1-1-2008

Authentic Performance Assessment: Informing Candidates, Faculty and Programs

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Academic Leadership Journal

Introduction

In our quest for authentic performance assessment of our teacher education candidates, our institution embarked on a journey to develop effective tools. This article highlights the portfolio segment of our trip. While not a straight path, we have reflected and learned with each turn. We have arrived at a place that we feel provides our education unit with rich data regarding the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of our candidates.

Portfolios have been viewed as an authentic form of assessment and have long been created by teaching candidates as part of the requirements of teacher education programs. According to Campbelle, Cignetti, Melenyzer, Nettles, and Wyman (2004) a portfolio can be defined as documentation that is organized and goal-driven proof of professional growth and competence. Kilbane and Milman (2003) indicate the strong legacy portfolios have in both learning and teaching experiences. Numerous authorities tout the value of portfolio development, both to the individual creator and to outside audiences (Grant & Huebner, 1998; Lyons, 1998; Meyer & Tusin, 1999; Ryan, Cole, & Mathies, 1997; Schulman, 1998). The process of collecting and reflecting is integral to any portfolio process, increasing student engagement in the entire teacher education program.

Traditionally portfolios have been constructed with paper and pencil, however, technology now permits digital portfolios the capacity to electronically store artifacts in a more compact fashion. Electronic portfolios allow candidates to showcase their cutting edge technology skills. Kovalchick, Milman, and Elizabeth (1998) state, “a technology portfolio is similar to a traditional portfolio, but it specifically addresses technology skills and issues. Also, the medium is different since it is organized using a combination of electronic media such as hypermedia programs, database, spreadsheet, and word processing software, as well as CD-ROMs and the World Wide Web” (p. 4). Electronic portfolios cannot only save space, but also showcase the many dimensions of learning that occurs during a candidate’s academic journey (Tuttle, 1997). Further, Cradler, McNabb, Freeman, and Burchett (2002) assert that the use of technology can influence achievement, higher-order thinking and problem solving skills, and prepare candidates for the workplace.

Used as an assessment instrument, the portfolio can be a powerful guide (Doolittle, 1994). The portfolio focuses and guides candidates on expectations across the entire teacher preparation program. The portfolio also raises candidate awareness and gives candidates a meaningful, first-hand experience with the applied use of both standards and technology to enable authentic assessment mechanisms. As an easy-to-maintain, living document that communicates a candidate’s growth, competencies, and reflections at given checkpoints, the electronic portfolio serves as a tool for professional development and self-management beyond the university classroom. The digital portfolio facilitates a sense of empowerment, choice, and accountability for the candidate, as well as the institution’s faculty.

The teacher preparation programs benefit by utilizing this portfolio assessment system as a basis for
continuously improving programs. Candidates also benefit, as Johnson, Mims-Cox, and Doyle-Nichols assert by “encouraging learners to shift from playing a passive role in assessment and evaluation...to an active role...” (2006). The assessment process can be wrought with challenges, as full implementation of the use of a system-wide portfolio system occurs. This article highlights our authentic assessment journey from an administrative perspective, providing insight to issues, requirements, implementation, benefits, transformation to what is in place today, and thoughts for the future.

Issues

Initiating a unit-wide candidate portfolio requirement reached consensus much quicker as compared to the lengthy discussions regarding the specific required portfolio artifacts which should be included. Faculty felt artifacts needed to represent the breadth and depth of the institution’s conceptual framework. The requirements were tweaked as the institution evaluated and analyzed the quality of the work submitted by candidates. In addition to serving as a growth and reflection tool for the creator (McKinney, 1998; Ryan, Cole, & Mathies, 1997), portfolios served the teacher education programs by providing critical performance assessment data. As requirements were discussed and negotiated by faculty, emphasis was placed on aligning artifact selections to the unit’s conceptual framework. This alignment was vital to our accreditation process, as teacher education programs are held accountable to outside accrediting bodies. The multipurposes of portfolio use for candidates, faculty, administration, and accrediting agencies made them a viable and integral part of our quality performance data.

Portfolio Requirements

The educational unit had natural checkpoints already in place where candidates were assessed based on set criteria. Adding unit-wide portfolio requirements was logical at each of the three established checkpoints. The first checkpoint was when candidates applied for admission to teacher education. Candidates had to complete a minimum number of general education courses and prescribed pre-professional coursework, achieve a minimum grade point average, and achieve minimum cut scores on an admission test (The PreProfessional Skills Test or the ACT). In addition to these requirements, candidates were required to input the following artifacts into their portfolios:

Checkpoint 1 – Admission to Teacher Education

- Autobiographical Information
- Resume
- Reflective Writing Piece on Teaching as a Career Option (Candidates asked themselves, “Why do I want to be a Teacher?”

At the end of Checkpoint 1, candidates shared their portfolio with their advisor. Advisors worked with the candidate to make any needed changes before signing off on the candidate’s admission application to teacher education.

The second checkpoint was upon successful completion of all required teacher education coursework. Candidates were preparing to enter the student teaching semester. Artifacts included items completed in methodology and professional education courses. The requirements included:

...
Checkpoint 2 – Admission to Student Teaching

- Technology-rich lesson plan
- Diverse needs documentation
- Learning theories documentation
- Education philosophy
- Reflection on professional growth
- Classroom artifacts of student learning

Elementary candidates again submitted their portfolios to their advisors for evaluation prior to being admitted to the student teaching semester. Since some of the needed artifacts were developed in classes taken during the semester prior to student teaching, candidates submitted their application early in the semester to facilitate the student teaching placement process and turned in portfolio documentation at the end of the semester.

The third checkpoint occurred upon completion of the entire teacher education program including the student teaching semester.

Checkpoint 3 – End of Student Teaching – Program Completion

- Personal accomplishments and honors

- Teacher Work Sample (Fort Hays Performance Assessment)

The Teacher Work Sample is worthy of detail. This authentic assessment was built into our teacher preparation program to provide a mechanism for candidates to detail the entire teaching process. Emphasizing student learning, the work sample was designed based on the work of the Renaissance Group (http://www.uni.edu/itq/). It also was intended to build a level of support during our undergraduate program to prepare candidates for a similar state post-graduation requirement.

Implementation

Faculty

While the elementary education program had utilized portfolio assessment in individual courses, the secondary content program use had been more sporadic. No program used the portfolio as a tool throughout the entire academic career of candidates. Thus, the implementation of the electronic portfolio requirement was designed with the concept of program-wide applicability. Email communication became a vital link in keeping everyone informed as we moved forward. Staff development training sessions were vital in the pre-implementation stages of this process. An integral part of this training was the inclusion of several student representatives. Their input was vital throughout the implementation process providing a critical perspective. A follow-up questionnaire was electronically sent to all training participants requesting feedback on the concept of electronic portfolios as well as the training session. Additionally, a faculty member was assigned to oversee the process.
and keep abreast of new technologies.

Two staff development-training sessions were held for unit faculty. These brown-bag luncheons provided an informal atmosphere for discussions about relevant portfolio issues. The first session dealt with overall requirements of the electronic portfolio, while the second semester’s focus was on assessment of the electronic portfolio. Staff development was a vital part of the implementation process.

A Portfolio Handbook (Mercer, Danner-Kuhn, & Slattery, 2001) was created detailing requirements, procedures, and other information candidates might need to successfully create their portfolio for our institution. It was available to candidates in both paper form and electronically on the teacher education web site.

Candidates

Preparing candidates for the implementation a unit-wide portfolio system can be a challenge (Barrett, 2000; Meyer & Tusin; 1999). Laying the foundation for success amid frustration is a task faculty must embrace. Our institution accomplished this is a variety of ways. Key faculty highlighted the template-driven web environment by conducting a series of student introduction and information sessions. Additional training/information sessions were conducted in selected required courses. These sessions were followed by three work sessions in the computer laboratory with extensive technology support personnel available to assist.

Two candidates were employed by the college’s Instructional Resource Center serving as peer helpers. The resource center had available computers and other resource equipment, such as scanners and digital cameras, needed for the development of candidate’s portfolios. These peer helpers presented their in-progress portfolios to candidates in various teacher education courses. They served as peer resources to others working through the process focusing mainly on technology skills and hardware and software applications necessary to create the electronic portfolio. The gathering of artifacts and documentation occurred throughout the candidate’s education program, typically over a two-year period.

Assessment

The portfolio requirements are standards aligned, designed around the unit’s conceptual framework, state professional standards, and Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards. Each portfolio was evaluated three times during a candidate’s progress through the teacher preparation program. Assessment of the electronic portfolio evolved from a checklist of completion to a more sophisticated rubric. The rubric is completed by advisors and clinical supervisors. A teacher-work-sample has been added to help document lesson planning, assessment techniques, and P-12 student learning. This work sample has evolved and now encompasses many of the previous artifacts.

Benefits

There is no doubt the implementation of an authentic assessment process is valuable to our education unit. It allowed us to make connections among the courses and clinical experiences required in
candidate’s programs. It also acted as a catalyst for candidates to develop their higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The portfolio process can be a unifying force for all facets of teacher education programs. Faculty and candidates across all content and licensure areas collaborate in the development of portfolios, which models the collaborative nature of the education field.

Candidate Feedback

Twenty-seven candidates were surveyed concerning their perceived perceptions of their portfolio and the development process. The candidates were selected because they had completed the first checkpoint requirement and were in the process of completing the coursework and subsequent artifact requirements for the second checkpoint. None had yet begun their student teaching semester. These reflections on their electronic portfolio and the process of development are detailed in the following sections.

Candidates were asked: “What purpose does your portfolio serve?” The major purpose of their portfolio was to showcase their work. Candidates responded with “to show people my work and allow people to get to know me,” “to put together all the work that I have done in my education program,” and “it is representative of the quality of work that I can do.” Closely following was the reflection that the portfolio was constructed to meet requirements. Candidates knew they needed it to be accepted into teacher education, directed teaching, and ultimately to graduate. The knowledge of the electronic portfolio requirement was evident through the responses. Candidates also realized the potential of the portfolio as a job recruitment tool. Responses included “to help future employers see what I have accomplished and what I have to offer them as a teacher” and “It serves the purpose of finding a job for me. Hopefully, administrators will look at my portfolio and see that I am a hard worker.”

Table 1. Percent of responses to: What purpose does your portfolio serve?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Showcase work</td>
<td>29.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet program requirements</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job search aid</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson planning</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No purpose</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked, “Who is the audience for your portfolio?” candidates could answer with as many responses as desired. The major audience of the portfolio as perceived by candidates was university faculty. Candidates turned in various course assignments to their professors via the portfolio web site.
Future employers were also a perceived audience. Candidates indicated that they would be showing their electronic portfolio to potential employers when they began the job search process. Advisors, responsible for signing off on the quality of the portfolio at the various checkpoints, were also a perceived audience. Candidates worked with their major education advisor to develop and refine their portfolio. The final audience was classmates. Candidates shared their portfolios electronically with classmates in efforts to provide support during the process by offering their portfolio as a visual template. There were no responses indicating that the candidate constructed their portfolio for their own growth. Based on this information, faculty determined that the need to reexamine the uses for portfolios needed to be a stronger component of the beginning introductory course. This reexamination is ongoing as we search for the most productive method of documenting learning.

Table 2. Percent of responses to: Who is the audience for your portfolio?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>59.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>51.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classmates</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where from there?

The electronic portfolio did serve many needs for the education unit. However, as the teacher work sample was explored, implemented, and added to the portfolio, faculty began questioning the need for the other individual portfolio artifacts. Did we need a technology rich lesson plan if technology was addressed in the performance assessment? What was a resume telling us early in their career? If candidates were reflecting on student learning in their performance assessment, was a separate reflection needed on professional growth? These questions led to many discussions of what the education unit needed and what our candidates needed.

After much deliberation, the decision was made to eliminate the portfolio as it stood and focus on the teacher work sample, as our primary piece of authentic performance assessment. All programs, elementary and secondary, require the completion of a work sample during the student teaching semester. Additionally, the work sample is scaffolded throughout the program in the content methods courses. We do not view this transformation as eliminating something, but rather an evolution to a more concise document that met our needs and the needs of our candidates.

Summary

After a thorough review the transition from electronic portfolio to teacher work sample was made. Sections of the work sample performance assessment matched previously required. These items best
exemplified state and national standards and the institution’s conceptual framework. Candidates were responsible for completing sections of a work sample performance assessment in their methodology classes and then developing a complete work sample performance assessment during their student teaching semester. Candidates reflected on their growth and learnings throughout the process. There is much work to be done to meet our goal of documenting learning for candidates, faculty, and programs. Faculty at our institution feel the performance assessment is providing rich data regarding our candidate’s attainment of the knowledge, skills and dispositions developed in our teacher education program. Our hope is that candidates continue to use the work sample performance assessment to facilitate a sense of empowerment, choice and accountability.

References


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