Teaching Portfolios for Preservice Self-assessment: Rural Interns' Perceptions

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Abstract

This paper shares nine Saskatchewan rural school division directors' and 11 rural preservice teachers' perceptions about teaching portfolios during, and after a 16-week internship. Data were gathered from surveys and a focus group interview. Although one director found portfolios too time consuming, the remaining eight supported portfolio construction and stated that they positively influenced directors' hiring decisions. The interns felt prepared to create portfolios, and offered suggestions for program improvements, but were less certain about budgeting time and using the documents for personal reflection. Positive prospects, reflection issues, and future improvements are shared.

Preservice teacher self-analysis and reflection is frequently mentioned in teacher education descriptions. It occurs in the University of Saskatchewan's Bachelor of Education, 16-week practicum. These intern teachers document their self-analysis. Yet these products are little valued by the interns themselves. Because the literature suggests that "teaching portfolios" can improve self-analysis and prepare interns for employment interviews, I initiated research into the use of portfolios. The internship was selected because it provides an opportunity for interns to deliberately collect, select, and then reflect on extended school experience. My purpose was to determine if teacher employers valued portfolios, and then to pilot and assess the use of portfolios with a set of interns.

In the first section, I describe what portfolios are, why they should be used, and what are the research goals. Next, in the Method section, I describe the framework, timelines, participants, and data collection. Then I present findings and discuss issues.

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Background

What Are Portfolios?

Portfolios may be thought of as a product, a process, or as an evaluation tool. When designated as a product, they compare to the collected works of artists. They have been described as a teacher's document collection that shows the scope and quality of their work, as a textured picture of teaching and learning unfolding over time (Wolf, Whinery, & Hagerty, 1995), and as living documents because new materials constantly replace the old.

The notion of process also suggests teachers using portfolios as records of lifelong learning to reflect, describe, and document their teaching and learning. Finally, portfolios can be considered as an empowering evaluation tool used by teachers to display their accomplishments.

Why Should Portfolios Be Used?

The literature suggests that portfolios may contribute to the career advancement, accountability, and enhancement of interns and teachers (Zubizarreta, 1994). They contribute to career advancement as a useful marketing tool. Canadian and American administrators report finding portfolios useful and when used in interviews, they enhanced the chances of candidates being hired (Winsor & Ellefson, 1995; Newman, Smolen, & Newman, 1993).

They may contain attesting documentation from cooperating teachers, college supervisors, administrators, parents, and students or make unrecognized dimensions of teaching visible (e.g. learning, collegiality, Riggs & Sandlin, 1999). They provide accountability to teachers who select and edit the form and contents of the portfolio (Synder, Elliot, Bhavnagri, & Boyer, 1994). They enhance teaching and reflection because teachers can research their own methods, choices, priorities, and philosophy (Seldin, 1993); or invest in their own learning through reading, trying new methods, and consulting with peers (Sparapani, Abel, Edwards, Herbster, & Easton, 1997).

Portfolios honour the teacher's professional autonomy, providing a self-directed approach to professional development, goal-setting, and self-analysis. Unlike generic inservice plans which are not tailored to meet specific teacher wants, portfolio-based professional development can meet each teacher's career-stage needs.

Rural school divisions might favour portfolios as professional development tools. They are less costly than centralized staff development; they are not limited to inservice days; and they can address issues rising from the teaching context.

Yet, according to Sparapani et al. (1997) portfolios are fraught with
reliability and validity problems (e.g., achieving objectivity), and they are time-consuming to create and monitor (Cole, 1992). Also the extensive portfolio literature is mostly speculative commentary on the promise and attraction of portfolios. The literature on reflection, a key purpose of portfolio development, reveals that teachers do not associate reflection with teaching work (McNamara, 1990). Zeichner (1990) also found that student teachers found it a profitless detour on their road to mastering technical skills.

Portfolios need testing. Do they really do what educators believe and claim they do? Are they useful in rural settings? How do school directors and interns respond to portfolio development?

Fitting Portfolios into the Saskatchewan Program

University of Saskatchewan preservice teachers complete two years of Arts and Sciences courses before enrolling in our college. The following two years are completed in the College of Education, with the internship scheduled for the fall term of the last year. Portfolios were introduced in the extended practicum to enhance intern self-analysis in a real teaching setting (Romine, 1994). Our internship process created opportunities for interns to gain feedback and enhance their employment prospects as they developed portfolios.

Because cooperating teachers at the placements sites had little information or experience in the development of portfolios, and intern pair placements were not always possible, most portfolios were developed by individuals rather than collaboratively. These factors created limitations because portfolios created in isolation are reported to be of inferior quality (Zubizarreta, 1994) to those where teacher talk occurred.

The interest in exploring the use of portfolios came from faculty coordinating the internship. I initiated, studied, and evaluated the development of portfolios during the internship, knowing that it was a work-in-progress requiring refinement. As other education faculty members gain understanding of portfolios, pre-and post-internship components will be incorporated as well.

Method

Development of the Pilot

Anne, a University of Saskatchewan internship supervisor, conducted a literature search. Eleven of a 25 intern cohort volunteered. To help her rural volunteer interns understand the portfolio process, she designed a framework that included: definition, purposes, key features, and content. During Anne's half-day portfolio workshop, the interns received explanations, examined model portfolios, brainstormed lists of artifacts to include, and discussed how
to illustrate teaching skills. They discovered how she would mentor their portfolio development and they completed a survey assessing the workshop.

**Data Collection**

For the three phases of the project we decided we would:

1. Use an electronic mail (Email) survey to elicit rural education directors' perceptions of the value and format of intern teaching portfolios.
2. Survey the intern pilot cohort during the internship to gather their ratings of the content and delivery of the portfolio workshop.
3. Conduct an intern focus group interview after the internship, about the intern experience, its value, possible changes to our framework, and plans to extend the project to all interns.

**Timeline**

Data were gathered from August 1998 to January 1999. In the first week of August, I contacted the research director of the Saskatchewan School Trustees Association who used his Email listserve connections to survey rural education directors (superintendents) who were also prospective employers.

The "School Trustees" research director asked: a) whether it was of value for interns to construct employment portfolios, b) how the portfolio should be organized, and c) what items should be included? The rural directors, like other participants (Sproul, 1986; Thach, 1995), promptly responded by Email within two weeks of the request.

By early September, the rural interns volunteered. The 8 females and 3 males, in their early 20s had completed a three-week student teaching block, had little practice in self-analysis, and only knew about portfolios as a means of pupil assessment. After the 11 interns completed the October portfolio workshop, Anne surveyed these volunteers. The questions asked if the rural interns thought that the instruction and mentoring in the use of portfolios was clear and supportive. The interns completed a Likert-type survey which asked each intern to rate his or her responses from 1 = strongly agree, to 4 = strongly disagree. The survey was completed after the workshop to determine if interns needed further instruction or practice about portfolios before dispersing to their rural schools.

The pilot cohorts were self-selected volunteers who committed themselves to a half-day Saturday workshop. Many of these long distance travelers were highly motivated individuals who clearly felt they had something to gain by participating.

A post-internship focus-group interview followed in January. The interns described their experience, noted what they valued, suggested needed
changes, and proposed features of future portfolio use for all interns. The 11 rural interns divided into four groups, three pods of three, and one pod of two interns. Following Morgan's (1998) suggestion to use guided group discussion, each pod of the focus group, in rotation, discussed and recorded their answers to questions related to one of the four themes: (a) their experience, (b) what was of value to them, (c) possible changes to the pilot procedures, and (d) means of extending portfolio use to all interns. At the end of the four, 20-minute-discussions, the compiled answers were read aloud and the total group had an opportunity to add further comments to any of the themes.

Findings

School Division Directors' Pre-Internship E-mail Survey Responses (n=9)

Although one director found that reviewing extensive portfolios during employment interviews was too time consuming, the remaining eight encouraged intern portfolio development. Three directors reported encouraging all staff members to develop portfolios and others assisted teachers in portfolio artifact selection. They agreed that candidates carrying portfolios created a favourable impression on hiring committees. Directors noted that portfolio construction prompted intern reflection and helped hiring committees create questions and discussion about educational issues.

Most suggested that portfolios should be brief, individualized rather than generic, reflect candidates' perceptions of the teacher's role, and portray the candidates' beliefs and values. Directors suggested that portfolios contain a statement of philosophy, a table of contents, final internship evaluation, samples of teacher work (lesson/unit plans), samples of student work (evaluation, assignments), supporting documents (letters, certificates), professional development experiences, and personal information (volunteer work, employment record, criminal records check).

Interns' Early-Internship Portfolio Survey Responses (n=11)

The survey responses are shown in Table 1. All 11 intern volunteers "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that they understood and felt prepared to construct teaching portfolios. Eight or more of the interns "strongly agreed" that they understood the research purpose, the oral instructions, the overheads, how portfolios could aid employment interviews, and that they felt prepared to construct their own portfolios.

Six of the interns indicated that they strongly agreed that the portfolio model aided comprehension of portfolio development. They added that they had enough practice to guide the continuing construction of their own portfolios.
Also, while nine interns had a clear understanding of how portfolios assist their employment prospects, only four of the interns strongly agreed that portfolios helped their reflection. Finally, one intern added that suggestions and responses from directors of education would be helpful.

Table 1

Pilot Interns' Survey Responses to Portfolio Workshop Experience

Please respond to the statements by circling the number most closely matching your response (1 = strongly agree, 4 = strongly disagree).

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1. The oral instructions about portfolios were understandable. 10 1
2. The overheads were clear. 11
3. The written instructions prepared me to begin developing a portfolio. 9 2
4. The portfolio model aided comprehension. 6 5
5. The portfolio activities provided useful practice to guide me as I begin to construct my own portfolio. 5 6
6. I understood the conditions of the Research Participant Consent form. 8 3
7. The portfolio presentation and preparation of my portfolio will help me to use reflection during my internship. 4 6 1
8. The portfolio activities will assist me in beginning to use my portfolio when seeking a teaching position. 9 1 1

Other ideas to help improve the presentation, written contents, and portfolio activities include:
- suggestions and responses from directors of education would help as well
- this is a good idea

Interns' Post-Internship Focus Group Interview Responses

Questions prepared for the focus-group interview prompted discussion directed to four themes: (a) What was your experience?, (b) What was of value? (c) What changes should be made? and (d) How could portfolios be extended to all interns?

Question one responses indicated that the interns learned that portfolio construction required considerable thought, work, and time. They appreciated being able to show what they wanted people to see. Their portfolios were a source of pride that showed their work and achievements. Artifacts included resumes, grade transcripts, internship evaluations, director's assessments, certificates, letters of reference, lesson and unit plans, samples of student work,
pictures, newspaper articles, examples of community involvement, and reflections.

Question two responses included the interns valuing the college supervisor's resources, internet portfolio examples, encouragement, accessibility, and willingness to answer questions. They also appreciated peer critique, and the use of portfolios as authentic evaluation tools. In constructing portfolios they wrote captions explaining why they had included an item. They displayed and analyzed positive and negative experiences as signposts along their internship growth journey. They explained that portfolio construction aided their reflection.

Question three improvements listed a table of contents, specific section topic headings, a time-line indicating what should be completed at each stage of the internship, portfolio template handouts, portfolio models, and a website. As well, they suggested that the College specify artifact selection, appropriate length of portfolios, and time requirements. They also requested portfolio instruction for cooperating teachers to facilitate mentoring interns' portfolio work.

Question four responses favoured keeping portfolio construction as a voluntary option for all interns because they assumed that most prospective employers would accept traditional documentation. They anticipated adding post internship course work items to their portfolios. They expected that their portfolio items would create interest, show dedication, and display their professional improvement in employment interviews. They also foresaw using their portfolios to guide other interns.

Discussion

Themes rising from the data clustered around positive perceptions, reflection problems and explanations, and improvements. Positive aspects of portfolio development are discussed first and suggestions for use conclude each of the theme sections.

Positive Perceptions

The school division directors promoted portfolio development with teaching staff, and, echoing previous research (Johnson, Kaplan, & Marsh, 1996), encouraged development of intern portfolios because they created favourable impressions in hiring committees. They noted that artifacts from prospective employee portfolios provoked relevant interview questions and discussion about educational issues. Their specified portfolio contents, supported by Hurst, Wilson and Cramer (1998), included achievements, products, and reflections.
The surveyed interns strongly agreed that their portfolio preparations were understandable. In focus group interviews they expressed pride in their portfolios and enjoyed their control of the process. They appreciated showcasing their achievements, selecting what they wanted others to see about them, using portfolios as evaluation tools, and sharing their new expertise with future interns. They recommended that portfolio development be offered as an option for all future interns.

This section supports development of portfolio methods and materials. It shows that directors favour intern portfolio in theory. Follow-up studies with directors, school trustees, and other hiring committee members will determine if favourable perceptions persist following examination of actual portfolios. Copies of former interns' portfolios will be used as models for current interns. Research could determine if and how these 11 interns retain interest in portfolios following employment.

Reflection Problems and Explanations

Although data demonstrated a clear understanding of how portfolios aided teacher employment interviews, reflection was more problematic. In the post-internship survey only 4 of the 11 interns strongly agreed that portfolio development assisted reflection. Since the survey listed the question early in the internship, the interns may have not developed their self-assessment skills nor recognized how portfolios promoted reflection. The teacher reflection literature articulates several problems. McNamara (1990) suggests that teaching is often perceived as being about solving immediate problems and reflection is viewed as an academic enterprise not associated with working as a teacher (Hatton & Smith, 1999). Zeichner (1990) adds that many student teachers see efforts to reflect diverting them from their immediate technical needs to master teaching skills and classroom management. When Hatton and Smith (1999) examined 16 studies investigating the effectiveness of approaches employed to develop the capacity for reflection in student teachers, they found little evidence of critical reflection on the part of students. These practical views may be deep-seated preconceptions still present in interns' thoughts about teaching.

The lower ratings may also indicate that interns need help in asking self-analyzing questions about their experience or that supervisors need to use the cognitive coaching "so what, now what" questions to model analysis of teaching. Winsor (1997) suggests that interns should prepare for supervisory conferences by goal setting, selecting artifacts that show evidence of progress, and discussing to demonstrate reflection on teaching.

Analysis of the directors' Email responses indicated several ways they expected interns to express teacher reflection. The directors stated that
portfolios encouraged reflective discussion of educational issues. They anticipated that portfolios would prompt the interns to share their perceptions of the teacher's role, express their beliefs and values, and articulate their philosophy of education.

Perhaps the interns' low rating of reflection was linked to time constraints. Like other authors (Cole, 1992; Sparapani et. al., 1997), the one director who did not support development of portfolios felt that their perusal was time consuming. The other time conscious directors requested brief portfolios as well. Interns also noted that portfolio development required thought, work, and time. And Fuller and Bown's (1975) developmental stages' study indicated that time blocks are needed for student teachers to move from survival skills to mastery of teaching skills before they can reflect on their impact on pupils.

Intern focus group data collected post internship expressed ways of attending to reflection. In contrast to the lack of teaching practise in their early internship, interns now had 16 weeks of experience. Interns, complementing previous writers (Wolf et. al., 1995), explained that portfolio work documenting their experience over time developed their reflection. They reported writing artifact captions explaining why an item was selected, they analyzed positive and negative internship experiences to track their growth, and they prepared their portfolios for employment interviews as records of their professional improvement. In Schon's (1983) terms they demonstrated "reflection-on-action."

This section identifies potential problems, and explanations. Awareness of this should help supervisors anticipate intern perceptions and intern readiness for reflection. It provides suggestions for questioning and peer coaching. The directors' observations and interns' reflective components may be used as required items for intern portfolios. It also highlights time constraints and the need to provide time for intern's discussion and portfolio work.

Improvements

The data suggested ways to support portfolio development. The directors encouraged teachers' portfolio work and assisted teachers in artifact selection. Similarly, although both directors and interns valued their individualized portfolios, interns asked for a template, a web page, portfolio samples, and completion dates to use as guides for portfolio construction. Both Collins' participants (1992) and these interns preferred a mixture of recommended and open choice items in their portfolios.

The interns also valued the oral support from their supervisors and wanted to know the directors' views. They offered to help future interns.
These shared items suggest that interns may prefer collaborative reflection. In accord with teacher reflection research (Pugash, 1990; Riggs & Sandlin, 1999; Wolf et al., 1995), they may prefer talk and discussion to written reflection.

This section details how other dimensions of portfolios may be monitored and supported. It suggests that providing peer support and reflective dialogue should be examined as an alternative to written reflection.

Portfolios have potential as tools for self-assessment and career hiring for rural, preservice teachers. This study, combined with others, suggests that educators should continue to investigate interns' use of portfolios.

References


