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Chapter 1

A Vision of Teaching Portfolios

Reflection is the beginning of reform.—Mark Twain, 1899

Teaching portfolios—selective collections of information about a teacher’s practice—have become a regular feature in many educational programs and organizations at national, state, district, school, and university levels. Across these different settings, not unexpectedly, teaching portfolios serve a number of different purposes and have taken a variety of forms. What is called a *portfolio* across these varied contexts can range from a thick collection of personalized products to a slender set of standardized materials. Although all of these versions are labeled *teaching portfolios*, these collections of information vary considerably in what they contain, in how they are constructed, and in the ways they are evaluated.

Given that teaching portfolios can take a variety of forms, how do educators decide which models are most appropriate for their purposes? Should portfolios be structured or open-ended? Should they contain only teachers’ self-selected work or a variety of information contributed from colleagues and supervisors as well? Should they reflect process as well as product? Who should evaluate them and how?

Portfolios provide teachers with an opportunity and a structure for improving their practice and advancing student learning. This opportunity is fully realized, however, only if the portfolio process is well designed. The purpose of this book is to guide school administrators and staff developers in creating and implementing a meaningful and manageable portfolio process in their schools and districts.

To meet these considerations, a definition and a framework that can help school administrators and staff developers distinguish among different kinds of portfolios and make informed decisions about the types of portfolios that best suit their purposes are offered. As described later in this chapter, the planned purposes for the portfolio drive important decisions about its content, structure, and process. After these purposes are clarified, the task of designing and implementing a portfolio system becomes much more straightforward.

In this chapter, a teaching portfolio is defined, and its essential features are described. In the following chapters, the importance of clearly identifying the purpose for the portfolio and how different purposes create different portfolio possibilities are explained as are steps for building a professional teaching portfolio and examples that illustrate each of the key features of a portfolio.

What Is a Teaching Portfolio?

In the most basic sense, a *teaching portfolio* is simply a collection of information about a teacher's practice. A teaching portfolio may include a wide variety of information about a teacher, such as letters of recommendations, formal evaluations by supervisors, teachers' written descriptions of their classroom instruction, teaching artifacts (such as lesson plans), and learning artifacts (such as student writing samples). Within this general definition and list of potential contents, several visions for teaching portfolios are possible. Predictably, a variety of models for teaching portfolios have emerged, with some models more successful than others.

Of the many visions that have unfolded in practice, some of the most common are the least productive. For example, the *scrapbook portfolio* is a collection of assorted mementos that have strong personal appeal for the portfolio owner. It includes information such as photographs of the classroom and affectionate notes from students and their parents. This style of portfolio is thick and colorful as well as eye-catching and heartwarming, but, although very important to the portfolio owner, it is virtually indecipherable to anyone else.

Another frequently observed type of portfolio is the *overflowing container*. In this version, a container, such as a cardboard box, a manila folder, or a file drawer, is indiscriminately filled with nearly everything that the teacher and students have created during the year. A massive collection of papers and projects, it is not organized in any coherent or conceptual fashion, making it difficult to interpret and impossible to evaluate.

Still another type of teaching portfolio is the *résumé on steroids*, which documents a teacher's experiences in much the same fashion as a résumé by listing activities and accomplishments, but in much greater detail than the résumé. The list might include degrees obtained, work experiences, conferences attended, awards received, and the names of people who can recommend the teacher's work. As with a résumé, the teacher's professional experiences are described, but there is no direct evidence of the substance or the quality of these experiences.

Each of these models for portfolios is fundamentally flawed. Although the formats differ, they all fail for the same reason: They neither serve as a source for serious self-reflection, nor can they be examined critically by others in an informed way. No clear conception of teaching underlies the portfolio, nor is there information about the teacher's instructional goals or teaching context. Furthermore, although direct evidence of teaching is provided in the form of artifacts in the scrapbook and container versions, the artifacts are not explained, are not explicitly connected to the teacher's intended instructional outcomes, and do not present clear evidence of student learning. Most critical, however, is the absence of the teacher's reflections on the successes and problems encountered in his or her teaching.

As assessment tools, these types of portfolios are of limited value because they offer scant evidence about the quality of a teacher's actions or thinking. Without information about the teacher's instructional goals and teaching context, it is difficult to examine the soundness of the planning. Without direct evidence of the teaching that took place, it is difficult to evaluate the adequacy of the instruction. And without reflections by the teacher on the problems and successes encountered in teaching, it is difficult to determine the depth of the teacher's understanding of the teaching and learning process.

Furthermore, these kinds of portfolios do little to advance a teacher's professional growth. Collecting artifacts and listing accomplishments can be trivial tasks unless they are carried out for clear and worthwhile purposes. But, if teachers are asked to articulate clearly their instructional philosophy and goals, to select carefully evidence that illustrates the ways in which they have addressed these goals, and to reflect critically on their decisions, then constructing portfolios becomes a profound learning experience.

A powerful alternative to the teaching portfolios described earlier is a vision of teaching portfolios that better captures their dynamic nature. A teaching portfolio is more than a container of information or a list of accomplishments—it is also a process for improving teaching and learning. Giving teachers both structure and opportunity to systematically document and reflect on selected aspects of their practice in light of the professional standards in their field and to engage in serious conversations with colleagues and supervisors about their teaching creates the conditions for improved practice and student learning.

Wolf and Dietz offer the following definition of teaching portfolios:

A teaching portfolio is a structured collection of teacher and student work created across diverse contexts over time, framed by reflection and enriched through collaboration, that has as its ultimate aim the advancement of student and teacher learning. (1998, 13)

Essential Features of a Portfolio

The key features of the portfolio definition are shown in figure 1.1 and are elaborated on individually in the next sections.

Figure 1.1 KEY FEATURES OF A TEACHING PORTFOLIO

- ❑ A portfolio is purposeful and structured.
- ❑ A portfolio contains student and teacher work.
- ❑ A portfolio shows teaching and learning over time and across contexts.
- ❑ A portfolio stimulates and reveals reflection.
- ❑ A portfolio is a collaborative undertaking.
- ❑ A portfolio advances teacher and student learning.

A Portfolio Is Purposeful and Structured

A portfolio is not a miscellaneous collection of teaching mementos; it is a selective set of information gathered for specific purposes. These purposes vary depending on the person creating the portfolio and the context in which it is constructed, but all portfolios are assembled for one or more (if sometimes implicit) purposes. These purposes may be to promote self-