THE
PORTFOLIO
PLANNER

Making Professional Portfolios Work for You

Debra Bayles Martin

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MAKING PROFESSIONAL PORTFOLIOS WORK FOR YOU

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For Luke, always . . .

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to:

Stacy Vinge for her generosity of spirit, her inquiring nature, and her enthusiasm for life and learning;

Debbie Stollenwerk for her vision and support;

The students who bring so much to our educational interactions;

The professionals who maintain a vision of student-centered classrooms and teacher-centered preparation programs.

*The purpose of education
is to allow each individual to come
into full possession of his or her personal power.*

—John Dewey

PREFACE

In the mid-1980s, many elementary students were enamored with the *Choose-Your-Own Adventure* fiction series (Bantam). Participating with the author by choosing how the story would progress personalized the reading experience in a unique way. Little did we know then that those books functioned as a sort of low-tech version of hypertext—allowing readers to enter and exit a storyline from any number of vantage points.

In many ways, my experiences with portfolios mirror those *Choose-Your-Own Adventure* stories. Like others, I have entered the world of professional portfolios from many vantage points, seen countless uses and abuses of the concept, and observed numerous twists and turns as applications are advanced, adopted, and altered.

This brief guide on professional portfolio planning is addressed primarily to preservice and inservice teachers. Because your professional portfolio needs will vary according to your context, perhaps portfolio planning might best be addressed through an electronic format—allowing you to "click" on particular hot links to visit websites of interest. However, even in this world of high-tech applications, there's still much to be said for the low-tech variety of choosing one's reading adventure with a text you can tuck into a bag or a pocket.

To support your reading, this book is organized in a format similar to the *Choose-Your-Own Adventure* paperback series. Throughout the pages, you'll see the "Cool Links" symbol. It will function like an electronic "hot link"—guiding you to other locations in the book where related concepts are discussed. "Cool Links" will allow you to personalize your journey so you can travel across and through the material according to your interests and questions.

From time to time, you'll also see "Teacher Thoughts" boxes. The comments in these boxes were written by practicing teachers in response to questions about their experiences with professional portfolios. Their observations highlight some strengths of professional portfolio development, as well as some pitfalls.

A third feature of this guide results from interactions with Stacy Vinge, a first-grade teacher in the San Diego area and a graduate student in the Reading Master's Program at San Diego State University. Stacy graciously consented to share her thoughts about

professional portfolio development, along with some of the artifacts she has collected during her teaching career.

One way to begin your journey through this guide is to turn to the Key Questions on page 10 and peruse the topics there. If something catches your attention, follow the text and the "Cool Links" as far as you'd like. At any juncture, you can return to the Key Questions page to begin other journeys.

If the *Choose-Your-Own Adventure* approach doesn't appeal to you, a Table of Contents appears on page 8. You'll note that the book is organized into three major sections. In Section One, discussions center on common questions about professional portfolios. Each discussion has been designed to stand independently, or you can read the discussions in order.

Section Two includes Portfolio Planning Guides to help you create professional portfolios for different audiences and purposes. You can use these pages as checklists for developing particular portfolios, or they can serve as brainstorming prompts to help you customize your own portfolio guide.

Finally, Section Three provides text and media references to guide you to other professional portfolio adventures.

Whether you're interested in completing a teacher preparation program, documenting your professional growth, or addressing another purpose, I hope you'll enjoy co-creating at least part of your journey within the pages of this text.

—Debra Bayles Martin

CONTENTS

SECTION ONE

COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT PROFESSIONAL PORTFOLIOS

I have been saving things since my student teaching because I've always thought I'd like to make some sort of portfolio with them. I haven't really had a purpose for doing one yet, so I'm not sure exactly how it would look.

I envision one general portfolio that shows who I am as a teacher—what I've done year by year. It might look like a book. Maybe I would make smaller versions for other reasons...

KEY QUESTIONS FOR READING THIS BOOK

If you would like to read this book by topics, select one of the questions below and follow the Cool Link to the listed page. You can also proceed straight through the book, beginning with the next page.

1. I've heard a lot about portfolios. But I'm wondering, **what is a professional portfolio?**

   For descriptions and definitions of various types of portfolios, go to page 11.

2. I'm pretty comfortable with what a portfolio is, but I'd like to read more about **different purposes for professional portfolios**.

   See pages 18, 21, 35, and 41, or Question 3 below.

3. I understand the general definition and purposes of portfolios. What I want to know is **how professional portfolios can be of use to me in my current setting.**

   See pages 18, 25, or 44-46 if you are preparing to enter or are enrolled in a teacher preparation program.
   See pages 25 or 48-53 if you are (or will be soon) seeking your first teaching position.
   See pages 19, 26, or 47 if you are a graduate student in education.
   See pages 25, 31-33, or 48-53 if you are an inservice teacher considering career advancement or development.

4. I already do a lot with portfolios. I want to think about **ways to improve what I already do with professional portfolios**.

   See page 59 for five ideas to enhance portfolio use, and page 63 for a discussion of electronic portfolios.

WHAT IS A PROFESSIONAL PORTFOLIO?

Growth without documentation remains too private;
documentation without growth is too trivial.

—Glatthorn, 1996

While professional portfolios are relatively new to education, they have "an ancient and honorable history" among artists, writers, and architects (Glatthorn, 1996, p. 31). For generations, professionals in these fields have collected samples of work to demonstrate their talent and skill. The idea of using portfolios to document teaching experience and expertise is rooted in these traditions. It is also supported by constructivist views of learning and over two decades of experimentation with student portfolios.

A series of education studies during the 1980s also encouraged the eventual use of professional portfolios. The 1983 federal report, "A Nation at Risk," stirred public concern about American education. Calls for enhanced student learning and increased teacher accountability rose from all sides. One of the most influential reform suggestions appeared in the 1986 Carnegie Corporation report, "A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century." Report writers suggested that greater educational accountability could be achieved by redefining the role of teachers. Instead of someone who efficiently dispenses facts to students, the ideal teacher would be "flexible, up-to-date, [and] able to *lead* children into deeper learning" (*Teaching as a Profession*, 1997, p. 2, emphasis added).

During the past decade, increasing numbers of educators and researchers have embraced a view of learning which resonates with the Carnegie vision of teaching as active and learner-centered (Wolf & Siu-Runyan, 1996). This perspective is often referred to as a constructivist view. Constructivists believe that children build (construct) their own understanding of the world by using what they already know to interpret new ideas and experiences. These interpretations then become part of the child's ever-growing knowledge base.

If children are creators of their own knowledge, then teachers ideally become facilitators of learning rather than transmitters of information. A constructivist teacher functions more like a coach—helping children become aware of the world around them, encouraging them to think about how new ideas and experiences

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relate to what they already know, and inviting them to take increasing responsibility for their conclusions and actions.

A constructivist view of teaching and learning requires much more of teachers than to simply take in a collection of facts from teacher preparation courses and then present that information to children. Indeed, as Anderson (1997) notes, teaching is, "at its core, a moral act" which requires careful thought and action (p. 2). To facilitate learning, constructivist teachers must know their students and their backgrounds, understand how knowledge is defined in various disciplines, consider contexts under which learning may best occur—and then orchestrate educational conditions to encourage optimum student growth. Such teachers become "lifelong learners seeking professional development" (Anderson, 1997, p. 2).

Constructivist views emphasize not only what teachers *know*, but what they *do*. Since much of what a teacher knows and actually does in a classroom is not easily measured with traditional paper/pencil assessments, other means of documenting teacher performance are being explored. With ever-increasing frequency, the professional portfolio is surfacing as a popular tool for documenting teacher preparation, inservice performance, and professional development (Bradley, 1997a; Cooper, 1997).

While the idea of collecting samples of one's work to document teaching experience and expertise may seem simple, a quick glance at the professional literature or a brief search on the Internet reveals a seemingly endless array of portfolio names, types, and purposes. This can lead to confusion about what someone means when they refer to a "professional portfolio."

When they hear the term "professional portfolio," some people think of an enhanced resumé. This is probably because professional portfolios are sometimes connected with job interviews and career advancement. Others envision scrapbooks filled with lesson plans, teaching evaluations, and photos of students engaged in classroom projects. Because our knowledge and use of professional portfolios draws heavily from what we have learned in using portfolios with elementary and secondary students over the past twenty years, it is helpful to compare student portfolios with their professional counterparts.

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Comparing Student Portfolios to Professional Portfolios

Murnane (1994) defines a student portfolio as a "multidimensional collection of a student's work assembled in an organized fashion" where "specific attention is given to what students are doing and can do" (p. 74). Paris and Ayres (1994) add that portfolio-building involves a *process* as much as a *product*, since work samples should be collected and reviewed in "a systematic way" (p. 167).

McLaughlin and Vogt (1996) expand the idea of *process* to include collaboration between student and teacher as portfolio samples are selected and organized. Porter and Cleland (1995) add that portfolio selections should be "accompanied by a reflective narrative that not only helps the learner to understand and extend learning, but invites the reader of the portfolio to gain insight about learning and the learner" (p. 154).

From these ideas we can describe a student portfolio as a two-part experience. The first part of the experience involves students in collecting samples of their work over time and considering what those samples demonstrate (often with the aid of peer and instructor feedback). The second part of the experience involves deciding which samples best illustrate important insights, accomplishments, or values; considering how those samples (and insights) might best be presented to an audience; and then creating an actual presentation product. Students can engage in a portfolio process for a number of different reasons (e.g., to examine their progress in a subject area and set goals for further work, to demonstrate competency in a certain field), and they can tailor their presentation products to any number of audiences (e.g., themselves, teachers, parents, administrators).

Teachers have discovered many benefits from engaging students in portfolio-building. According to Young, Mathews, Kietzmann & Westerfield (1997), some of the most prominent include:

- Documenting growth in learning or increased proficiency in a particular area over time.
- Documenting growth that is not easily assessed through more traditional means such as standardized tests and application forms.
- Enhancing a learner's ownership of learning.
- Encouraging learner reflection on past experiences as well as in determining future learning goals.
- Involving participants in inquiry.

- Enhancing relationships among portfolio creators and mentors.
- Encouraging a sense of community and cooperation among learners rather than a sense of competition.
- Allowing individuals to display learning in ways overlooked or undervalued by other assessment means.
- Increasing involvement in writing, in discussions, and in interactions with other professionals.

Given the benefits of portfolio-building among young students, many educators and administrators have wondered if engaging teacher preparation students and practicing professionals in portfolio development might yield similar benefits. This leads to the question of how and when adults might build their own portfolios.

Creating a Professional Portfolio: Process and Product

Based on what we know about the portfolio process for younger students, creating a professional portfolio[1] involves going through a systematic *process* to create a particular *product* to address a particular audience or to achieve a specific goal. Although the *product* of a portfolio process may function somewhat like an enhanced resumé (if the creator's goal is to demonstrate particular achievements), the portfolio *process* itself is much broader than simply listing an academic or employment history. Job-seeking is only one of many reasons individuals create professional portfolios.

See page 18 for more on goals for creating professional portfolios.

Like building a student portfolio, developing a professional portfolio means engaging in a *process* that results in a tangible *product*. This process involves five steps. First, you select a personal or professional goal (such as graduation, certification, professional advancement). Second, you think about how your professional experiences relate to that goal. Third, you collect actual items and

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[1] For this discussion, "professional" refers to anyone engaged in professional preparation at the undergraduate or graduate level, as well as to practicing educators. "Professional portfolios" can be created at any time during a career, from its beginning in teacher preparation programs throughout advanced study and inservice practice.

documents[2] that could demonstrate what you have done (or are doing) to reach your goal.[3] Fourth, you decide which items among your collection best illustrate your achievement of or progress toward the goal. Finally, you determine how to present the selected items to the individual or group connected with your goal (e.g., instructor, evaluation committee, personnel director). All of these steps can be completed on your own, or with the aid and input of others (e.g., peers, colleagues, mentors).

As a result of going through the five steps above, you create a *product* which includes only the items you feel best illustrate specific accomplishments. Generally, you also share your reasons for selecting the items by including a written reflection with the finished portfolio *product*. These reflections are intended to help a portfolio reader gain insight into the *process* behind the *product*.

The "multidimensional" aspect of portfolio *products* requires us to make important decisions about what to collect and how to best present our selections. For example, is a teaching portfolio designed for career advancement best housed in a folder, a three-ring binder, a plastic file box, or in an electronic format? Should the product include students' drawings and papers created during a unit of study? Is it better to include three-dimensional objects (e.g., a student's clay sculpture) or to rely on photos and narrative descriptions? Should a teaching approach be described in writing or is it preferable to include a videotape of a particular teaching event?

Obviously, the nature of a professional portfolio (*process* and *product*) will vary according to its central purpose (Wolf & Siu-Runyan, 1996). Any time you consider creating a professional portfolio, there are several questions you should ask yourself. These questions appear on the next two pages. Each question includes a "Cool Link" to direct you to related material in this book.

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[2] Because they range from two-dimensional pictures and papers to three-dimensional items such as videotapes and art projects, many writers refer to these samples as **artifacts**. For our discussion, "**artifact**" will refer to any item you could collect to demonstrate what you are learning or doing as a professional. This includes samples of your students' work as well.

[3] Some refer to the complete collection of items from which you will select certain samples as a "**working portfolio.**" See page 38 for a discussion on working portfolios.

1. Why am I creating a professional portfolio?

Your central purpose or goal for creating a professional portfolio probably depends upon your situation. Turn to Question 3 on page 10 and select from the Cool Links the situation that most closely relates to your current context.

2. What will I include in my portfolio?

Check out the **Portfolio Planning Guides** beginning on page 73 for lists of possible items to include in different types of portfolios.

3. When will I collect and organize the samples and artifacts for the portfolio product?

Check out the **Portfolio Planning Pages** beginning on page 73 for ideas on time frames for collection.

4. How will I display and present my collection?

The **Portfolio Planning Guides** beginning on page 73 include ideas about different portfolio containers. You may also want to read about electronic portfolios beginning on page 63.

5. Who am I as a learner and who am I sharing this portfolio with?

Turn to page 41 to read about the value of reflection as part of the portfolio process. You can also go to pages 21-24 to consider various audiences for your portfolio.