Assessing pre-service teacher learning and professional competency through portfolios and roundtables:

Keeping an eye on the job

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This is a report of the final phase of an ongoing study into the potential of professional portfolio development as a form of reflection and assessment within a 4-year BEd program for primary teachers. The project began in 1998 and since that time has tracked a small group of pre-service teachers working each year on the production of teaching portfolios that demonstrate their ongoing learning in a wide range of teaching competencies. Drawing on theories of human subjectivity formed in and through social practices, this research has examined how pre-service teachers have been both empowered and limited in their creation of individual, unique ‘teaching selves’. In this final phase of the study, implementation of a culminating authentic assessment strategy - roundtables - is examined in relation to the goals of a pre-service teacher education program. In particular, there is a focus on how development of the pre-service teachers' professional knowledge and skills has been facilitated by portfolio development, and also on what 'other people' are able to assess of these teachers' capacities from their portfolios and roundtable sessions. In this way, the views and experiences of various stakeholders in teacher education are examined in relation to implementation of an innovative and flexible form of teacher assessment. In this paper we argue that the use of Professional Portfolios in teacher education has great potential for promoting educational change in: university teaching and assessment practices; the content and processes of teacher education curricula and school experience; and conceptions of what it means as a teacher to be ‘professional’.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of a study into pre-service teacher Professional Portfolios lies in the fact that in an education program there is a tension between development of the individual as a professional and the demands of a professional program that must ensure ‘technical competency’. Students engage in their education studies with their own histories, belief systems, goals, values, learning styles and world views, and therefore interact with learning experiences in many and sometimes unpredictable ways. At the same time, they all differ as to their initial degrees of attainment of
teaching competencies, and the rate at, or ways in which they achieve these competencies. Student Professional Portfolios developed over the pre-service program address these practical issues in that they support the education program in its intent to have students take responsibility for their own learning and development as life-long learners.

It is suggested in the literature that Portfolios will allow both breadth (for demonstration of competencies) and depth (with regard to individuals’ personal and professional growth and progress across four years). It is claimed that the Portfolio allows the demonstration of ‘professionalism’ in that the process of developing a Portfolio necessitates the recording and evaluation of activities, processes and related decisions that would characterise a professional teacher (Klenowski and Ledesma, 1997; Loughran and Corrigan, 1995; McLaughlin and Vogt, 1996). The Portfolio process brings together systematically and holistically the notions of reflection, assessment and evaluation, and professional competency, thereby mirroring goals and key issues related to undergraduate education. In addition, we see our Professional Portfolio research project having the following benefits. It will allow us to incorporate Professional Portfolios into our pre-service program so that models and theories of teacher growth (Frid et al., 1998) can be tested and refined. It will encourage the sharing of innovative research-oriented teaching practices implemented in our own classrooms. Also, it will encourage us to act as professional role models for pre-service teachers because we are ourselves engaging in action research and related professionalism.

This research is seen as a vehicle by which we can address an on-going challenge for teacher education. We are seeking ways to better prepare teachers to be technically competent in basic teaching skills, as well as professionally knowledgeable and capable in an increasingly diverse social, cultural, technical and economic environment. This is where the importance of our theoretical perspective is most acute. Traditional humanist views of human subjectivity, as in teacher socialisation theory (Nias 1989), suggest that the autonomous self selects behaviours, forms of language and attitudes on the basis of a rational consciousness which has the ability to choose between available alternatives. Poststructuralist theorists, on the contrary, suggest that human subjectivity is formed in and through practice, and that behaviours, attitudes, modes of speaking and acting are formed and structured in relationships of power and discourse (Foucault, 1992).

The Professional Portfolio as a means of reflection:

a theoretical perspective

There has been a long tradition of research in teacher education focussing on the teacher-researcher (Boomer, 1982; Green and Reid, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1990; Kincheloe, 1991), with an associated emphasis on 'reflective practice' as a means of both promoting and supporting professional growth (Francis, 1995; Holly, 1989; Schon, 1987). There is little doubt that the exercise of thinking back, reviewing and re-thinking instances of the pre-service experience in terms of their contributions to who we are as teachers has been beneficial to all of us in terms of evaluating the program of pre-service study we have made available to our students. We have already worked extensively with the journal in pre-service teacher education, researching its effectiveness as a technology for reflection (Reid, 1997), and remain convinced of the value that rethinking experience has for enhanced understanding of teaching. Concerned with the effects of teacher competency discourse in the curriculum of pre-service teacher education, we have been attracted to the increasing number of accounts of the use of various forms of a Professional Portfolio in teacher education. These include the work of Barton and Collins (1993), Loughran and Corrigan (1995), Bullough (1996), McLaughlin and Vogt (1996), Klenowski and Ledesma (1997), Lyons (1998) and Shulman (1998). Our interest lies in determining whether and to what extent the production of a Professional Portfolio can function in pre-service teacher education as an alternate
means of reflective practice, focused on the teacher self as a professional identity, rather than on everyday experience.

There are two related reasons for our interest in researching the introduction of a Professional Portfolio into the new BEd program at UNE at this time. The first is to do with reflective practice, and the second with the formation of the student teacher as a ‘professional’ subject. Ongoing reflective practice on our own behalf is a practical way in which we can attend to the quality of our own teaching and our students’ learning. Introducing portfolio development as a technology for reflective practice shows promise as a means by which we might continue to research the professional growth of student teachers while simultaneously enhancing this growth. In addition, the scope of a Professional Portfolio allows for a wide array of related research concerns in teacher education to be addressed; in particular, issues regarding the role of the Practicum, integrated curriculum, the role of technology, and the relationships between competency and professionalism. These are all practical issues for us as teachers and they are all linked to and encompass the issue of reflective practice.

The second parallels this practical concern. It is a theoretical interest in exploring more carefully our understandings of teacher education as a process of the formation of a professional subject — a teacher-self (Reid, 1997). We are working with post-structuralist notions of human subjectivity that enable us to move beyond traditional constructivist accounts of learning where a pre-formed student self becomes more knowledgeable through engagement in the teaching-learning process. From this point of view reflection is seen as a useful process of clarifying or disclosing the 'self' in action, in ways that will allow for rational change (improvement) in future action. The problem for us, here, is that this 'self' always pre-exists experience. As Foucault (1988, p. 22) explains, in the modernist view of the rational, thinking subject, "knowledge of oneself constitutes the fundamental principle" or "the first step in the theory of knowledge". However such a modernist understanding of a rational subject is no longer a sufficient or useful basis on which to conceptualise the practice of teaching and learning. We find the idea of human subjectivity as diffuse, multiple and always ‘under construction’ much more useful for teacher education. The teaching self is not singular, or ‘essential’ (Henriques et al., 1994). It will be produced differently in different circumstances. With the benefit of post-structuralist theory, teacher education can be understood, like schooling, as ‘a practice producing subjects’. It is concerned with the formation of particular forms of ‘teaching’ subjects, in and for particular contexts. Student teachers are to be constructed as knowledgeable and capable educational agents (Green and Reid, 1995; Reid, 1997).

The attraction of the Professional Portfolio in such a theoretical context is clear. The notion of the Portfolio as a "living" document, a "record of a teacher’s practice selected for a particular purpose" (SCTP, 1997, p. 3) goes beyond any sense of an essential teaching self. The Portfolio is "a story told by the teacher", structured according to "the particular purpose for which the portfolio is being prepared" (SCTP, 1997, p. 5). It is thus an exemplary instance of a teaching-self constructed, or compiled, within a particular situation of practice. The Portfolio, like the journal, requires the student teacher to engage in self-evaluation and reflection. However this reflection is explicitly about "evidence" of their teaching development (Klenowski and Ledesma, 1997, p. 18). It takes the form of "a short reflective commentary" (SCTP, 1997, p. 7) on selected examples of work. Evaluating and commenting on any of the range of appropriate evidence of their learning and teaching offers teachers an opportunity to “draw on a wider frame of reference” and “evaluate and rethink their experiences”, in Hamilton’s (1990) terms, or to "better see the links between" the items they select for inclusion (Loughran and Corrigan, 1995, p. 567). As Shulman (1998) notes, "a portfolio is a theoretical act":

By this I mean that every time you design, organize or create [...] a framework, or a model for a teaching portfolio, you are engaging in an act of theory. What is declared worth documenting, worth reflecting on, what is deemed to be portfolio-worthy, is a theoretical act. (Shulman, 1998, p. 24)
The Portfolio also might provide the student with a technology for distancing the ever presently-situated self from former selves, for designing or fashioning a desirable teaching-self based on the example of others, and for recognising change over time. In Foucaultian terms, this is clearly a technology of the self, which aims ultimately at self discipline and the benefits of self governance in line with the assumptions of truth and normality produced in different discourses (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). Such a disciplinary technology is useful and necessary in and for the efficient constitution of the range of different and particular selves that need to be produced each time a new set of discursive practices is mastered (Gee, 1991). In the case of a portfolio used for a job interview, for instance, student teachers need to produce and compile a representation of themselves as the sort of teacher they imagine necessary for the particular situation of employment in the early twenty-first century. The Portfolio is a site where the student self can be re-constituted as a particular sort of teaching-self by 'putting out' what Gee (1991) describes as "the identity kit" of a particular employment situation.

When Shulman underlines the importance of the theoretical nature of the Portfolio, he makes a useful practical distinction between the notion of a teacher's filing cabinet and a teacher's Portfolios, in the following terms:

As teachers, we accumulate a great deal of documentation of our work. But depending on the case we have to make, we draw from the filing cabinet and create a particular portfolio. (Shulman, 1998, p. 37)

It is important for student teachers to have such a site and opportunity to rehearse and try on a range of new discursive positions, even if only tentatively and inadequately at first. They need a place to 'practice' being the Good Subject of their new profession. The teacher education setting can provide the guidance and collaboration that will allow student teachers to produce themselves as different sorts of teachers than the teachers they had in school. This is an important point for teacher education. Each unit within the pre-service program is developed on the assumption of a clientele that is more or less expert at doing 'school', and for whom traditional practices and social effects of schooling have not been debilitating, overly restricting, or particularly unpleasant. For these reasons, teacher education is often, therefore, "essentially a rhetorical activity, seeking to persuade students to change the way they experience the world" (Laurillard, 1993, p. 28). We need them to understand the need for, and imagine the possibility of, different ways of acting in the school setting. Our rhetoric within a particular curriculum unit of Maths, or English, then, is always designed to have particular effects on the students.

But this rhetoric is always designed initially as a one-way communication. For us as teachers preparing the 'message' of the course, the student, at the beginning, is "a general receiver, without too many individualised traits, not a real person but a fictionalised norm of a person" (Poster, 1984, p. 115). If she is to learn effectively, and achieve success in the course, then a particular form of self-discipline is needed. Poster goes on to claim that: "the receiver of the message must transform him or herself into the norm in order to comprehend the message as it was intended. The receiver must become the norm" (Poster, 1984, p. 115). The Portfolio a student teacher might compile for assessment within our course may be quite different from the Portfolio she would compile for an interview in a Steiner school, a large inner-city primary, a small two-teacher Area School in a rural community, or for inclusion in the Honours Program. The self that must be produced in each of these situations is demonstrably different, and it is important that the program provides student teachers with the opportunity to compile such a 'range' of teaching selves within the 'safety' of their pre-service education. This is the context for the action research project under discussion here.
THE RESEARCH PROCESS AND OUTCOMES

Portfolio development – the initial process

In 1998 we began a research project built on the notion of teaching as reflective practice and so designed to explore the notion of teachers as reflective practitioners. We took up the notion of the professional portfolio as a technology to assist (student) teachers to be reflective about their practice and professional development. We were attempting to find out how we, as teachers in a new 4-year undergraduate Bachelor of Education (Primary) could devise learning activities, tasks and forms of assessment that would accumulate over the duration of the program, so that student teachers could develop a record of their professional development as competent and reflective teachers.

We began in 1998 to work with volunteer students towards the end of their first year, to review the year as a whole, with emphasis on two compulsory units in which we were currently teaching: an integrated Maths/English/Science unit (CSST 190), and an introductory teaching and learning unit based on psychology (CSLT 180). These units both involved an associated school experience period. In that early reflection we concentrated on finding out what the students considered were the strengths and weaknesses of the program, and what suggestions they might have to help us rethink ways in which the first year experience might have been better for them. In addition to this, we introduced the idea of a professional portfolio, without explanation, and asked the students what they thought would be valuable to go into a Professional Portfolio from the work they had done during the year, what else they thought would be good to include in a Professional Portfolio, and what support they thought they would need to help develop such a Professional Portfolio over the rest of their course.

From this point we instigated and applied for funding for the Professional Portfolio Pilot Project in our institution. We were thus able to set up during the next year, weekly meetings with the Portfolio Group who volunteered to be part of the project. Simultaneously we were able to attempt to take what we had learned and continued to learn from their reflections back to our teaching, by programming together in CSST 190 and CSLT 180 to include in our curriculum, activities and content that we (and the second year students) considered would be helpful for the professional education of the first year students (Frid & Reid 2001; Reid & Frid 2000). In this paper, we focus only on the original Portfolio Group, and the ‘second cycle group’ will be mentioned only incidentally.

The research group

Seven students indicated their interest in taking part in the research: six women and one man (Rosalie, Maia, Jen, Kate, Melissa, Rikki, and Martin). In describing them here I want to pay tribute to their commitment and excellence as students, and to their loyalty to their original commitment. Involvement in this project has always been extra-curricular, until 2001 when we were able to offer a final year ‘Special Topic’ elective for students wishing to take part in the roundtable assessment. By this time, three of the original group were ineligible to enrol in the elective.

Over half of this group, three of the women (Rosalie, Maia and Jen) and Martin, the only male volunteer, were mature-age students. Rosalie was a highly motivated and well-organised student, wife of a prominent local figure and mother of three children in primary and secondary school. Maia had four children all still in primary school, and lived an hour and a half’s drive from the university in a small country town, where her husband was finding it increasingly difficult to support the family in the depressed rural economy. At the end of 2000, Maia and her husband lost their property and the family was forced to move in with his parents nearly four hours drive from the university. She boarded in Armidale during her final year. Martin was also a mature-aged student, attempting to change career after fifteen years as a salesman and mechanic. His wife had left her
job as a full time teacher to move the family, including two children, to Armidale for the duration of Martin’s course, and he found part time work to supplement her irregular earnings as a relief teacher in local schools. Jen had two primary aged children, one of whom was disabled. During the course of the study, Mel separated from her husband, and had to drop out of internal study for a year to find work to support her family. She was thus unable to complete the 2001 Professional Portfolio elective, while Martin and Rosalie, who had made accelerated progress within their degree programs as a result of having credit for several electives, were thus not eligible to enrol in an elective unit simultaneously with their Internship enrolment. All of these students were hard workers, extremely high achievers, and committed to completing their degrees and finding employment as quickly and efficiently as possible. They all considered that participation in the research might give them a competitive ‘edge’ over other students when looking for jobs at the end of their pre-service preparation.

The younger students, Kate, Melissa and Rikki, had all entered the BEd program under the Schools Referral Admissions Scheme (on ‘Principal’s Recommendation), an equity program at UNE which allows students from rural high schools the opportunity to study at university without necessarily having received the required tertiary entrance scores in their HSC examination. None of these students was academically strong, and Kate in particular lacked confidence in her ability. She joined the research group because she sat next to Maia in class, and they had worked together on several assignments, striking up a lasting and mutually beneficial friendship. Rikki and Melissa were interested in the idea of developing a portfolio, and joined the group early in 1999 when they heard other students talking about it.

Portfolio development – Year Two

In 1999 the students entered second year, and we planned the research to ensure that the students were familiar with each of the areas of competence outlined by both the NPQTL (1996) and the NSW standards of professional competence (1998). At each weekly meeting we discussed one of the five ‘areas’ of competence in the national standards document, and used the group to suggest what might be suitable for saving and filing in their portfolio file as ‘evidence’ for their having this sort of competence. Once the students became familiar with the competencies themselves, it became evident that they could view the assignments they were being asked to do within the course in a different way. Their reading assignment could allow them to demonstrate their competence at diagnosing and working with individual student needs, for instance; and their Integrated Curriculum assignment could allow them to demonstrate their competence to plan and teach a unit of work. They reported that they looked on these tasks differently – not just as hurdles, or ends in themselves, but as a means of practising and recording the increasing range of things they could do as teachers.

We decided that at the end of second year, the research group would present its work at as an exhibition of portfolios in progress, and each student was asked to present a display board (like an academic poster) that represented their own strengths as a teacher. The students chose a wide variety of foci and means of presentation. Rosalie, for instance, had great interest and skill in using IT in her work, and was taking an elective unit on multi-media for the classroom. She had remarked early in the year that by graduation at the end of fourth year she would probably have to have her own ‘portfolio home page’ in order to be up-to-date and marketable as a potential employee. She chose to produce a web page that reflected her skills in using info-tech. Maia focussed on her growing interest in student learning, and prepared a display based on Bloom’s taxonomy. Two of the students, Jen and Martin, prepared displays that would highlight their expertise in their different LOTE specialisations, Melissa chose to focus on her expertise in music, and Rikki on literacy, and Kate on integrating picture books across the curriculum. In addition, Rikki and Melissa decided to also show a group project that they had been part of in their Special Education unit, as they felt that this would demonstrate their skills in working as a member of a
team. We had left the choice of what they would present entirely up to them, though we did set a constraint on size, so that the seven displays would fit easily into one exhibition space.

From the beginning of our talks about this presentation, the audience and therefore the purpose of the display was an issue of discussion. Invitations were sent out to other academic staff within the Faculty, to the regional offices of the DET and Catholic Education, to the parents and families of the students, to academic staff teaching in elective areas in other Faculties, and to the teachers in their school experience schools. Students saw their display space as ‘advertisements for themselves’ as teachers, and so it is understandable that these focussed on elective and specialty areas that they considered would make them stand out and be more attractive to potential employees. A late afternoon Portfolio Exhibition, with wine and cheese, meant that the entire range of the people they had hoped would turn up did, although not in large numbers. Few of their fellow students were interested enough to come and see their work, although many of their teachers did. Their task, during the exhibition, was to stand by their display and answer questions, explain the significance of items they had chosen to include, and generally talk to the visitors about what they had been doing. In this way, each of them was able to take on the subject position of a teacher talking about a facet of his or her own particular achievement and how this could enhance their attractiveness and employability as a teacher. Our task was to explain the project and the aims of this sort of research. The event was filmed by the local television station, and the following quotes from the students indicate the value they were finding in this form of assessment.

MARTIN: With exams, there’s only one winner, but when you use a portfolio, everybody wins. Everyone can show their strengths and weaknesses.

ROSA Lie: With portfolio assessment, you’re not just testing or examining specific things that are banked up in your memory. With a portfolio you’re actually able to explain the depth that is involved with teacher education.

Ironically, of course, these students were not being assessed at all. The work they had done for this exhibition was all in addition to their set curriculum, and only for the purposes of the research.

**Portfolio development – Year Three**

In 2000, the students entered third year. The Portfolio Group continued to meet fortnightly this year, with a new second year group meeting on the alternate weeks. As the first group reflected on the previous year’s work, and moved towards a new action research cycle, their concerns and action focus changed. In the third year of the program, they were involved in longer, and more demanding, school experience, and we realised that the ‘talent’ or ‘special expertise’ focus of the previous year’s portfolio display was no longer appropriate. It gave insufficient emphasis to the complexity of teaching, and, they claimed, may not be sufficient for them to ‘get a job’, the goal the students were increasingly focussing on. This new focus occurred as Jen took on part time employment as a teacher’s aide in an independent school, and was able to share a new, industrial perspective with the group. Their talk raised concerns about the prospect of gaining casual work only, of being ‘sent’ to remote areas or renownedly ‘difficult’ suburban city schools, or of not getting a job at all, began to occupy much of the informal talk the group engaged in. As lecturers, we were quizzed about the most marketable options to take, about their potential employability if they were unable to leave their families to teach in distant locations, and about the value of enrolling in the honours program if they needed to gain employment in order to live.

These discussions were complex and often unsatisfactory for us. In fact we had little experience of advising our students on the basis of a fairly complete understanding of their personal circumstances. We came to understand that, even though we would want to encourage students to attempt an Honours degree, for instance, it may well not be in their interests to enrol in the
Honours program, if this meant not completing a 10 week Internship as a pass degree student. The extra fifty days practice teaching that the Internship provided would possibly make the pass degree students more competitive as applicants to the State system when seeking a position at the end of the year. These sorts of concerns led us as a research group towards a more explicit focus on the use of the portfolio in job applications and interviews.

Rather than the display of a narrowly expert teaching self, as we had attempted at the end of 1999, we introduced the students to the idea of roundtable assessment as advocated through the National Schools Network Authentic Assessment program (NSN, 1997). There was much discussion of how the roundtable interview would work in our situation, and the sorts of evidence that they could accumulate and present to address each of the areas of competency we were attempting to cover through our reflection on their campus and school experience program. Adaptation of the Sizer model was agreed upon. It was decided that we would invite an industry representative (the Deputy Principal from a local school), an academic, and a professional support person (the university's Careers Officer) as 'examiners' or audience for their portfolio presentation. However the students requested that this should happen as a group 'employment' interview, as a means by which they could gain confidence and practice for the 'real' professional experience that they would need to do individually when seeking employment.

The Group Interview was scheduled after the end of semester, with the 3rd year research group seated around the interview table. The interview panel directed questions to each of them in turn. This process was done as a fishbowl exercise, with the second year portfolio students and ourselves, along with other interested academic staff who were invited to attend, sitting around the edges of the room as observers. The research purpose was for us to find out how the students would physically use, introduce, and display the evidence of their competence in their portfolios, in an actual interview situation. There was no sense that this was either a mock or an unimportant interview, even though, of course, it actually had no bearing on any grade or formal assessment for the students. The students were nervous, unsure of how to use their portfolios, and the panel was briefed only with the instruction that they were to determine the suitability of the students for employment. Each student had prepared a statement of their Teaching Philosophy, part of one of their third year units, for the interview panel to read prior to the interview itself.

The video shows that the students dressed formally, answered inexpertly, and, as the panel discussed with them in the review session later, did not appear as well rounded professionals ready to take up a position in a public school. Only one of the students, Martin, would have gained a job from that interview. The students, though presenting themselves well as people, and collaboratively assisting each other to expand answers where they could, did not talk and act with professional confidence in their knowledge. Of more concern to us, though, they found very few opportunities to even open their portfolios to talk about the material they had presented there for display and elaboration on their answers. As a group, apart from Martin of course, they were despondent about the interview 'assessment'. They felt disappointed at the fact that the work they had put into their portfolios was not displayed or drawn upon at all, and determined to learn more about interview technique before they presented themselves for any real job interview. They negotiated with the Director of Professional Experience to invite the Careers Officer to address all final year students the following year on how to develop these skills.

**Portfolio development – Year Four**

We lost four members of the research group before the start of 2001. Rosalie and Martin had fast-tracked their degree, and were enrolled in the Internship during Semester 1, so they were no longer on campus. Jen had withdrawn from the course for a year in order to work full time to support her family, and one of the authors, Sandra Frid, had been offered a job at Curtin University and had moved interstate. But as Rosalie and Martin were both keen to retain contact with the group, and Rikki, Maia, Melissa and Kate wanted to keep working, we decided to
formalise the process slightly to raise the stakes for the portfolio assessment, to really 'make it count' as a grade. A one Semester 'Special Topic' unit called 'Professional Portfolios' was offered to these students, and any others who wished to enrol, up to a quota of eight. The only requirement for entry to the unit was an interest in being involved in the on-going research project, and a demonstrated willingness to engage in reflection on their own learning. The unit quota was quickly filled, and the course began with four students (Rikki, Maia, Melissa and Kate) who were continuing their involvement in the project into their fourth year, and four (Daniel, Tara, Leanne and Angela) who were just beginning.

As we had only one semester before their Internship began, and as their Departmental Interviews for employment were planned to take place during their Internship, in October, the group agreed on a very tight schedule. Each area of competence was to be reviewed, along with possible sources of evidence, from the on-campus course, school and community experiences of the students. Each student took responsibility to plan the session for two areas of competence, in pairs, with the 'old hands' going first, to provide a model for the newcomers. Each area was allocated one and a half sessions, and students were to receive 15% of their unit grade for each seminar and associated paper. Each week's session began with a 'show and tell' of a page concept, draft, or (towards the end of semester) a finished page of the portfolios in progress.

We decided, after reflection on the group interview of the previous year, that the portfolios would need to be paper, rather than in electronic format. This set finite boundaries to the portfolio production, and acknowledged the physical difficulties associated with the actual use and display of material in digital form during an interview. We also decided, that given the difficulties in actually using the portfolios they had prepared last year to illustrate their answers at interview, we would set a severe limit on the number of pages they were allowed to contain. The 'scrap book' approach was rejected outright. We decided that the portfolios needed to be focussed, streamlined, and self-explanatory. The portfolio needed to be able to attract and easily inform a reader about the ways in which each student's personal, university and school experience had equipped her or him across the range of teaching competencies deemed appropriate in a beginning teacher.

The NSW professional teaching standards refer to seven elements of competence for teachers (NSWDET, 1998, pp. 64-68). These are a set of values, attitudes and competencies that a beginning teacher can use as a framework for assessing her own professional development, and her needs for ongoing professional development. The seven elements enlarge on the five areas of beginning teaching competence outlined by the NPQTL in 1996. As all of the research group would be seeking employment within the NSW state system as a first priority, we decided to use these as a framework for the assessment portfolio. A limit of two pages for each area of competence was set, with an extra two pages that students could use as 'specialty pages', to showcase aspects of their professional selves that might make them more attractive to an employer.

The assessment itself, we agreed, would this year take the form of the roundtable assessment (NSN, 1997) that we had approximated but not fully experienced last year. Roundtable 'exhibitions' as a form of 'authentic assessment' are predicated upon a consideration of what an educational institution "aims for and how they might know whether their aim succeeds" (McDonald et al., 1993). Roundtable exhibitions are occasions of public inspection where the constituency served by the institution is to be satisfied that "some cohort of young scholars [is] now ready to move on or out". In other words, the roundtable assessment in teacher education bears a burden of accountability to the profession as well as to the university. For this reason, we decided on individual roundtable presentations to a panel that comprised representatives of the profession, the academy and the community. In the event, the roundtable panel consisted of the following people:
1. Professor of Education in the Faculty

2. Unit coordinator of compulsory 4th year Teaching Project unit

3. The authors

4. Regional DET Training & Development officer

5. School Principal

6. Research Group Critical Friend (a PhD student)

7. Student's own choice of a panel member.

This was a large and daunting panel for the students, and we were literally seated around a large table, like a formal interview, all facing the candidate. Because this was an assessment meeting, interview questions were formalised (see Figure 1), and each student was strictly allowed only 30 minutes for their interview. Each student's performance was recorded on video tape, with one copy for the research team and one for them to review prior to their DET interview 10 weeks later.

CSST 496 Professional Portfolio

Roundtable Interview Questions

1. Can you please tell us what you have learnt about yourself as a teacher from preparing this portfolio?

2. What do see as your major strengths and interests that will help you to be a successful teacher?

3. Many classes today are mixed ability, containing students with a wide range of abilities. Please tell us how you would cater for the range of abilities you are likely to encounter.

4. What are some strategies you have learnt about or used during your teacher education that will help you manage the classroom most effectively?

5. What are some practices that you consider are most effective in assessing the outcomes your students are achieving?

6. How will you approach the teaching of literacy in your classroom?

7. What do you see as your major concerns with the use of technology in the classroom?

8. How will you know that you are being effective as a teacher?

9. What will you do to ensure that all the children in your class are able to concentrate fully on their learning while in school?

10. At this stage in your professional career, how do you see yourself contributing to leadership within your school and community?
11. Would you like to talk further about any aspect of your portfolio?

12. Do you have any questions you would like to ask of us?

Figure 1. Roundtable Interview Questions

REFLECTIONS ON ROUNDTABLE ASSESSMENT:

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Content and presentation format of the portfolios

The portfolios appeared to differ in the degree to which they documented the seven areas of competency. Some explicitly indicated (eg. with arrows, short statements, indicators) what competencies were in evidence and how particular portfolio items showed this. Other portfolios, in presentation form, in fact left the reader to ‘read between the lines’ to figure out what particular items were intended to show. Hence, this feature was distinctly different between portfolios, and appeared as a major communication feature that can lead to a ‘better’ portfolio.

Related to the degree of explicit documentation of competencies, our analyses suggest that the use of a table of contents or index aids in communication of the contents of a portfolio, particularly in relation to documenting the extent to which competencies are in evidence. A table of contents appeared to aid the student in self-evaluation of the breadth of their work, and also aided the reader in identifying and assessing what is in the portfolio. Similar statements could be made about the use of an introductory letter or statement. The teaching philosophy statement, which each student was required to include in their portfolio, did not do this work adequately for some.

The portfolios were also quite diverse in their presentation format, making them individual in nature. These differences included the ways the students used colours, numbers, or icons to document the seven areas of competency. Hence, there was much variance in ‘visual appeal’. Some pages were more ‘dense’ or ‘cluttered’ than others, and the use of colour schemes, photos and work samples varied. There was also significant variation in the degree to which portfolio entries communicated in concise yet meaningful and in-depth ways, for example by appropriate use of charts or diagrams. Individuals also varied the overall structure of their portfolios, using either the seven competencies for main sections, or structuring their portfolio according to other logical structures, for example, with their ‘specialist’ areas of strength given priority and evidence of the competencies being elaborated upon in conjunction with these areas.

It was clear that all students had very specific evidence related to classroom management as well as the teaching/learning of literacy. These areas were also specifically addressed in the interview questions, as priorities for the NSWDET. However, other areas were not in evidence as clearly even though they too were explicitly addressed in the interview questions – for instance, assessment. This highlighted for us the need to reflect upon the program structure of the BEd, to ensure that assessment as an area of competency had in fact been adequately covered in the students’ pre-service education.

Related to the content of the portfolios, our reflections upon our own practices and those within the BEd program give rise to numerous questions:

- What do the contents of the portfolios tell us as lecturers about the value of the content and learning and assessment tasks in our units?
• To what degree is there evidence of on-campus learning in comparison to practicum experiences? To what degree are these integrated?
• How might on-campus teaching as well as the practicum more fully enhance students’ professional development related to their portfolios?

Final grades for the Special Topic unit

All eight students passed the assessment for the special topic unit on portfolio development. In some ways the seminar presentations had already earned them a ‘leg up’ towards a good grade, so that nobody entered their roundtable with a real ‘fear of failure’. Three of the students earned a High Distinction (HD) for the unit, two earned a Distinction (D), two a Credit (C) and one a Pass (P). It is significant to us that our own assessment of the students, some of whom we actually ‘owed’ a considerable debt to for their loyalty and continued interest in the research project, needed to be moderated by the presence of a range of other assessors. This was one of the reasons that we agreed to such a large roundtable panel, and hence, we are confident that our reflections on the benefits accruing to sustained professional reflection within the pre-service program are appropriate. The students who earned HD for the unit were all from the original group — Maia, Melissa and Rikki. Kate, also from the original group, earned a D. The newcomers, who had had just one semester to come to understand the competency framework and to prepare a portfolio for assessment, all did an adequate job, although only Angela presented a performance that rated ‘with Distinction’ at the roundtable.

This variation was also reflected in the written documents. Even though the group had worked together as they developed their portfolios, there were marked differences between the final portfolios. The shared reflection and seminar presentations, along with ongoing display of their work in progress, allowed plenty of opportunity for the ‘old hands’ to model the process and their developing products to the newcomers. However it seems clear that the students need time to try on, and take up the identity of a reflexively professional teacher, who can talk knowledgeably and confidently about one’s teaching practice and preparation. This tentative conclusion points to some important questions:

• How might a formal self- and peer-evaluation be built into portfolio assessment? This had occurred informally. What would be the value of a more formal structure?
• How does opportunity over four years to articulate, justify, and re-formulate ideas assist in seeing oneself as a professional, and also to feel and act like a professional?
• How does ongoing opportunity and involvement assist in developing depth in the contents of a portfolio?

Portfolios as a technology for reflective practice

The portfolio itself is a reflective process, and the opening question of the roundtable sessions addressed this, so all students showed evidence of the use of a portfolio for reflection. However, it appeared that, in general, the students who had been involved longer were often better able to articulate their ideas. More importantly, it appeared they were able, in general, to get beneath the surface of teaching, to discuss the why rather than merely the what or how of teaching.

Thus, there appeared to be variance between the portfolios in the degree to which students had ‘ownership’ of the contents of their portfolios versus having borrowed ideas from others or from various readings or education documents. It appeared that this was related to how long they had been involved in portfolio development, with the newcomers not displaying as strong sense of ownership. Here, by ‘ownership’ we mean that students were able to discuss their ideas, philosophies and practices within a coherent and cohesive perspective that was a personal ‘blending’ from a range of experiences and sources. At the same time they appeared to be more self-aware of their ideas, where these had come from, and how they had developed through
various experiences. There also appeared to be variance in the degree to which the students saw themselves as life-long learners as teachers.

Related to the notion of ‘ownership’ as a capacity to ‘blend’ ideas was the fact that some of the portfolios showed evidence of the integration of theory and practice (e.g. use of Bloom’s taxonomy, theories of classroom management, ideas from Piaget or Vygotsky, or what is meant by ‘literacy’). Achievement of a capacity to inter-relate theory and practice is documented in the literature as difficult within pre-service education. Thus, this research points to portfolios as a means by which to more fully foster both understandings and skills in inter-relating theory and practice. Although our sample here was small, there was some indication that this integration was more fully developed in the portfolios belonging to students who had been involved over several years. This tentative conclusion, along with those related to portfolio depth and ownership, raises these questions:

- Are there ways the integration of theory and practice can be developed more fully in a portfolio?

**Portfolios as a vehicle to develop confidence and communication skills**

We were awed by the confidence with which some of the students spoke during the roundtable sessions, and the way they could clearly and succinctly articulate ideas. It appeared that the students who had been involved longer in the portfolio process spoke with more confidence and clarity. Questions thus raised in this regard are:

- Is there a correlation to experience?
- Was there more clarity and focus within their written portfolios also?
- What might these things indicate in relation to students’ empowerment concerning the discourse of teachers and teacher education?
- Would students have ‘performed’ differently if they had been instructed/reminded to use their portfolios and ‘talk’ to them as they answer questions?

The leadership question was a tough one for a beginning teacher. It appeared that, in general, the students who had been involved in the project longer handled this question more completely. That is, they had constructive ideas, and showed evidence of considering themselves as future leaders (and did not appear daunted by this). This is potentially a very important finding because a couple of years ago we would not likely have identified Kate or Melissa or Rikki as future educational leaders, yet it appears they will now be able to function in that capacity. In fact, they themselves indicated that they see themselves as potential leaders and able to make significant contributions to the teaching profession. The question this points to is:

- Is this an outcome of involvement in the project, or part of their personality, or both?

**The role of the roundtable panel members**

During the conduct of the roundtable sessions it was evident that the wide range of panel members was a key factor in the way the sessions progressed and in the foci of the discussions the panel had after the interviews. The university-based panel members had much insight into the emphases of learning outcomes targeted in students’ on-campus studies, and they also had familiarity with each student’s personal and academic backgrounds. Thus, they were able to help the other panel members gain a picture of where the student were ‘coming from’, and they could address any queries or concerns about particular students. In comparison, the school-based panel members had different perspectives on students’ strengths and weaknesses that were valuable and allowed the others to see things they might have overlooked.
The use of school-based panel members added authenticity to the sessions in relation to going for a job interview, particularly since these panel members had experience in serving on the DET interview panels. This experience at times proved valuable in that they were able to use their interview skills to ask supporting questions to assist when students were struggling to articulate ideas or were nervous. They showed a capacity to take charge and act as a facilitator to ‘bring out’ a candidate’s ideas. Thus, it is clear that the diversity of panel members was a positive feature within the goal of providing the students with an equitable interview process that has structure while also catering for the uniqueness of the students and their portfolios.

Some questions that emerged in relation to the roundtable panel are:

- How might different people on the panel play different roles according to the degree to which they have worked with a student? Would this even be appropriate?
- What role(s) might the student's friend play (eg. moral support, panel member, prompt, peer evaluation, etc.)? Could this be different within different contexts for a ‘roundtable’ presentation?

The value and feasibility of portfolios and roundtables:

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The professional portfolios as presented by the students in the roundtable sessions and in written form demonstrated to us that portfolio development has much to offer pre-service teacher education with regard to preparing teachers who are both technically competent and professionally reflective. We have evidence that the portfolio process assisted students to initially develop awareness of the multi-skilled nature of teaching along with the complexities of educational contexts and processes. From this growing awareness of the breadth and dynamic nature of teaching and learning, students were able in an ongoing way to reflect upon their learning and development as teachers. They were able to use this learning to document capacities within a range of areas, and in this process were in fact learning to identify, articulate and justify their ideas, values and practices as teachers. Thus, we see portfolio development as beneficial for providing pre-service teachers with opportunities to develop a range of ‘teaching selves’.

From this research have also emerged numerous issues and questions regarding portfolio development and roundtable assessment, and in particular, their value and feasibility for incorporation into the mainstream of a BEd program:

- When would students begin portfolio development? How would this be supported?
- How can the use of a ‘learning’ portfolio versus a ‘show’ portfolio be more fully utilised to meet the goals of professional development alongside those of job interview preparation?
- Who would be the ‘audience’ at particular points along the way (eg. students themselves, academic staff, school-based personnel)?
- Would portfolio development necessarily involve a final oral presentation like a roundtable? What is the value in this final process?
- How could roundtable assessment be incorporated in an economically feasible way?
REFERENCES


National Schools Network [NSN] (1997) Authentic Assessment Kit: A professional development kit to help classroom teachers understand and implement authentic assessment, NSN, Ryde, NSW.


