Teacher learning through portfolios

Some trends and issues

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This paper argues that teacher-constructed portfolios represent a new way of learning for teachers by encouraging reflection on their everyday practice. In an age of discontinuous change there is a high priority on teacher learning, and portfolios may be a useful way of achieving this. It is suggested that the literature on portfolios is generally under-theorised, though practical guidelines are necessary for teachers to assist them to construct a portfolio. The issues of purpose, process, content, assessment and university accreditation of portfolios are reviewed and a case study of a portfolio process in a Canadian high school is presented and briefly discussed. The paper concludes by discussing some advantages of the use of portfolios and some areas of tension that need to be considered if portfolios are to be adopted on a widespread basis in the teaching profession.

INTRODUCTION

It has often been said that we live in an age of change. Not only is change pervasive these days, but the very nature of change is changing. Charles Handy (1996) captured this idea when he wrote:

Thirty years ago most people thought that change would mean more of the same, only better. That was incremental change and to be welcomed. Today we know that in many areas of life we cannot guarantee more of the same ... incremental change suddenly becomes discontinuous change. (pp.5-7)

He went on to say:

Discontinuous change means ... completely rethinking the way we learn things. In a world of incremental change it is sensible to ape your elders in order to take over where they leave off ... but under conditions of discontinuity ... learning then becomes the voyage of exploration, of questing and experimenting. (p.8)

In this article I want to connect this theme of change with some developments in the use of portfolios in various places. I suggest that the introduction of portfolios as a relatively new practice in the teaching profession can be seen as a change process and that it
means a "complete rethinking of the way we learn things", as Handy put it. For teachers and others who undertake the task seriously, portfolios can be seen as a voyage of exploration, of questing and experimenting. Above all they are means of encouraging reflection as a process of learning and professional growth for teachers at all levels from preservice teacher education (Woodward, 1998; Clarke, 1999) through to the workplace learning of experienced teachers (Retallick & Groundwater-Smith, 1996).

I suspect that teachers are not yet very proficient at learning through reflection as a key process of teacher professional development (PD). In Australia at least, our models of teacher PD are changing as we move increasingly towards school-focused PD and workplace learning but we need also to change our images and processes of teacher learning if these new models are to be effective. In this article I argue that the teacher-constructed portfolio is worth exploring as a new way to learn through reflection.

A helpful definition of a teaching portfolio has been put forward by Wolf & Dietz (1998):

A teaching portfolio is a structured collection of teacher and student work created across diverse contexts of time, framed by reflection and enriched through collaboration, that has as its ultimate aim the advancement of teacher and student learning. (p.13)

This definition captures some important features of portfolios and points to some of the issues I want to explore here. I identify and discuss some of the issues and I elicit trends from Australian and international contexts. I conclude the article by presenting a case study and some analysis of the portfolio process in a high school in Canada.

THEORISING PORTFOLIOS

One of my immediate concerns about the 'portfolio movement' is the undertheorised nature of many of the accounts in the literature. Whilst practical guidelines are appropriate and necessary, it is imperative that we go beyond these if portfolios are to be meaningfully adopted on a widespread basis in the teaching profession. We need more in-depth analysis of 'why' portfolios are a good idea as much as we need prescriptive statements of 'how' to construct them.

Useful work in that regard has been undertaken by Groundwater-Smith (1999), who argues that "the learning portfolio is underpinned by the idea of the scholarship of practice" (p.1). The argument is grounded in the nature of professional knowledge about which she says:

Knowledge is not only a matter of acquiring information about a phenomenon, but of transforming that information through intelligent reflection and action such that it forms a working knowledge base. (p.4)

The key learning process here is reflection, and underpinning that is "a deeply embedded enquiry orientation" (p.5). The learning portfolio is seen as a technology for documenting not only the experience of teaching but the reflection and enquiry which produces professional learning. This approach locates the portfolio movement alongside other well-known enquiry models such as teachers-as-researchers and school-based action research.
In furthering that line of thinking I want to consider the notion of teacher-constructed portfolios in the context of knowledge production about teachers and teaching. Gibbons et al (1994) suggest two modes of knowledge production:

- **Mode 1**: traditional, scientific research generated by ‘outsiders’, e.g. university researchers, and applied to ‘insiders’, e.g. teachers.
- **Mode 2**: knowledge produced in the context of application, e.g. teachers generating knowledge about teaching.

Whereas Mode 1 is discipline-based and defined by researchers, Mode 2 is transdisciplinary and based around problems identified by practitioners. As Gibbons points out "Mode 2 is marked especially but not exclusively by the ever closer interaction of knowledge production with a succession of problem contexts" (p.5) and practitioners are “active agents in the definition and solution of problems as well as in the evaluation of performance” (p.7). Mode 2 is a new form of enquiry characterised by collaboration and “oriented towards contextualised results” (p.19).

Teacher-constructed portfolios can be regarded as a tool of enquiry and they are clearly in the realm of Mode 2 knowledge production. Enquiry usually starts with a question – be it a research question or just curiosity about some aspect of teaching and learning. An enquiry portfolio, therefore, will be driven by a central and important question. As Grant & Huebner (1998) suggest:

It is possible for a teacher’s portfolio, constructed around inquiry into a self-designed question, to have significant impact on the development of teacher knowledge and professional practice. (p.33)

Also engaged in theorising portfolios are Frid & Reid (1999), who argue that the benefit of portfolios for teacher education students is in the contribution they make to “the formation of a professional subject – a ‘teaching-self’” (p.2). Using a post-structuralist theory they suggest that portfolios allow the ‘teaching-self’ to be “produced differently in different circumstances” (p.3) depending on the purpose of the portfolio. In that sense they go beyond notions of ‘an essential teaching self’ as implied in competency-based and some other approaches to teacher education.

There is a trend towards increased theorising as the use of portfolios in teacher education becomes more commonplace (Anderson & DeMuelle, 1998). What I regard as important is that the trend be continued within Mode 2 knowledge production, i.e. that teachers take the initiative, in collaboration with academics, to advance our collective knowledge about portfolios.

**PURPOSES OF PORTFOLIOS**

Purposes matter a lot in teaching. In any change effort teachers and schools should know where they are going and, broadly speaking, they should be agreed on where they are headed. Purposes that inspire real commitment are those that come from within, not those that are imposed. Pursuing their own inspiring mission together is what most
teachers find particularly satisfying, and changes that are demonstrably connected to purposes of teaching, learning and caring in classrooms are the ones that matter most for teachers (Hargreaves, Shaw & Fink, 1997). What then are the purposes of portfolios?

In a 'Teacher Learning' research project conducted in 1998 (Retallick, 1999) there was a lot of discussion about purpose in relation to portfolios. For some teachers the purpose of the exercise was rather hard to define, for others it was about reflecting on their teaching, or use in a promotion application or accreditation at the university. The first point to make about purpose, then, is that there are many purposes of portfolios depending on the individual interests and concerns of the teacher. The purpose must be important to the teacher and it must come from within to generate ownership or at least it must be a voluntary exercise.

One major purpose of portfolios is for teacher assessment. In the US there has been a great deal of debate over teacher assessment in recent years and there has been widespread dissatisfaction with some of the teacher testing processes that were being used. In 1987 the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was established to resolve some of these problems and Shulman (1988) was one of the first to consider portfolios for use in teacher assessment:

In our current research we are preparing to field-test a program of assessment in which portfolio development and subsequent assessment of performance are combined. Candidates will first spend a year developing their entries for a portfolio. In most cases these will be clearly defined to include evidence of the teacher's plans and activities (including videotapes of teaching where possible) as well as examples of student work. When possible, these defined entries will extend over time so that changes in teaching and learning and evidence of the relationships between them can also be included. (Shulman, 1988, p.40)

Some ten years later the NBPTS has the following core tasks:

- to establish professionally credible standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do in particular fields of teaching; and,
- to develop and operate a national voluntary system to assess and certify teachers who meet these standards. (Ingvarson, 1998a, p.33)

Some 2,000 teachers are voluntarily assessed each year for Board certification and one of the major methods used is the portfolio. The Board expects that teachers will take about 100 hours to complete six entries for their portfolio over a period of up to a year. The six entries cover three areas – two are based on student work samples, two on video clips of class discussion and two are based on documentation of accomplishments outside the classroom. The portfolio entries are designed to provide windows into what teachers and their students actually do. Candidates for NBPTS certification are strongly encouraged to involve colleagues in the process of preparing their portfolio and they are provided with detailed guidelines for each entry (Ingvarson, 1998b, p.133).

Another purpose of portfolios is that of reflection on teaching for professional development and improvement. There is an interesting example of this purpose in the Peel
District School Board in Canada where it is called The Reflective Teaching Portfolio. It is claimed that the portfolio process:

- Gives you a frame of reference for ongoing self-review and reflection;
- Helps you develop/maintain an action plan for professional growth; and,
- Incorporates growth experiences from all stages of your teaching career.

(Fine, 1998, p.2)

In the UK there is an example of the professional development purpose of portfolios with an emphasis on reflection and experiential learning. This is the Thames Regional INSET Network (TRIN) project (Hall, 1997) which involves 24 local authorities around London concerned with coordinating and disseminating good PD practice. Some years ago they trialled a portfolio project with a view to finding out how teachers would respond and if universities would give credit for professional learning documented in a portfolio. As stated by Hall (1997, p.171):

The main characteristic of a PD portfolio that distinguished it from a professional diary or record of achievement is the stress it places on reflection. Being reflective about an experience and relating that to other aspects of the person's professional life is fundamental to three important aspects of PDP's:

- They can assist the process of learning itself by helping the individual move from the 'concrete experience' to the 'abstract conceptualisation' aspect of the experiential learning cycle.
- They can assist in helping individuals through the 'active experimentation' phase of the experiential learning cycle.
- Reflective writing can make it possible for a portfolio to attract accreditation.

The outcomes of the project are of some interest. They claim that "the most outstanding benefit identified was that of learning to be a reflective professional. This is possibly the most important discovery of the project. The enthusiasm of the portfolio producers that was encountered ... is difficult to over-stress and was largely based around the work they had done on learning to think and write reflectively ... A general view of the project participants was that through improving reflectivity in teachers a portfolio can improve the pupils' learning" (Hall, 1997, p.172).

It is possible to discern three distinct types of portfolios based on their different purposes. The learning portfolio promotes teacher reflection and ownership over the learning process while the assessment portfolio presents administrators with information about a teacher's effectiveness. A third type has been called the employment portfolio and it provides prospective employers with information about a teacher's suitability for a position (Wolf & Dietz, 1998).

PROCESS OF PORTFOLIOS

As with purposes there are different processes being used for portfolios. Any portfolio process is best seen as a journey over an extended period of time rather a specific event.
For instance, at Southern Lehigh Middle School in Center Valley, Pennsylvania, USA there is year-long process to assist teachers to develop and implement their portfolios:

1. Teachers begin by articulating their goals for the year, including personal/professional goals and those set by the school and the district. Each teacher meets with the principal to establish clear, concrete goals for the year.
2. Teachers then list the ways they can implement their goals by considering a range of questions like: What are the specific tasks planned to meet the goals?
3. Teachers keep a log of their professional development experiences during the year.
4. This section includes the material teachers select as samples or evidence of their work. The contents need to reflect a ‘purposeful collection of evidence’, not every test, work sheet, or piece of student work that crosses a teachers desk. Limits are placed on the amount of material to be included so that portfolios do not become overwhelmingly large or time consuming.
5. The final section is the teacher’s own reflections on the previous entries. Here teachers can explain why they included certain items in their portfolios and how they feel about them. They can also explain how certain items illustrate their progress towards the stated goal or possible ways of improving their practice in relation to the goals place. (Andrejko, 1998)

Teachers submit their portfolios to the principal mid-year and again at the end of the year and they engage in a structured conversation to promote analysis and reflection. This reflection allows the school to examine their strengths, identify their challenges, and make plans to ensure effective professional development in the future. It is interesting to note that the use of the portfolio process by teachers is voluntary, though working towards the goals is not. It is reported that nearly 100 percent of the teachers use portfolios every year (Andrejko, 1998: p.48).

A different kind of process is in use in the Region 15 Public Schools in Middlebury, Connecticut, USA (Van Wagenen & Hibbard, 1998). In those schools, portfolios have been used for some time with students to assist them to improve their performance through analysis, reflection and goal-setting. Now they are being used by teachers to improve teaching and learning and to build a community of learners throughout the school district.

The portfolio process for one teacher began with an invitation to a meeting to talk about a teacher’s portfolio. As she says:

At the time I had no idea that I was about to embark on a journey that would change the ways in which I teach and make decisions about instruction. My journey would take me through several different types of portfolios, help me to gain National Board Certification, and help me to become a classroom researcher as well as a teacher. (Van Wagenen & Hibbard, 1998, p.26)

This teacher has been working on portfolios for four years and reports a great deal of learning over that time. She worked with another teacher as a collaborator and in the first year they decided to investigate strategies to improve the quality and accuracy of their students’ self-assessment. They collected a variety of instructional artefacts of their
own as well as that of their students. At year’s end they reflected that they had collected too much material and they had not met often enough to talk about what they were doing and why.

In the second year they kept the same basic focus, expanding it to include goal-setting. Again they did not meet very often and they collected far too much material. At the end of the year they decided to look closely at their students’ portfolios and they selected some of various ability and motivation level and they wrote lengthy case studies of the students’ abilities to self-assess, self-evaluate and self-regulate. Whilst this was a valuable exercise, they found their own reflections difficult to write and lacking insight into their own learning. Through careful analysis of the students’ portfolios and reflection on their own they came to the realisation that they “had spent a lot of time trying to prove something about ourselves as teachers, rather than working to improve our methods of instruction ... Instead of a balanced portfolio showing our growth as educators, we had a collection of our best efforts ... while ignoring less than successful lessons and students” (p.27).

The third portfolio was different. That year, the district offered teachers the opportunity to substitute the portfolio for the formal observation and evaluation process. Concerned about showing those “less-than-wonderful lessons”, one of the teachers discussed the matter with her administrator and was assured that her vision of a portfolio would be a far more powerful evaluative tool than any other because it would enable her to take charge of her own assessment. She realised she would be doing exactly what she asks students to do: self-assess, self-evaluate and self-regulate.

With that in mind the teacher devised a new focus question concerned with improving writing and she wrote a formal research plan to collect data on student writing, to teach a series of lessons and chart students’ progress and then to ask for student reflections about how they perceived the effectiveness of the strategies used to improve their writing. This was to be the basis of her third portfolio. As she now comments:

This story of my odyssey is representative of the stories of other teachers in Region 15 who have had similar experiences working on portfolios. We all struggled to invent a new way of examining our practices as teachers, and we have all come to similar conclusions about what it means to us personally and professionally ... Most significantly we learnt to write reflective essays that showed what we learned. In our early attempts we focused mostly on the question “What did we do?” As we looked back on those early essays, we realised that we needed to address two more questions: “So what did we learn?” and “Now what will we do?” (p.29)

During the four-year study some 68 teachers and administrators completed a portfolio. They found that collaboration was a key to success and that districts must provide time for such collaborations. They found that teachers and administrators who develop a portfolio do it for the powerful professional development experience it provides, and through the experience administrators learnt how to support teachers finding ways to improve student performance. Teachers developed many effective strategies for studying student work and discovered important connections between teaching and learning.
For a portfolio process to be successful there needs to be a good deal of structured support for the individuals concerned. There needs to be systems support to establish a learning infrastructure around such issues as teacher release time, resources for participating in professional development activities, timetable flexibility for portfolio partner meetings and a willingness on the part of teachers to collaborate on the purpose and process of the portfolio.

CONTENT OF PORTFOLIOS

The first questions to arise in discussions about portfolios for teacher learning and development are usually: What does a portfolio look like? and What should go into a portfolio? Those questions are references to the content of portfolios which usually means the actual evidence in the form of artefacts and information to be included.

Decisions about content should be largely in the hands of the person who owns the portfolio, though some guidance may be helpful. Some writers begin with a definition as it helps to shape what might be included in the portfolio. Dietz (1993, p.8) defines the portfolio in these terms:

The Professional Development Portfolio is an envelope of the mind, a collection of essential questions, artefacts, and evidences that represent growth, continuous learning, and the current level of performance and interests of the learner. It is meant to be dynamic and changing as the learner experiences discoveries that lead to new directions and activities.

Wolf (1996, p.34) looks at it this way:

Essentially, a teaching portfolio is a collection of information about a teacher’s practice. It can include a variety of information, such as lesson plans, student assignments, teacher’s written descriptions and videotapes of their instruction, and formal evaluations by supervisors ... (it) should be more than a miscellaneous collection of artefacts or an extended list of professional activities. It should carefully and thoughtfully document a set of accomplishments attained over an extended period.

In earlier work (Retallick & Groundwater-Smith, 1996) we defined the professional learning portfolio as “a compilation of evidence which demonstrates the acquisition, development and exercise of knowledge and skills in relation to your work practice” (p.13). We suggested the components of a portfolio might be:

1. A table of contents.
2. A statement of purpose.
3. A career map.
5. A statement regarding your educational goals.
6. A description of the project.
7. Evidence of your professional learning.
8. An explanation of each item of evidence.
At that time we had in mind the documentation of learning from a specific project – such as an action research project – that participants had been involved in, and the purpose was very much related to university credit. However, different purposes and processes will produce a different kind of portfolio.

An example of quite specific requirements for a portfolio is from the Education Department of Western Australia (Martin, 1997). This is in respect of an application for promotion to Level 3 Classroom Teacher. Based on detailed research involving analysis of over 700 portfolios submitted for promotion (see Jasman & Barrera, 1998) the portfolio process is based on competency standards for which teachers are required to submit detailed evidence of attainment. Teachers are asked to submit a maximum of two written pages for each competency and other evidence to support the written statements, which could include: lesson plans, unit outlines, video clips, photographs, samples of students’ work, annotated photographs, and extracts from teaching-related publications (Martin, 1997, p.11).

What is evident from this brief review of the content of various portfolio processes it that it depends very much on the purpose of the portfolio. The purpose must be clear because it shapes and determines so much of what follows.

ASSESSMENT OF PORTFOLIOS

One of the most contentious and difficult issues for portfolios is that of assessment. Perhaps the first question is: Should they be assessed at all? If a portfolio is “a narrative of practice” (Retallick & Groundwater-Smith, 1996, p.13) then any reading by another person will be an interpretive exercise of discovering clues about intentions, motives and perspectives about teaching. If the purpose of the portfolio is purely for self-reflective professional learning, it could be argued that it is inappropriate for another person to cast judgement. In such cases an informal self-assessment or a peer evaluation process with feedback to the teacher concerned may be appropriate.

However, for other purposes a more formal process of assessment will be required, particularly if there is any consideration of standards being attained as in the US NBPTS or the WA competency standards for promotion to Level 3 classroom teacher. Doolittle (1996) makes the point that “portfolios that are used to make personnel decisions come under a much higher level of scrutiny than if intended for professional growth” (p.2). It is the importance of the consequences that makes the higher level of scrutiny necessary.

Two issues are often cited as problem areas for assessment of portfolios. They are the issues of comparability and subjectivity. Because the construction of a portfolio is such an individual matter and it is voluntarily undertaken, it is reasonable to expect a wide range of approaches from any group of people. For professional development purposes this may be a good thing but when assessment is involved the comparability aspect becomes problematic. This is usually handled by stipulating that certain items must be included in the portfolio with other items being at the teacher’s discretion. At least then it is possible to compare the core items as the basis of the assessment.
The second issue of concern is subjectivity in the evaluation of portfolios. While teacher evaluation in any form is subjective, the question is how to make the evaluation of portfolios as reliable and valid as possible. There are various ways of addressing this issue without putting a ‘straitjacket’ on the portfolio process. One way is to have a panel of assessors so that portfolios are looked at by more than one person, and also a training program for the panel is often used so that they are more likely to have a similar view of assessment criteria.

One thing is clear and that is the need for agreement amongst those who are reading or assessing portfolios about why they are doing it, what the consequences of their decisions might be and what criteria they will use to cast judgement if that is what is required. It is also important that anyone constructing a portfolio is fully aware of what the assessment rules are for their own portfolio. Our own attempt at clarifying the assessment rules was to develop a set of criteria which we put forward in the University Protocol for Accreditation (Retallick & Groundwater-Smith, 1996, pp.9-12):

- Validity – does the evidence of learning address what it claims to?
- Authenticity – has the evidence been verified as genuine?
- Reliability – is the evidence sound enough to ensure that different assessors would reach similar conclusions?
- Currency – is the evidence relatively recent?
- Sufficiency – is there sufficient evidence to justify equivalence to a full university subject in the degree for which credit is sought?

The assessment of 721 portfolios in the WA study by Jasmin & Barrera (1998) for the Level 3 classroom teacher promotion study is a useful one to consider. With such a large number of portfolios to assess, there were 22 pairs of assessors who were carefully selected and who undertook a two-day training program. Prior to the allocation of portfolios, assessors were provided with information packs containing checklists, scoring sheets, feedback sheets, a summary rating sheet and a code of ethics. They were also required to contact at least one referee for each applicant and half way through the assessment period they attended a moderation exercise to ensure that they were using the process correctly and had a common understanding of the standards to be applied.

This is an example of a high-stakes assessment process where promotion decisions are the outcome. Every attempt was made to deal with the issues of comparability and subjectivity in a rigorous and defensible way. Other assessment processes may well be less detailed where the stakes are not as high or the portfolio has a different purpose.

UNIVERSITY ACCREDITATION

This leads to the issue of university accreditation of portfolios. Whilst there is very little about accreditation in published sources, there are some examples of policy and practice in various universities in Australia and overseas. As the trend towards recognition of prior learning gathers momentum, more and more universities are changing their poli-
cies on credit to allow students to submit a portfolio of their workplace learning for credit purposes.

In the UK one study sheds some light on this issue. The study was referred to earlier as the Thames Regional INSET Network (TRIN) project and one of their findings was in relation to universities granting credit. This was done by questionnaire to ten universities. Of those, three were in a position to give credit for prior learning and two were able to give credit for portfolios. The project concluded that "there is no doubt that a great deal of work needs to be done before there is general acceptance by higher education of the potential for awarding portfolio based credit" (p.175).

Another approach which seems to be more workable for universities is to have a portfolio-based subject as part of their course offerings, particularly in undergraduate programs and coursework masters degrees. This is the case in a number of Australian universities including Charles Sturt University, Griffith University and University of Western Sydney as well as others. It is more workable because portfolios can be constructed with the learning outcomes of a specific university subject or course in mind which provides a clear focus for the student and explicit assessment criteria.

A CASE STUDY OF A PORTFOLIO PROCESS

Top Hat High School (a real school, but a fictitious name is used here) is in Ontario, Canada. To place the teacher learning portfolio process at the school in context I will briefly review the school as a whole. The school is new, having been established just four years ago, and is housed in a modern and attractive building. On entering the building I first noticed a large foyer with a carpeted, sunken area and many students sitting around and talking in a relaxed way. Following this is a broad arcade with attractive lights and upstairs walkways that promotes the concept of a comfortable and informal learning environment rather than a traditional school with narrow corridors.

Upstairs are classrooms, laboratories and teachers' rooms that all look reasonably familiar until one takes a closer look. For instance, in the teachers' room I noticed a notebook computer on many of the desks (all teachers have a notebook supplied by the school). This enables teachers to track student progress and communicate around the school and around the world by e-mail. I also noticed that the teachers' room is shared by teachers from a range of different programme areas, not all from one department as in a traditional high school.

These two features of the teachers' room are indicative of the values upon which the school was established and which now permeate the school. First, the school curriculum is based on the values of 'Education for a Global Perspective'. Global issues and perspectives, including life-long learning, provide the framework for all courses in Grade 9 and are infused into courses in Grades 10-12 where possible. The global learner "anticipates connections, understands different perspectives, commits to personal and planetary well being, demonstrates literacy for a global age, participates in life-long learning". These and other attributes are identified in the Graduate Exit Outcomes for the school. As is stated in the Programme of Study 1998-99:
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We believe that to instil the capacity and motivation for life-long learning we must encourage you, through a gradual process based upon individual growth and development, to accept responsibility for your own learning. This may be accomplished if we help you acquire the values, knowledge and skills necessary for you to succeed in a more complex, interconnected world.

Second, the school is not organised around subject departments with a head in charge of each. This traditional, balkanised form of organisation has been replaced by key process teams with program leaders for areas such as instructional practices, teacher advisory groups, global education and secondary school initiatives (i.e. School Board initiatives). In addition there are interdisciplinary management teams for designing the timetable and organising events, such as graduation, recognition assemblies and World Food Day.

Student learning portfolio

From the beginning of the school there has been a system of student assessment by portfolio. Throughout their four years at the school all students are required to develop a portfolio of their achievements in relation to the graduate exit outcomes and under the guidance of their teacher adviser. Each teacher has a Teacher Adviser Group (TAG) of about 20 students and they maintain the same group throughout the four years. The TAG teacher is responsible for the portfolio process and for career planning, counselling and reporting to teachers and parents, and is the main advocate for the student if any problems arise. There is a timetable allocation of 50 minutes for TAG once a week.

Students are encouraged to develop and include a wide array of evidence and artefacts in their portfolio and to revise and update those materials throughout their four years of high school. The materials could include statements of their goals, progress reports, a graduate résumé, letters of reference, research materials, curriculum assignments, career day investigations, personal reflections and parental comments amongst many others.

Whilst the portfolio process has been overwhelmingly successful there are still some problems of getting all students to commit to it and of teachers finding the time to properly assist students with the process. However, a particularly important development from it occurred about two years ago when the school decided to follow a similar process for the teachers in the form of a teacher learning portfolio.

Teacher learning portfolio

At Top Hat High School there is a formal requirement for evaluation of teaching at least every three years as part of the ongoing supervision process. With this in mind and with the aim of fostering a learning culture for teachers as well as for students, two years ago the school decided to introduce a teacher learning portfolio process. It was regarded as important that teachers should model learning processes required of students, and portfolios were seen as one way of achieving that aim. It was also related to specific criteria for teacher expectations at Top Hat as presented in the following categories:
• proof of life-long learning
• use of instructional technologies
• involvement on Key Process, Management and Subject Teams
• demonstrated belief in continuous improvement in all aspects of the teaching role.

Each teacher was provided with a folder which identified seven areas of teachers' work: teaching learning strategies, planning strategies, student assessment and evaluation, system role, adviser role, communication with students and parents, and physical environment. For each of these areas a performance-based rubric is included in the folder which enables teachers to carry out self-assessment on a four-level scale. The purpose of the self-assessment is to provide a basis for dialogue with the supervisor about the quality and improvement of the teacher's work. Teachers are asked to provide evidence and artefacts to demonstrate their achievements and to indicate what actions they are planning to take to build on their areas of strength and their areas of improvement.

Teachers are encouraged to obtain student feedback about their teaching on specially prepared forms and these are also to be included in the portfolio. Other items that teachers generally include in their portfolio are an updated résumé, a statement of their philosophy of teaching, and current course outlines. They are also given access to their personnel folder from the Board Office from which they may obtain evidence or artefacts for inclusion in their portfolio.

Within the first two years of the portfolio process, five teachers have undergone evaluation and others are in various stages of preparing their portfolio. The five teachers have each received a letter from the principal and/or vice-principal which gives them a formal acknowledgment of the quality of their work and encouragement to move on to higher levels of achievement as a teacher. There are moves now for the process to become district-wide.

Problems and issues

As with student portfolios the process is not uniformly and unquestioningly accepted by teachers. Some teachers are not yet convinced of the value of the learning portfolio and therefore are not prepared to devote the time that it requires. According to the principal, about one-third of the staff are fully in favour, one-third are watching to see what happens and the remainder may not be convinced of the value of the portfolio or the portfolio assessment model.

To conclude the case study I quote from a teacher at the school who has been most involved in the development of the portfolio process:

As we have known for a long time with students, portfolios provide an efficient way of assessing a complex variety of tasks and learning situations. Within my own teaching and with the task of working with other teachers through assessment, portfolios help to provide a clearer representation of ourselves as learners as well as professionals. The opportunity to review and reflect upon artefacts that best represent the idiosyncrasies of our daily activity is indeed rewarding. On another level the use of teaching portfolios assists the implementation of a professional development program that accurately meets
the needs of staff and individuals. Upon reviewing the portfolio either by yourself or with a colleague, it is hard not to feel rewarded and proud of your accomplishments.

CONCLUSION

There is clearly a trend over the past decade or so in Australia and overseas towards the increased use of portfolios for a variety of purposes in the teaching and learning profession. There are several advantages for using portfolios and there are also some areas of tension. The advantages have been neatly summarised by Edgerton, Hutchings & Quinlan (1991) as:

1) Portfolios capture the intellectual substance and ‘situatedness’ of teaching;
2) Portfolios encourage teachers to take important new roles in the documentation, observation and review of teaching;
3) Review of teaching documentation prompts teachers to use these new roles as powerful tools for improvement; and,
4) As more teachers are using them, portfolios are forging a new culture of professionalism about teaching.

The areas of tension are mainly in the multi-purpose nature of portfolios, the allocation of resources to the process and the place and form of assessment of portfolios. Teachers constructing portfolios need to be clear about why they are doing the exercise, they need to have time allocated to the process and to collaborate with others about it, and they need to know what is at stake if their portfolio is to be assessed. These matters can be effectively dealt with if there is serious commitment to the idea of teachers learning through portfolios.

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REFERENCES


