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Educational Portfolios

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different types of portfolios? What are the educational purposes? What benefits are derived from portfolio use? Are portfolios beneficial for students in special education? What are the arguments against using portfolios in the classroom? Do portfolios need to be standardized to address certain criteria? Should portfolios document longitudinal growth over several years, or be confined to a single year? Should portfolio entries only document school learning, or should it incorporate entries from students' lives outside of school? How many different disciplines should be represented in a single portfolio? By the end of this review, the goal is to have demystified the concept of portfolios and unveil their tempting benefits for all those involved in the classroom.

Following the research for my literature review, I completed my own action research to supplement my initial discoveries. I contacted three schools in the Rochester, New York area that implement portfolios in their schools: one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. Through my contacts with these schools, I was able to compare their portfolio implementation and perceived benefits and drawbacks to my prior research. Consequently, I was able to extend my understanding and reiterate the conclusions of my research.

**Literature Review**

"The central task of education is to implant a will and facility for learning; it should produce not learned but learning people." ~Eric Hoffer

"The only purpose of education is to teach a student how to live his life-by developing his mind and equipping him to deal with reality. The training he needs is theoretical, i.e., conceptual. He has to be taught to think, to understand, to integrate, to prove. He has to be taught the essentials of the knowledge discovered in the past-and he has to be equipped to acquire further knowledge by his own effort." ~Ayn Rand

"The aim of education should be to teach us...how to think, [rather] than what to think...to improve our
experimented with portfolios. As administrators for a writing program with a final written exam, the educators felt dissatisfied with the holistic scoring method used. They decided to begin experimenting with portfolios, asking students to submit folders with writing across several genres, rather than a single one. This created a new emphasis on process over product. Today, more and more teachers are recognizing the impact that portfolios can have on the quality of learning students receive. Educators are incorporating portfolios into K-12 classrooms, but with more of an emphasis on using the portfolio as a showcase for accomplished work rather than for assessment (Barrett, 2007). Portfolios strive "to produce richer and more valid assessments of students' competencies than are possible from traditional testing" (Barrett, 2008, p. 2). As new knowledge is presented, students apply and implement this new information and reflect on their learning and work within their portfolio (Chambers & Wickersham, 2007). The portfolios provide students with the opportunity to be reflective practitioners of their own learning and learning processes, facilitating the development of behaviors and talents that provide a richer picture of student work (Barrett, 2007; Barrett, 2008; Lombardi, 2008). Research has shown that students at all levels view assessment as something done to them by someone else. Many students have little understanding of what is involved in evaluating their work beyond letter grades. By incorporating portfolios into the main infrastructure of the classroom, it provides a guideline "for involving students in developing and understanding criteria for good efforts, in coming to see the criteria as their own, and in applying the criteria to their own and other students' work" (Barrett, 2008, p. 2). This new form of learning focuses on student work accompanied by student reflection. These collections are indicative of progress towards the essential outcomes decided by the teacher, school, district, or state, telling the story of the students' efforts, progress, and achievements (Barrett, 2007; Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997). Through the story their portfolio shares, students create a new story for a new audience by weaving together introductions, summaries, and reflections (Goodson, 2007). These
Educational Portfolios 9

1997). This type of information can be extremely helpful in designing future instruction. Due to its purpose, the primary audience for a working portfolio is the student under the guidance of a teacher. As students work on their portfolio, and reflect on the quality of work within it, they "become more reflective and self-directed" (Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997, p. 1). Another key audience member can be parents, since the working portfolio can contribute valuable information, particularly in parent/teacher conferences. The portfolio serves as a vessel for demonstrating student strengths and weaknesses, as well as documenting progress.

Working portfolios are typically structured around a specific content area that focuses on meeting explicit objectives. Through the portfolio, students are working toward documenting mastery of those objectives. When students move pieces from a working portfolio into a showcase or assessment portfolio, they must reflect on their choices, seriously deliberating on why and how each chosen piece demonstrates their mastery of those objectives (Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997).

Similar to the working portfolio is the documentation portfolio. McMahan and Gifford (2001), in their article *Portfolio: Achieving Your Personal Best*, claim that this type may be the most useful for students of all ages. The documentation portfolio "enables both the teacher and the student to collect work systematically over time and with a specific purpose" (p. 38). Within this type of portfolio are rough drafts, brainstorming activities, checklists, observations, discussion notes and responses, etc. The greatest advantage to the documentation portfolio is that students can see their progress over time. However, one limitation is the amount of time and space involved in knowing which samples are most valuable in documenting their progress (McMahan & Gifford, 2001).

The process portfolio contains articles and artifacts that demonstrate part of a larger project. This type of portfolio emphasizes self-reflection as the students examine steps taken in an assignment, the knowledge gained in the process, and any changes that could be made. Instead of the assessment of student growth being analyzed at the close of a semester or grading period, this type of portfolio
visual effects, and rendering solution that can be integrated into appropriate classrooms
(http://usa.autodesk.com). Another 3D graphics software is Bryce from Daz-3D. This program allows
students to create 3D modeling and animation (www.daz3d.com/i.x/software/bryce). Vectorworks has
superior 2D and 3D capabilities (www.nemetschek.net/designer). Belkin Voice Recorder, as described
previously, can record memos, lectures, interviews, and conversations simply by being plugged into an
iPod (www.belkin.com). Finally, Microsoft OneNote 2007 is a digital notebook that gathers information
in one place, allowing users to quickly find what they need, share notes and information, gather and
organize text, pictures, digital handwriting, audio and video recordings, and more

Electronic portfolios can be used for many purposes, but the overarching purpose is to
document the learning process and growth for learners of all ages (Barrett, 2007). When implementing
electronic portfolios, many of the steps are the same as for paper portfolios. Teachers must evaluate
whether the course or class is well-suited for a portfolio. The purpose must be clearly articulated, and
students must receive coaching in the reflective process and feedback throughout the entire process.
Particular to the electronic portfolio, technical issues much be addressed when necessary (Zellers &
Mudrey, 2007).

Many benefits present themselves in electronic portfolios. Like paper portfolios, electronic
portfolios help to identify student strengths and weaknesses; furthermore, technology allows student
progress to be recorded digitally and provides a new motivation for traditional subjects. It keeps the
work organized electronically, allowing for a paperless learning environment (Chambers & Wickersham,
2007; Zuger, 2008). Portfolios go from overloaded scrapbooks to electronic organization as students can
showcase their talents, creativity, individuality, and technological capabilities. Electronic portfolios take
the portfolio concept to a new level by challenging students to apply learning in a real world way
(Lambert et al, 2007). With portfolios now integrated into technology, students are given the
I contacted each principal via email and asked if they would be willing to answer the following ten questions (see Appendix A):

1. What type of portfolio(s) does your school employ?
2. Why did your school decide to use portfolios?
3. Does the portfolio(s) replace standardized testing?
4. If so, what requirements are necessary to make portfolios align with state standards?
5. Is portfolio implementation universal throughout the school, or is it at the teacher's discretion?
6. Does the portfolio document longitudinal growth over several years, or is it confined to a single year?
7. How many different disciplines does a single portfolio represent?
8. What do you perceive as the benefits for using portfolios?
9. Do you believe portfolios can be beneficial for children receiving special education services, as well as children in the general education classroom? Why or why not?
10. What do you perceive as drawbacks, if any, for using portfolios?

The principal at High School answered these questions through email. The principals of Elementary School and Middle School answered the questions verbally as I asked them over the phone.

Analysis:

When all responses were collected, they were compared with each other and the research from the literature review, marking similarities and differences.

Results

Supplemental School Information:
economic history of the community. The curriculum is organized around six historical time periods studied over two-year periods. These periods consist of Prehistory, Early People/Woodland Peoples, Indians/Explorers/Settlers, Village to City, City Grows, and Today and Tomorrow. Students at all levels study the same period at the same time. This allows for greater cross-age and peer collaboration. The topics of investigation increase in complexity and sophistication as students move through grade levels. The expeditions often take students outside school to conduct fieldwork. All expeditions involve intense research, reading, writing, scientific exploration, and real-world application.

Each grade has one class made up of 30-32 students, two teachers, and one teaching assistant. On average, the student-teacher ratio is 12 to 1, compared with a state average of 13 to 1. To build strong classroom cultures, instructional continuity, and teacher-student relationships, the teachers “loop” with their students. On occasion, students are grouped in multi-age teams for academic subjects and expeditions.

Elementary School is one of five charter schools in the city of Rochester. A charter school is a public school, but differs from traditional public schools because it is independent and operated by educators, parents, community leaders, educational entrepreneurs, or others. Funding for charter schools is based on designated local or state quality and effectiveness of education, but permits the schools to operate outside the traditional public school education system.

Survey Question Responses:

[Question 1: What type of portfolio(s) does your school employ?]  

All three schools reported to use a type of summative, or showcase, portfolio. These portfolios consist of projects chosen by the students that they believe demonstrate learning targets and prove growth as learners. Students reflect on their portfolio choices, defending their selections.

High School and Elementary School report using collection, or developing, portfolios. These focus on the growth and development of the students.
they have collected from kindergarten through fifth grades, as well as work from sixth grade. High School also uses longitudinal portfolios, although the Senior Project is a one year project portfolio that incorporates the student’s ability to use skills taught over the course of their time at the school.

Middle School reports using portfolios that are confined to a single year.

[Question 7: How many different disciplines does a single portfolio represent?]

High School includes math, science, social studies, English, and citizenship. Middle School and Elementary School include writing, art, reading, social studies, science, and math.

[Question 8: What do you perceive as the benefits for using portfolios?]

Portfolios push students to be aware of their own growth, and to take more responsibility for their own learning. They increase student intrinsic motivation. As students choose pieces for their portfolios, they reflect back and think metacognitively. They evaluate their own work, helping them to grow as individuals. Since portfolios are an ongoing project, it helps keep students focused. Portfolios, when standards-based, provide students with a more effective, comprehensive, and humanistic means of assessment than traditional testing.

[Question 9: Do you believe portfolios can be beneficial for children receiving special education services, as well as children in the general education classroom? Why or why not?]

All principals adamantly believe that portfolios are beneficial for children receiving special education. In fact, given the needs of students with disabilities, it would be even more necessary to individualize assessment for them.

[Question 10: What do you perceive as drawbacks, if any, for using portfolios?]

Portfolios are very time consuming. Teachers need time to devote to the process, potentially at the expense of something else. Administrators must convince all the staff of the portfolio value versus less comprehensive portfolio processes. It also takes consistent monitoring. Students must be well-prepared, and taught how to create the portfolio, how to choose pieces, and how to self-reflect. It is
arbitrarily assigned. Since portfolios are a more comprehensive form of assessment, they allow teachers to focus on the development of individual skills and knowledge over time. Those who use portfolios recognize that they can learn far more about their students' learning by presenting them with tasks that require the use of the skills and knowledge they want to assess, and subsequently evaluating their performances on those tasks. Portfolios help to break down classrooms into individuals as the center focus. Both the principals and the research report that they recognize a qualitatively different level of student motivation and engagement on work.

All the principals strongly advocate for the use of portfolios with students receiving special education services. Similar to the literature review, they argue that portfolios may be of the greatest value to students in special education. Due to the highly individualized nature of portfolios, assignments can be easily adjusted so that they are accessible to students with special needs.

As for drawbacks of portfolios, the same issues are cited. One of the greatest complaints is the time that teachers need to devote to the process. Additional time for planning, conferring with other teachers, developing strategies and materials, meeting with students and small groups, and reviewing and commenting on student work all add to the time burden of portfolios. Another challenge of portfolios is the need for storage and space. Unless the portfolios are electronic, they will all require physical space in the classroom.

Yet despite these drawbacks, the research still strongly supports portfolios. Regardless of the challenges, all the principals stand by their decisions to employ portfolios. Therefore, what does this say about the effectiveness of portfolios within the classroom?

Conclusion

Throughout the literature review and follow-up study, a common theme has appeared. Despite the challenges of portfolios, many educators believe the benefits outweigh the difficulties. Portfolios
nature of portfolios shifts the focus to each unique student, creating a more equitable and sensitive portrait of what students know and can do. Students become involved in their own education, enhancing their awareness of metacognitive strategies for thinking about and producing work. On the administrative end, portfolios provide teachers with greater flexibility, the ability to track longer episodes of teaching, and focus on the development of skills and knowledge over time. Hopefully, given the numerous benefits of portfolios, more and more classrooms will adopt them.


Appendix B: Middle School Mid-Year Portfolio Presentations

Mid Year Portfolio and Presentation of Learning

Each student at Middle School is required to create a portfolio of work that has been completed during the first twenty (20) weeks of school and that highlights a variety of areas. These portfolios serve important purposes for students, families, and teachers.

To Help Students:
- Develop a commitment to meeting standards at each grade level.
- Produce high quality work that will be presented publicly.
- Develop a sense of personal pride in work and achievement.
- Become responsible for collecting, interpreting, and sharing work.
- Develop an understanding of personal strengths, goals, learning styles and challenges.
- Build self-confidence and public presentation skills.
- Reflect on and articulate their learning and the learning process.
- To set goals for the remainder of the year.

To Provide Families With:
- Evidence of their child’s abilities and growth over the first twenty (20) weeks of school.
- An understanding of Middle School’s philosophy and practices.
- A sense of pride in their child’s accomplishments.

To Provide the School With:
- An assessment of student skill levels, quality of work, and growth.
- An assessment of the school’s curriculum and instructional practices.
- An opportunity to build community and district support and understanding of the school.
Appendix B continued...

Name: ____________________________
Portfolio Reflection at Mid-Point of Year          Date: ______

"Who Am I?"  7th

At this point in the school year, you should be able to reflect on who you are as demonstrated by key character values and requirements of

As an introductory piece to your portfolio, you need to write a reflection that responds to the prompts that follow. You should answer all the questions thoughtfully and with examples from specific classes and assignments.

Who Am I: as a worker?

Who Am I: as a citizen?

Who Am I: as a scholar?

Who Am I: as a journal writer?

Who Am I: as a community service participant?

Who Am I: as a decision maker?

Remember, you should make sure:
- You have answered every question completely
- You have included specific details
- You have written very neatly, or have typed (12 point font, double-spaced) this reflection
- You include this reflection in your portfolio
Extended Class Portfolio

9th grade: "Where Am I Going?"

What should I have in my portfolio?

3 different pieces of work that represent our design principles

- September and October: Building Community through Service and Compassion
- November and December: Solitude and Reflection
- January and February: Self-Discovery

Examples: Maniac Magee Project
- New Year's Advice Project

1 Reflective writing piece of "Where are You Going?" using the following as examples....
  - Goals of the school
  - Journal Writing
  - Decision Making
  - Student as a worker, citizen and scholar.

1 Reflective writing piece on a community service you did
Appendix B continued...

### Presentation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Exceeding</th>
<th>Met</th>
<th>Approached</th>
<th>Incomplete</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preparation</strong></td>
<td>Student is completely prepared (e.g., cover sheets, notes cards, etc...) and has obviously rehearsed.</td>
<td>Student seemed somewhat prepared but might have needed a couple more rehearsals.</td>
<td>Clear that key elements were missing and rehearsed was lacking.</td>
<td>Student does not seem at all prepared to present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attractiveness</strong></td>
<td>The portfolio is exceptionally attractive in terms of creative cover, organization, and neatness.</td>
<td>The portfolio is attractive in terms of creative cover, organization, and neatness.</td>
<td>The portfolio is acceptably attractive though it was a bit messy.</td>
<td>The portfolio is distractingly messy or very poorly designed. It is not attractive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Verbal</strong></td>
<td>Spoke clearly and distinctly at a suitable rate and volume throughout the entire presentation.</td>
<td>Spoke clearly and distinctly at a suitable rate and volume throughout most presentation.</td>
<td>Rarely spoke clear and rate and volume fluctuated.</td>
<td>Difficult to hear and understand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-verbal</strong></td>
<td>Kept composed the entire time with excellent eye contact and posture.</td>
<td>Kept composed most of the time with good eye contact and posture.</td>
<td>Composed, eye contact and posture lacked.</td>
<td>Could not keep composed, Poor eye contact and posture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time Limit</strong></td>
<td>Presentation was 20 minutes long and did not exceed 25 minutes.</td>
<td>Presentation was between 15 and 20 minutes.</td>
<td>Presentation was between 10 and 15 minutes.</td>
<td>Presentation was less than 10 minutes or beyond 25.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project Display</strong></td>
<td>All projects were displayed in an organized manner that was easy for the audience to see and follow.</td>
<td>Some projects were displayed in an organized manner that was easy for the audience to see and follow.</td>
<td>Projects were only displayed in sequence and seemed a bit unorganized.</td>
<td>Projects were unorganized and presenter ended up wasting time looking for next project.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Comments/Suggestions:**

**Over all Evaluation of Portfolio Presentation:**

- [ ] Exceeding
- [ ] Approaching
- [ ] Met
- [ ] Not Met
Appendix C continued...

6. Academic Portfolio
   Students will prepare an academic portfolio that includes work samples that demonstrate accomplishment of math, reading, writing, and expedition learning targets.

7. Presentation
   Students will prepare their academic and passage portfolios in advance, and these portfolios will be distributed to the members of the committee. Committee members will include at least one current classroom teacher, at least one former teacher, the School Leader, a Board member, parents, and a community member. At the conclusion of the presentation, the committee will determine if the student has adequately met the criteria of the passage, or if revisions are required.

   The format of the presentation will be:
   • Introductions (5 minutes)
   • Student description of metaphor (5 minutes)
   • Student discussion of academic and social preparedness for middle school (10 minutes)
   • Student responds to questions from the Committee (15 minutes)
   • Committee deliberates (5 minutes)
   • Committee informs student of outcome (5 minutes)

Each piece of the portfolio is scored using qualitative rubrics with a scale of 1-4 (1=Fail, 2=Pass, 3=Pass with Honors, 4=Pass with Distinction). Students receive two scores: one score is derived by averaging the scores for all of the portfolio pieces, and the other score is given for the presentation.