time to be spent during weekly student teaching seminars examining and discussing artifacts that will eventually go into student teachers’ portfolios. In the Professional Development School cohort program at The University of Wisconsin-Madison teacher education students are required to bring specific kinds of portfolio artifacts to their weekly field seminars several times during the semester (e.g., an
example of how they have incorporated knowledge of the community context into their instruction). They also have individual conferences with their supervisors about their portfolios in addition to the group discussions of their artifacts and examples of portfolios completed during previous semesters.

Programs also vary in the way in which cooperating/mentor teachers are involved in the portfolio process, from those where there is very little involvement (e.g., insertion of artifacts from cooperating teachers into the portfolio) to those where cooperating teachers are very involved in the process of constructing a portfolio with their student teacher. In the required course on mentoring taken by new elementary cooperating teachers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, time is spent discussing the ways in which portfolios are used in the program and in encouraging cooperating teachers to play active roles in the construction of their student teachers’ portfolios.

Another dimension of variation in the use of portfolios in teacher education programs is with regard to what happens with the portfolio once it is completed. Frequently, but not always, there is some kind of public presentation of the completed portfolio to various audiences. These presentations range from “show and tell” sessions where very little serious discussion of teaching and learning takes place to events where the portfolio is used as a springboard for in-depth discussion and analysis of various issues. Those who are present at portfolio presentations include some combination of university and school personnel and oftentimes peers. Institutions also vary in the way in which they assess the completed portfolios of teacher education students. While some programs have very specific rubrics to evaluate portfolios, others do not and use a pass–fail system and the writing of general comments. In some cases, teacher education students have participated in the development of the criteria by which their portfolios were to be assessed (e.g., Stroble, 1995). Sometimes the portfolio is assessed, but not the oral presentation and sometimes both are assessed and figure into student teachers’ grades.

One example of criteria used to assess teaching portfolios in teacher education programs can be found at Michigan State University in Team One (MSU, 2000). Here one of the required sections of student teachers’ portfolios is concerned with “Teaching for Understanding.” Interns are required to submit two entries in this category which demonstrate their efforts to teach for understanding and foster student learning. One of the entries must be in math or literacy and the other one can be in a content area chosen by the intern. Some of the criteria by which these portfolio entries are assessed include: (a) whether the goals for student learning are clear and worthwhile, (b) whether the tasks and activities fit the goals, (c) whether the assessment reflects an understanding of where the student is in her/his learning and whether the next steps make sense.

3. Some emerging issues in the use of portfolios in teacher education

In the relatively few years that teaching portfolios have been employed in teacher education programs to assess and promote learning among prospective teachers a number of issues have emerged in their use. One major issue that has emerged is a frequent conflict in purposes among teacher educators and their students. For example, as was reported in a recent in-depth analysis of work with teaching portfolios at the University of Colorado (Borko et al., 1997), student teachers are understandably most concerned about the uses of their portfolios as aids in gaining employment while teacher educators are most concerned about using portfolios to promote professional development and to make assessments. The students’ focus on the “showcase” aspects of portfolios and in presenting a favorable image to prospective employers sometimes conflicts with the goal of using the portfolio for professional development and/or assessment and has created tensions between student teachers and teacher educators. One way of dealing with this tension is to use separate portfolios to address the different purposes. This can either involve the construction of totally separate teaching portfolios as is done at the University of California-Santa Barbara (Snyder et al., 1998) or, as in our own Professional
Development School cohort program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, selections made from a learning and development portfolio for an employment portfolio after the completion of the program.

Another issue that has emerged in the use of teaching portfolios has to do with fostering student teacher ownership of their portfolios. Leaving the construction of portfolios mainly to students has sometimes caused problems in both assessment and professional development (e.g., superficial reflection about teaching, limited evidence on which to base an assessment of teaching), but too tightly prescribing what goes into the portfolios has sometimes caused negative reactions by student teachers who, lacking ownership of their portfolios, are more likely to see them as something that diverts their attention away from their teaching and their students (Borko et al., 1997). One goal that has been sought by teacher educators who have faced this dilemma has been to seek a balance between specifying portfolio entries and letting students determine their entries. For example, Barton and Collins (1993) who have worked with portfolios in teacher education programs at the University of Rhode Island and Florida State University, respectively, have concluded that the most effective teaching portfolios include a combination of prescribed evidence and self-selected evidence. Furthermore, when prescribing entries, they have found it most effective to prescribe form (e.g., include a video of a lab lesson) rather than specific content (e.g., a lesson on photosynthesis).

There is much evidence in the literature on multicultural teacher education that teacher education students often bring (among other things), deficit perspectives about low income students of color to their teacher education programs that prevent them from successfully teaching these students, and that their programs often fail to help them reexamine these views and develop more culturally relevant teaching practices (Ladson-Billings, 1999). If the reflection stimulated by teaching portfolios does not help challenge student teacher perspectives that help to maintain the gap between the poor and others in US schooling, then its value is problematic. Some amount of structure provided by teacher educators in teaching portfolios and other vehicles for promoting reflection such as action research, journals, etc. is probably necessary if student teachers are to confront some of the difficult issues that have to do with race, social class and inequality (Zeichner & Hoeft, 1996). On the other hand, it is certainly possible to go too far in this direction which raises the issue of indoctrination.

Teacher educators have also struggled with getting student teachers to work on their portfolios over time (e.g., a course, a field experience) rather than engaging in the common practice of putting it all together at the last minute before an oral presentation. One way in which this problem has been dealt with is to establish checkpoints along the way for students to present various pieces of the portfolio either to a seminar or class group or to a teacher educator in an individual conference (e.g., Dollase, 1996).

Although there has been some study of the process of portfolio construction at institutions like the University of Colorado (Borko et al., 1997), there has not been any study of which we are aware of the nature of portfolio communities as teacher education students and their mentors share and discuss various aspects of teaching portfolios at different points in their construction. Although it is clear that most student teachers and teachers who have been engaged in the process of constructing a teaching portfolio claim that the portfolios have caused them to reflect more about their teaching, closer study of the nature and quality of this reflection is needed. It is agreed by most who have studied the issue of teacher reflection and reflective teaching that reflection in and of itself is not necessarily a good thing and does not automatically make one a better teacher (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). We need to learn more about the nature and quality of reflection that emerges under different conditions of portfolio use.

4. Conclusion

It is important that future studies of the use of teaching portfolios in teacher education help us move beyond the obvious conclusions that
portfolios promote greater reflection by student teachers and provide teacher educators with more “authentic” assessments of the teaching of their students. The important questions are what is the nature and quality of reflection that is promoted under different conditions of portfolio use and what is the specific quality of the assessments that one can make of teaching with the aid of teaching portfolios under particular conditions. Without a clearer sense of the specific quality of reflection associated with portfolio use, the quality of the teaching assessments will be greatly limited. We have suggested a framework that includes several dimensions along which teacher educators and researchers should describe the conditions of portfolio use in their particular programs so that research on teaching portfolios will become more sensitive to the influence of the portfolio context on student teacher development and on the quality of teaching assessments. Teaching portfolios are here to stay in the current and likely future political environment for teacher education in the US. We need to learn how to take advantage of their potential for promoting meaningful teacher growth and in giving us better insights into prospective teachers’ teaching as we assess it.

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