

Chapter 7

“Pretty Good Practices” for the Design of Teacher Portfolio Courses

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors argue that although portfolios are a popular means of teacher evaluation, they, like any other assessment, must be properly implemented if they are to realize their full potential. Accordingly, they offer seven “pretty good practices” (Mishra, 2008) for designing portfolio courses: peerfeedback, authentic audience, diverse resources, learning by doing, open access, confidential spaces, and self-pacing. These practices were developed from the authors’ extensive work helping teachers to develop portfolios that demonstrate their learning in their graduate studies, and they help students create portfolios that have value as both summative assessments and places for formative growth. In the spirit of “pretty good practices,” however, the authors invite others to modify these practices for other contexts or to carry out research that would help refine and improve them.

INTRODUCTION

Alignment between learning activities and assessment is always critical but often overlooked. To teach differently than one assesses is to set students up for failure (Friedman & Heafner, 2007); conversely, to assess differently than one teaches is to underrepresent students’ accomplishments in the classroom (Heafner & Friedman, 2008). In both cases, teachers are demonstrating their knowledge (i.e. teaching) differently than they expect students to demonstrate knowledge (i.e. through assessment), creating conflicts or even contradictions at the heart of the learning process. Although “teaching to the test” is often frowned upon, this instructional approach should instead only be viewed as problematic when the assessment itself is problematic (Whetten, 2007). In an ideal world, teaching and assessment are aligned

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7305-0.ch007

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and founded on solid learning theories; however, since testing is often more maligned than teaching, educational reform has often sought to replace assessments without ensuring that other teaching elements are adjusted properly. The result is that some educators “begin at the end”—they adopt new and improved assessments but ultimately create new problems because they haven’t designed their courses to emphasize those improvements (Love, McKean, & Gathercoal, 2004, p. 24).

In the field of teacher education, portfolios are one of the most promising results of the search for improved assessments. Since their emergence in the 1980s, advocates of teaching portfolios have spoken of their usefulness for varied purposes and in diverse contexts. That is not to say there is no downside to portfolio-based assessment, even for its advocates. Like any other form of assessment, educators must support portfolio assessment with appropriate curricular and pedagogical strategies. Therefore, every promising feature of a portfolio entails potentially more changes educators have to make to ensure that those promises are fulfilled. Even if educators only focus on those features of portfolios that are most important for their particular context, the wide variety of ways that portfolios are used can make it difficult to know what other changes need to be made.

Portfolios may be used in many different contexts, spanning from the level of individual courses or teacher education programs (Zeichner & Wray, 2001) to entire states and countries (Wolf & Dietz, 1998). In fact, there is such wide range of uses for portfolios that Bartell, Kaye, and Morin (1998) described the portfolio as having been used “at every phase of teacher development” (p. 5); therefore, it is important to explain the context from which this chapter has emerged. For the last several years, we have been involved in helping teachers develop portfolios as part of the Master of Arts in Education (MAED) and Master of Arts in Educational Technology (MAET) programs at Michigan State University, which require a portfolio in the same way that many other master’s programs require a thesis (DeSchryver, Leahy, Koehler, & Wolf, 2013). Just as master’s students may be required to take a certain number of credits to complete their thesis work, MAED and MAET students must enroll in a *capstone portfolio course* to complete this program milestone; however, unlike many thesis credit requirements, the capstone course is a fairly structured class with specific lessons and homework assignments designed to guide teachers through the process of creating a portfolio.

From our extensive experience with capstone portfolio courses, we have come to understand effective practices for helping teachers develop portfolios; the objective of this chapter is to synthesize theory and draw from this experience in order to identify and describe seven *pretty good practices* for structuring courses like the capstone portfolio course. A number of researchers have bemoaned the lack of empirical evidence on the use of portfolios, especially digital portfolios (Abrami & Barrett, 2005; Evans & Powell, 2007; Pechione, Pigg, Chung, & Souviney, 2005; Tosh, Light, Fleming, & Haywood, 2005; Zeichner & Wray, 2001). This chapter is, unfortunately, no exception to this lack of empiricism. While we have drawn upon empirical studies in developing these pretty good practices, we have not yet tested the practices empirically. Future work on effective practices for portfolio courses would benefit from further understanding of how portfolios are currently being used in the field and from empirical testing of proposed practices. We hope that this synthesis of existing theory into pretty good practices will serve as an invitation and foundation for future empirical work in this field.

We have intentionally chosen to refer to *pretty good practices* in this chapter. *Best practices* are commonly discussed in educational circles, and they serve as an inspiration for this work. However, as Zeichner and Wray (2001) have pointed out, teaching portfolios are used in so many ways that it is difficult, even inadvisable, to talk about them in general terms. Chickering and Gamson (1987) have likewise suggested “the ways different institutions implement good practice depends very much on their

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