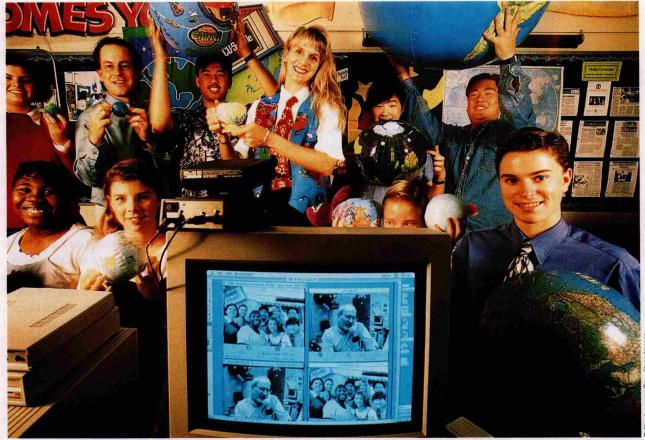Bryan Painter

Using Teaching Portfolios

Teaching portfolios are not just scrapbooks of random assignments and student work samples; rather, they represent teachers' evolving reflections and analyses measured against rigorous standards.

*I*f teachers want to be involved in their own development and supervision, they must take ownership of the evaluation process. The best avenue for teachers to engage in such practice is the teaching portfolio. We know that our students benefit when they reflect on their work and carefully select evidence to showcase their development over time. Preservice teachers at colleges and universities also use portfolios to document their growth and reflect on their profes-

sion. Should we not expect the same documentation and purposeful reflection from practicing teachers?

A teaching portfolio is a documented history of a teacher's learning process against a set of teaching standards. The portfolio is much more than an elaborate scrapbook or a collection of written documents: It is an individualized portrait of the teacher as a professional, reflecting on his or her philosophy and practice. This portrait is fully realized through the teacher's deliberate selection of artifacts and thoughtful reflections on those artifacts, which provide insight into the teacher's growth.

Portfolio Versus Folio

Most teachers collect work from their classrooms. Any given teacher can fill file cabinets or crates with student work samples, lesson plans, photographs, and parents' notes. This collection of student and teacher "stuff" is

certainly worthwhile, but it is not a portfolio. Such a compilation is a *folio*, a collection of evidence that a learner may pull from when creating a portfolio. The teaching folio is a teacher's gathering place for his or her teaching artifacts.

When teachers are ready to create a portfolio, they need to know the standards by which they will be assessed. These standards may change as teachers change districts or as states adopt new measures of teacher success. Once teachers know and understand their standards, they should spend considerable time reflecting on their philosophy of teaching, carefully considering what evidence may assist them. They may find such evidence in their teaching folio, but not all artifacts in their folio will be

teachers examine themselves against the entire set of standards, they achieve more holistic and meaningful results. Teachers should carefully choose a limited number of artifacts—ideally no more than 12—to document competency against the entire set of standards.

Reflection

Far too many teachers spend valuable time putting photos, certificates, and lesson plans into elaborate scrapbooks that they mistakenly refer to as portfolios. Such scrapbooks may provide visual insights into a classroom or a teacher's creativity, but we learn little about that teacher's intellectual and professional ideas. Thoughtful reflection, not a color printer, is the key to portfolio success.

describe the artifact, justify the artifact's inclusion within the framework of the standards, and convey what the teacher has learned about himself or herself and about the practice of learning.

Two Examples

Mr. Jones, in his third year of teaching, was originally hired to teach 2nd grade but currently teaches a 2nd and 3rd grade multi-age classroom. He struggles at times to meet the needs of his diverse learners, but he continues to seek support and to further his own instructional growth.

Artifact. Mr. Jones included teacher notes and student work samples from a series of ongoing science inquiry and investigation centers in his classroom.

Reflection. Mr. Jones used his artifacts to support a number of standards. He presented a thorough examination of himself that he assessed against the appropriate performance standards. Mr. Jones

■ Provided a detailed description of the inquiry centers and linked the content and process skills that he developed through the centers to those in the district curriculum;

■ Reflected on his own development as a scientist and described his efforts to promote curiosity, inquiry, and observation skills among his learners;

■ Discussed content issues and addressed how he anticipates student misconceptions of the sciences;

■ Described his own development in trying to meet his learners' diverse academic needs; and

■ Presented several professional development experiences in which he furthered his instruction, including his attendance at a regional science conference and a national multi-age conference.

A second example is Mrs. Davis, who is in her eighth year of teaching 1st grade. She is highly accomplished in the classroom and respected by her colleagues.

Artifact. Mrs. Davis included an action-research article that she wrote on empowering students within classroom

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useful. Teachers pull from their folio to "port," or carry, evidence that will document their growth. A teacher returning to the same folio over time will undoubtedly use different artifacts as he or she addresses new and varying criteria.

Artifacts

An artifact is any evidence that teachers use to document or support how they meet the teaching standards. There is no sure-fire recipe for collecting artifacts or for putting together a portfolio, though portfolios should include both teacher and student work. Teachers should select not only their best work, but also their early work to compare with more recent and better examples, thus showing growth over time.

Teachers may be expected to meet any number of performance standards, depending on the district. We should not expect, however, that teachers facing 30 standards should thoughtfully select and defend 30 artifacts. When

When selecting an artifact for a portfolio, a teacher should consider these questions:

■ Why is this artifact better than other artifacts that I could choose?

■ Does this artifact provide evidence of my growth and success against one or more performance standards?

■ Can I rationalize the importance of this artifact to those viewing it out of context?

■ Is this artifact a result of my professional growth and accomplishments? Have I grown as a result of the artifact?

■ How does this artifact represent who I am as a teacher?

Merely considering these questions is not enough. Teachers must publicly support and even defend why they included each artifact, typically with a written narrative but occasionally through an audio or video presentation. This rationale, even more than the artifact itself, tells the reviewer about the teacher's growth. Each rationale should

communities. The article has been tentatively accepted for publication.

Reflection. Mrs. Davis used this artifact as evidence of her classroom environment and her positive relations with students. She discussed ongoing strategies that she uses to facilitate meaningful discussions among learners. More important, she reflected on the significant role that the article played in her own growth and development. Mrs. Davis

■ Engaged in action research that made her more aware of herself as a learner and as a social scientist, which inspired her to provide more meaningful investigations for her own learners;

■ Became a better role model for her learners because she was more aware of questioning strategies; and

■ Realized the importance of giving back to the education community and furthering the development of colleagues beyond her school building.

Professional Growth

I have focused primarily on the role of portfolios in teacher evaluation, but the teaching portfolio is first and foremost a tool to support teacher learning. Helen Freidus (1998) writes that portfolios engage teachers "in an open-ended process that pushes them to revisit their own knowledge and express it in meaningful ways" (p. 51). By asking teachers to stop and think about their beliefs and practices in the classroom, the process often identifies any gaps that exist between the two. Teachers who can articulate their beliefs are better suited to justify and question their own practices. More important, they are better prepared to talk with colleagues or to search for meaningful ways to enhance their instruction and further support their learners.

Teachers who keep portfolios will also be more effective in using portfolios with their students. Just as our own writing makes us better prepared to engage learners in the writing process, we under-

stand the portfolio process better when we experience it ourselves. Students should be expected to reflect on their learning, both process and product, and evaluate themselves against standards. This is not easy. As Donald Graves (1992) writes, "students don't suddenly become good readers of their work" (p. 94). They must recognize the qualities of good work and thoughtfully apply criteria against their own ideas. Teachers who have engaged in this authentic process will have powerful insights to model for their students.

Time and Anxiety Factors

Creating a portfolio is extraordinarily time-consuming, and extra time is something that most teachers do not have. Districts should not expect teachers to fully develop teaching portfolios without supporting them through the process. My district recently developed and adopted a new system for performance-based teacher supervision, a major component of which requires teachers to maintain a professional portfolio. A new concept and requirement for

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most teachers, the portfolio has caused some anxiety and even resistance. Although we recognize the value of the process, we haven't yet reached districtwide agreement about portfolios. Conversations among teachers and administrators have been crucial, but they must be ongoing; we will not succeed in answering tough questions unless we have dialogue and remain flexible in meeting teachers' needs.

Many teachers who are not used to writing about their work and analyzing themselves against standards can find it a scary endeavor. Charlotte Danielson and Thomas McGreal (2000) caution districts not to include portfolios in the evaluation process without clear criteria by which teachers will be measured.

My district has recently adopted new performance standards, and we expect these standards to be the focus of conversations for years to come. We need thorough training at the district and school levels as we continually negotiate the meaning of the standards. Teachers have been integral to our dialogue; before teachers can select artifacts for their portfolios, they must fully understand the standards of evaluation. Vague or misleading criteria will create confusion and more work for teachers—inefficiencies that schools cannot afford. As the principal and instructional leader in my school, I am responsible for knowing the standards and for making them clear to my teachers. Teachers who do not fully understand the standards cannot be expected to meet expectations in the classroom, much less in the portfolio process.

Teachers committed to portfolios will likely need guidance from principals as they organize, select,

Sample Portfolio Artifacts

Student work samples
Lesson or study plans
Professional memberships or awards
Communications between teacher and parents
Communications between teacher and students
Personal writings and reflections
Web sites or CDs developed by teacher
Critiques of lessons
Behavior modification plans
Committee work
Work on curriculum or program design
Professional articles to enhance instruction
Work from graduate classes or staff development
Assessment tools used with students

rationalize, and critique their artifacts. My district is currently defining what a portfolio should look like, and we are exploring options that teachers might use in reflecting on their growth. With no exemplars to emulate, teachers understandably have difficulty choosing artifacts and reflecting on themselves and the standards. Quality examples may reduce the uncertainty that teachers feel about the process. We should be aware, however, that by using models we also risk creating a cookie-cutter process that silences the unique voices that our portfolio process should encourage.

Release time for teachers to discuss their work is helpful not only to create portfolios but also to engage teachers in professional dialogue about instruction, assessment, and school or district goals. Professional development is at the heart of supervision; the primary purpose of

teacher evaluation is teacher growth, and principals must assume an instructional leadership role. Such a role may require experience with portfolios, so principals may want to develop their own portfolios.

Final Thoughts

Given adequate time and energy, teaching portfolios will enhance professional practice. I look forward to observing the growth of my teachers as they analyze and reflect on their work. Our district has raised teacher expectations, and the teachers are up to the challenge. As principal, I must be up to the challenge, too, if I am going to support teachers' instructional growth.
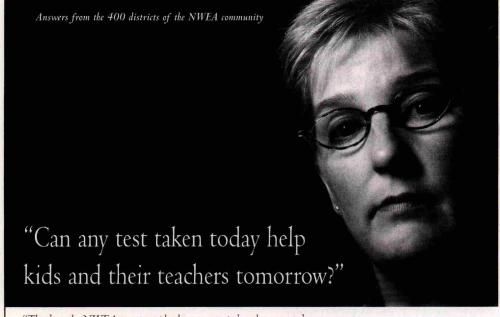
The portfolio should never be the sole avenue for professional development or replace evaluative observations and conversations. The supervision process works best when teachers and principals

work together toward a common goal: teacher growth that leads to student learning. As a complement to other practices, portfolios provide teachers with a professional tool to evaluate and improve their own development. ■

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