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Documenting professional practice through the use of a professional portfolio

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Many early childhood practitioners use pedagogical documentation as an important process that enables children's thinking to be represented in a form that can be readily shared with others (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999). Documentation in the form of a professional portfolio provides a vehicle for reflection and an appreciation of the complexities and ambiguities of professional practice in the human professions. The nursing and teaching professions have also embraced professional portfolios as a means through which accountability to self and to others can be judged. However, it is the fusion of process and product within professional portfolio development that enables those involved in the human professions to examine, reflect on, understand, explain and further develop their professional practice. It is through this interrogation of practice that we can not only gain insight into our capabilities but also the theories, beliefs and values that underpin the wisdom of our professional practices. The process of professional portfolio development can be enriching and empowering. An outline for organizing a professional portfolio is provided.

Keywords: *Professional documentation; Early childhood teachers; Professional portfolio; Professional practice; Reflection; Self-inquiry*

Many early childhood practitioners use pedagogical documentation to record under-standings about children's thinking and learning. Documentation provides a systematic way of interrogating children's meaning making and of interpreting and challenging children's learning processes (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999, pp 146-148). The process of documentation requires reflections on and analysis of practice.

In a similar way, learning portfolios have been used within undergraduate pro-grammes in teacher education and in nursing as a tool for self-inquiry and as a form of assessment. At one university, student teachers were required to prepare and then defend the portfolios that they developed from entries in their reflective journals through the final year of their degree programme (Woodward, 1998). In another programme, practicing teachers were required to develop a portfolio as a pro-fessional experience requirement in which they reviewed the extent to which their practices met professional standards (Goodfellow, 2000). Professional nurses' port-folios are being used in a number of countries to document professional develop-

ment over time and provide a means through which accountability to self and to others can be assessed (Bell, 2001). Professional portfolios provide a way of not only getting inside practice but interrogating those practices through gaining insight into one's thinking and professional decision making (Goodfellow, 1995; Darling, 2001).

Introduction

A teacher education student, having completed her professional portfolio recorded her reflections on the process:

> I found it an interesting journey to map, document, and validate who I am as a professional in this field, and to realize the many skills and abilities that I possess. It has also been an exhilarating experience to learn of the respect that I have from colleagues and families that I have worked with … This portfolio has helped me to appreciate my growth and development in the teaching profession, and has helped to consolidate my concept of who I am as a teacher.

> The portfolio that I have completed holds a collection of my work as a professional in the field of early childhood education. It demonstrates my skills and abilities and offers documents and photos as validation of my professional experience. I consider this portfolio to be a dynamic document that will grow and change along with my journey as an early childhood professional. Working in a sphere that is often not recognized as a profession, nor it's members valued, this professional portfolio has renewed my faith in the vital role that we play in the education field and will help to validate that role. (Anita)

I have largely been influenced in my promotion of portfolio development as a professional activity by the following:

- my awareness of what I call the changing face of early childhood education and the need for a different profile of the early childhood educator than what has been expected and accepted in the past (Goodfellow, 2002);
- my understandings about the nature of reflection (Schon, 1983; 1987; Zeichner, 1999);
- the use of professional journal writing as a process of reflective activity (Holly, 1997; Janesick, 1999);
- literature about teacher's professional lives and studies of learning to teach (Beattie, 1997; Wideen *et al.*, 1998);
- understandings drawn from research and personal experience with student teachers and cooperating teachers responsible for student teachers (Goodfellow, 1995);
- insights gained from innovative programmes for young children (Dahlberg *et al.*,1999).

Recently Zeichner (1999) wrote briefly about studies of learning to teach in which he identified 'how difficult it is to change the tacit beliefs, understandings and worldviews that students bring to teacher education programmes' (p. 11). Zeichner's comments echo those made by Wideen *et al.* (1998) who, after reviewing 93 empirical studies on learning to teach formed the view that:

> programmes of teacher education … must be created to assist beginning teachers to

examine their beliefs and to understand how to support new practices that are consistent with their changed beliefs. (p. 169)

My initial intention in setting professional portfolio development as a course unit requirement within a professional study programme was to enable practitioners to document elements of their practice, to become analytical of those practices and to develop an appreciation of their role as early childhood professionals. The students in this programme already had teaching qualifications but were undertaking study to gain a specialist Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) degree. However, as I reflect on one student's entry in her professional portfolio I am reminded of the struggle in which many of the students engaged as they tried to individually and collectively decide how to approach the task that I had placed before them. The student wrote in her reflections:

> When first embarked on this process I felt somewhat overwhelmed by the thought of what to document and how to validate my work as an early childhood professional. (Mary)

I have been challenged by the range of responses in the students' evaluations of the unit because of the varying degrees of struggle reflected in their comments. Like Anita, some students were exhilarated by the process, others saw little purpose in preparing a professional portfolio and were critical of it *overlapping with other subjects* and finding the requirements to be *unclear, confusing* and *not relevant to practice*. My assessment of the portfolios reflected a similar range in students' understandings of the purpose in preparing a professional portfolio. Some students conveyed their excitement about the process of self-reflection—an honouring of themselves and the 'artistry' of their work through the way they submitted their portfolio. Other students were less able to bring a sense of cohesion and insightfulness to their portfolio development.

Yes, it was a journey for both the students and me. Most often, that journeying occurred in uncharted waters for I had presented the students with a challenge that they had not experienced before. I had previously worked with students who had kept professional journals and while I was not aware of it at the time, I had a sense that the professional portfolio represented reflections on and analysis of the social construction of professional practice not readily pursued through journaling. I perceived that a portfolio of self within professional practice had potential in illuminating the nature of that practice. While I provided the students with ideas, I did not give them a particular plan or model to follow. Just as a journal is personal, I also consider that a professional portfolio is personal. I wanted to leave the options open for students to create something that reflected themselves and who they are as professionals. Unwittingly, I was attempting to avoid imposing my own social constructions on the process.

The baggage that the students carried with them as they journeyed through the development of their professional portfolios was varied. They were a unique group of students in that they held teaching positions in schools that reflected a particular educational philosophy. Some students had been teaching for a number of years,

others for only a limited time. Some were mature age; others were more recent school leavers. Students came from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The extent to which the students were able to identify the nature and content of their baggage varied considerably. Some students had labelled their baggage in that they already had a particular view of themselves as learners and practitioners (i.e. prior beliefs); they carried with them their expert knowledge and the meanings that they assigned to their professional practices. Other students had much greater difficulty in linking new and old ideas; still others appeared to be limited and constrained by a sense of the place they were going and how they were going to get there. It was these students who seemed to be more focused on meeting a set of external standards that were implied as well as made explicit within the programme of study. They appeared to have difficulty in accepting the need to look at themselves and their practices—they described their work but provided little reflection on those practices.

I had planned for each student's journey to be one of mapping and self-discovery. I had thought of a professional portfolio as a way of encouraging (developing) professionals to engage, reflect on and analyse their professional practices. My aim was to enable these developing professionals to gain a sense of self-empowerment and professional autonomy through the process. I was focused on promoting meaningful professional growth through documentation and reflection (Zeichner & Wray, 2001).

The professional portfolio as a reflection of the 'self'

A professional portfolio is a planned and organized collection of artefacts and reflections on those professional qualities and practices that illustrate who one is as a professional. As a product, the portfolio can be described as a file (even an electronic or multimedia file) or folder that contains a collection of artefacts (reflecting values and beliefs) and displays professional practices and research of that practice. It may also include attestations by peers as well as other forms of documentation of work practices.

The development of professional portfolio requires a fusion of both process and product (Winsor, 1998). The process provides for examination and reflection through the unfolding of one's understanding about teaching and learning (Darling, 2001). One student explained the nature of the process this way:

> Just choosing what to put in the professional portfolio after collecting so many things over 8 months was hard because I wanted to make it as visual and balanced in all aspects of teaching while being as reflective as possible. [I have realized that] it is a dynamic and continuous piece of work that will never be finished as long as I am a teacher of young children. (Diana)

The process of professional portfolio development may also be considered to be a 'powerful technique in assisting the professional to attain skills of critical thinking' (Matthews-Smith *et al.*, 2001, p. 79) requiring what Schon (1983) describes as reflection-on-action. However, documentation of reflection can be difficult, particu-

larly when the focus of such documentation is the 'self'. Jane, one of the students wrote in her journal:

> I relate well to other staff and have created a happy and harmonious work environment. However, at times I find it difficult to assert myself and this lack of ability affects my effectiveness as a team leader. (Jane)

Personal reflections on practices are an important aspect of portfolio development as they provide interpretative comments in relation to both the attributes and the artefacts included in the portfolio (Bell, 2001).

Anita, in her reflective comment referred to earlier, wrote about her portfolio as 'a collection of my work' just as an artist may refer to an exhibition as a collection of their works of art. It is in preparing for the exhibition that the artist or the professional makes judgments about the quality of their work. Those making the professional judgments have a sense of quality from the inside—a critical appreciation of professional practice (Fish, 1998). Students were encouraged to think critically about the values, traditions, beliefs and assumptions that underlie professional practice and to honour their capabilities and abilities in relation to such practice. The process requires meaning making. That is, critical appreciation is concerned with making explicit, the tacitness of professional knowledge in practice. That explicitness was sought through the students' documentation.

Professional documentation provides an opportunity to 'get inside' professional practice (Goodfellow, 1995; Darling, 2001). To study (professional) practice is to study the self and the self in relationships with others (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Anita explored her own understandings as she engaged in critical appreciation of her practice and wrote in her portfolio:

> I believe that I demonstrate a warm and caring attitude through the genuine affection that I show the children, through my body language and facial expression, listening to them, and ensuring that I interact with them at eye level …
>
> I think that my ability to maintain children's sense of wonder and curiosity lies in my sincere interest in their learning and in supporting their endless willingness to investigate and explore. I also feel that by modelling curiosity, asking open-ended questions or simply wondering what will happen next often captures children's interests and initiatives in their learning. By ensuring that children's experiences are relevant, age appropriate and enjoyable I find that I am able to foster each child's ability to think creatively.
>
> I enjoy spending time with the children just sitting, listening and sharing in their interests. From these interactions I am able to build a rapport with each child and become acquainted with his or her individual needs and interests. With this knowledge I can build on making learning more relevant and meaningful in his or her life. This can often mean finding a special book to extend an inquiry, taking a photo of a special event, recording an individual thought, or arranging a special visit or excursion. (Anita)

Here Anita looks at herself and her practices. She readily describes herself within a relationship with children and the strategies that she employs in that engagement as part of being a professional.

The nature of being a professional

'Being' is about the living and experiencing of the self. I am reminded here of the use of the metaphor of an iceberg to depict the nature of the hidden dimensions of professional practice (Fish, 1998). Only one-third of the iceberg can be seen above the surface. What happens above the surface is evident in our actions. However, we are also involved in very complex decision-making as we go about those actions. The two-thirds of the iceberg that lie below the surface level of the water represent the deeper dimensions or tacitness of our thoughts and actions and, the values and beliefs that influence out actions. These intrapersonal qualities that include feelings and attitudes, are represented in what the professionals I have worked with referred to as style or know-how (Goodfellow, 1995).

The image of an iceberg as professional practice should not be seen as a solid fixed structure for being, living and experiencing do not exist in isolation from the self, its context or the environment. The iceberg changes its form as it floats and drifts within a contextual sea of time and place. It is influenced by and itself influences the environment within which it is situated. It has dark sides indicative of the unknown, penetrable cracks and crevices, hidden dangers where one may need to take risks - and yet, the iceberg conveys a sense of strength and powerfulness. Personal qualities and experience lie below the surface of our doing. Professional practice draws on these dimensions as well as our theoretical/professional knowledge as we engage in decision-making within our everyday practices. However, studies of learning to teach indicate the difficulty in changing tacit values, beliefs and attitudes, and understandings (Zeichner, 1999) Therefore, it is important to address the hidden qualities and dimensions of our professional practice if we are to improve our way of professional being. One way of addressing this is through the process of preparing a professional portfolio. The following provides an outline of the guidance given to students in the programme in which Anita was enrolled.

What should be included in a professional portfolio?

The elements of a professional portfolio include artefacts and other forms of documentation, such as belief statements and attestations that provide an exposition of personal attributes.

Artefacts and other documents

One of the most crucial areas in portfolio development is the selection of artefacts (Wyatt & Looper, 1999). It is important to consider both relevance and variety in the selection of items to be included in the professional portfolio. Each of the documents must be accompanied by a caption and a written reflection that both interprets and explains the basis upon which the item has been selected and what it is intended to demonstrate.

Documents to be included in the professional portfolio of an early childhood teacher may include examples of work such as:

- photographs and interpretative statements about teaching/learning;
- records and interpretations of children's work as a demonstration of particular practices supported by the teacher;
- examples of classroom organisation and planning for children's learning;
- abstracts of articles or papers presented by the teacher at workshops/seminars;
- records of staff planning meetings in which the teacher has taken a major role;
- evidence of communication with parents (and statements from parents about aspects of the teacher's work);
- invitations to participate in community networks as a representative of the profession.

Samples of work or other related material in each of the sections must include captions. The caption should address the five W's—who, what, when, where, and why. In recording why the artefact has been included it is important that the comments:

- provide insight into the importance of including the particular artefact;
- are reflective; and
- refer to what has been learnt as a result of this event.

Artefacts should provide convincing evidence. That evidence must be presented in an integrated way within the portfolio. One of the ways in which the material can be organized is through a structured approach that commences with the identification of professional attributes.

Professional attributes

If the professional portfolio is to be a reflection of self in relation to those attributes that are valued by the profession then the attributes relating to a particular profession may be drawn from relevant sources such as competency standards, codes of practice or proficiencies indicative of registration criteria.

Attributes should be organized and grouped under headings within relevant sections of the portfolio. In identifying particular attributes that are valued by the profession and how each attribute is demonstrated in practice, professionals are involved in making judgments. They need to make decisions about what to focus on and what to include in their portfolio and so become involved in the process of interpreting those attributes within the context of their own practices. Further, they make statements about their work (which is set within interpersonal relationships) and, provide examples of and reflections on their practices. This process has the potential to tap into the wisdom of professional practice. For example, one student recorded an incident in her journal where she felt a child's decision to engage in a particular activity had been usurped by another child and supported by another teacher. The student wrote her reflections on this event in her journal and recorded how she managed the situation. She used this example in her portfolio to illustrate how her philosophy statement referring to fairness and providing children with a

sense of security was implemented in practice. It provided insights into the wisdom of her practices.

Wisdom refers to a way of knowing that involves expert knowledge (including personal/professional, theoretical and practical knowledge) and sound judgment. It has reflective, affective, and experiential qualities as well as a moral/ethical dimension (Goodfellow, 2001). Feldman (1997) argues that teaching is a way of being and that:

> the wise practitioner (is) one who can draw upon and add to a wide set of knowledge, can use that knowledge and professional experience to deliberate about and reflect on practice, and as one who can act widely within educational situations by relying on a growing and deepening understanding of what it means to teach and be a teacher. (p. 758)

Belief statements

In early childhood education, the portfolio should provide documentation that identifies and reflects a set of belief statements (or philosophies) that address such things as:

- approaches to teaching and learning;
- record keeping including programme planning and development;
- strategies to evaluate teaching/learning and programme development;
- statements concerning inclusion of children with additional needs and, diversity;
- parent/professional liaison;
- community involvement, consultations with other professionals etc.;
- self-assessment, professional development of self and support given to others in order to enhance their professional expertise;
- new initiatives or improvements in relationships both within the profession and between the professional and the wider community.

These belief statements reflect the hidden dimensions of practice that are alluded to in the iceberg metaphor referred to earlier in this article.

Attestations

Attestations from others about the professional's work may also be included if they make reference to particular attributes. They may include:

- sample letters from other professionals or parents indicating satisfaction with particular aspects of professional practice;
- written comments from peers/supervisor(s) or external evaluators;
- certificate(s) indicating participation in relevant workshops.

In brief, the professional portfolio describes (and provides evidence of) the professional's philosophy, abilities and accomplishments as well as personal aspirations in relation to the role of the professional.

Organizing the professional portfolio

Just as it is important to prepare an outline when undertaking any research writing so too is it important to begin with an outline when preparing a professional portfolio. The professional attributes referred to earlier are only a suggestion about how to approach the development of the portfolio. They are designed to enable those commencing portfolio development, to get started on the process. However, even before writing commences, it is important to have an outline. The outline should identify key points to be addressed when focusing on, conveying, or revealing professional expertise and how this expertise may be validated. It may be helpful to commence with a written philosophical statement about personal professional practices and consider the ways in which documentation that 'attests' to those practices can be provided. Such notations will assist in thinking about the organization of the portfolio.

One student chose the following groupings from the Australian Early Childhood Association's Code of Ethics (Stonehouse, 1998) to organize her portfolio:

- Professional goals;
- Professional development;
- The classroom context—classroom management , classroom environment;
- Individual planning;
- Teaching experiences and relationships with children;
- Parent and family communication;
- Staff relationships;
- Professional community;
- Reflections and future goals.

The portfolio is a professional presentation. Therefore, it should not only meet professional expectations with regard to organization and selection of physical components (for example, paper, text type and type of file/folder), but it should also mirror an individual's philosophy and style. Sections within the professional portfolio should reflect the major attributes that the professional has identified as being relevant to their professional expertise and to the attributes that they have identified. The sections within the portfolio should be readily linked so that they subsequently provide a holistic view of the professional as an individual.

Wyatt & Looper (1999) advise that:

> The style of language, sentence structure, introductory and closing paragraphs, spelling accuracy, colourful words, analogies, and narrative clarity influence the evaluator's opinion about your level of development … Just as the physical constructs of the portfolio reflect who you are, so does your language. (p. 72)

The language used to describe professional qualities is in itself a revelation of personal qualities and attributes.

Conclusions

Documentation of and reflection on professional work within and through a professional portfolio may serve a number of purposes including opportunities to:

- demonstrate, display and highlight aspects of one's own practice in relation to those practices that are valued by the profession;
- provide analytical and interpretative records of reflection on practices and so enhance the skills of critical thinking;
- identify professional growth and establish a basis for furthering one's own professional development;
- document the purposefulness of one's work as a professional.

When presenting a (personal) professional portfolio the professional presents material that characterizes themselves and distinguishes their practices, values and beliefs from those of another professional in the same field. Documentation of professional practice not only enables a developing professional to reflect on their practices but also provides a testament to those practices in ways that are enriching and empowering. That is, it can be a tool that provides a context for 'reflection-with-action'. If education is to be designed for understanding (Gardner, 1999) then the professional portfolio provides an essential element in that process. It can serve as documented evidence of one's thinking about professional action and of the processes is which one engages as a professional.

Wideen *et al.* (1998) recommended that if teacher education programmes were intended to bring about change in beliefs and assumptions about teaching held by student teachers then those programmes should engage students in 'deliberative exploration' of those beliefs and in reflection over extensive periods of time. Students were challenged through both coursework and practice to confront their traditional ways of being and to apply other ways of thinking about professional practices and documenting these. I had initially encouraged student exploration of practices through requiring them to write their own statements of personal philosophy, to keep a professional journal and to identify three professional goals. I had believed that these deliberative activities would support them through the early stages of reflection and so form a basis for developing those strategies required in the development of a professional portfolio. I responded to their writing by seeking clarification and/or requiring further reflection on incidents (where appropriate), and writing supportive comments. However, not all students found the process to be meaningful and satisfying. For these students, further exploration of the nature of their personal/professional 'iceberg' may have been helpful but opportunities to do this were constrained by time and my own availability.

While several students found it difficult to engage in a critical appreciation of their practices, I sensed that Anita, in her recorded reflection on the process, was beginning to display what may be described as an ontological appreciation of her practices. That is, not only an understanding of the knowledge and expertise that informed her professional practice but the values, attitudes and beliefs that underpinned that practice. In addition, she seemed to be able to convey a real insight into her thinking and an appreciation of herself as a professional and this, says Darling (2001) requires 'a critical eye, an inquiring spirit, and careful judgment' (p. 118).

Researching self within the context of professional portfolio development reflects an approach within which professionals examine themselves. As Bogdan and Biklen

(1992) explain, the role that the professional plays in the preparation of a portfolio is similar to that of a key informant for a researcher. In this case, however, the researcher is the self. Portfolio development requires the professional to see through the surface practice and into the often tacit dimensions of what underlies those practices. This was quite challenging for students. Many students found that their statements of philosophy were helpful in setting a foundation upon which they could elaborate on their practices. However, other students showed little evidence of addressing new understandings of those practices that had been introduced to them. It was these students who particularly required more dialogical approaches to journal writing and more extensive monitoring of the development of their professional portfolios. I wished to encourage all students to:

> think deeply about what I teach children and why I teach what I teach … [and to] … conquer a challenge that I [initially] thought was unachievable. (Mary)

Insightfulness, reflection and critical appreciation can lead to furthering ontological appreciation. As Evelyn explains:

> The development of a portfolio has helped me to evaluate my professional self with respect to my philosophy, my abilities and my accomplishments, and helped me to see who I am as a teacher, and how others view my work. It has helped me to articulate some of my attributes, my skills and my abilities with respect to my work and my relationships with children, parents, colleagues and other professionals.
>
> It is my hope that this will not remain a static document. I hope to change and add to it as I grow professionally in my journey as an early childhood teacher, for it will be an ongoing testimony of my acquired knowledge, skills, practice and personal attributes as an early childhood professional. (Evelyn)

In the current climate of change and the importance being placed on reflection, critical thinking and knowing about the 'self' as a professional working within relationships, the professional portfolio provides a tool for self-inquiry. The exposition of the hidden dimensions of practice through the development of professional portfolios has the potential to lead to empowerment of those involved in the human professions.

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