

Preparing a Professional Portfolio



**STANDARDS
COUNCIL**
OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION
VICTORIA

Preface

The *Professional Recognition Program for Teachers Guidelines*, a booklet published by the Department of Education in 1996, included advice prepared by the Standards Council of the Teaching Profession on Professional Portfolios (Appendix B).

Many teachers have since contacted the Standards Council seeking further information which would assist them in putting together a portfolio. Responding to this demand, the Standards Council in conjunction with the Australian Principals Centre, ran a half-day seminar on portfolios for teachers and principals conducted by visiting educator and author, Dr Kay Burke.

The publication of *Preparing a Professional Portfolio* builds on these developments and is a further response to the need expressed by teachers for detailed advice in this area of their professional lives. It draws upon several authoritative sources to describe and illustrate the components of a professional portfolio and how it might be structured for presentation in a variety of contexts.

The paper is designed as a practical guide for teachers in schools who may want to present a portfolio to accompany a job application or as part of a performance assessment process.

Professional development coordinators in schools may also find the paper useful in advising staff on ways of documenting their professional practice and planning their further career development.



Don Laird

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What is a professional portfolio?

The professional portfolio can be described as a quality record of a teacher's practice selected for a particular purpose. It is a discriminating collection of teaching materials that may assist in demonstrating significant career achievements. Described as a "living" document, the portfolio contains selected cameos of teaching practice captured over a defined period of time. These examples demonstrate the teacher's thinking about the nature and substance of personal professional practice and its outcomes.

Purposes of a portfolio

The teacher may prepare a portfolio:

- to apply for a position or promotion
- to support a school appraisal process
- to provide information to the principal for annual review
- for use in undertaking further studies towards an education degree/diploma/certificate
- to assist reflective practice, professional renewal and identification of career and professional development goals.

What is the value of a portfolio?

The portfolio allows the teacher to give voice to the values and attitudes which underpin professional practice. The practice that is documented in the portfolio is firmly grounded in the context of "real" classroom experiences. The portfolio will illuminate the subtle ways in which the teacher is able to blend an approach to teaching with subject knowledge and achieve student learning within particular contexts.

The portfolio enables others to determine the depth of thinking and quality of the actions taken by the teacher. It should demonstrate that the teacher's practice is consistent with agreed standards of professionalism. It can therefore assist in evaluation processes of teacher performance, often within a professionally supportive and familiar context.

Some have observed that the portfolio provides a "mental work space" in which teachers can interpret and reflect upon their teaching practice and its outcomes. It is seen as a professionally formative activity which can also help overcome the isolation of teaching.

In developing a portfolio the teacher may seek advice and support from a colleague or colleagues. Such interaction counters the solitary nature of the teaching task, contributing to and expanding professional discourse within the school community. As a vehicle for

demonstrating professional teaching behaviour, the portfolio gives others a glimpse of the valuable work that is proceeding in classrooms.

The portfolio is regarded as a tool for improving the quality of teaching practice. A group of teachers may work as a team designing teaching and learning activities which will achieve particular student learning outcomes. The portfolio provides a format in which individual teachers document and illustrate this process. In demonstrating the learning outcomes achieved, teachers may reflect upon the ways in which the program might be further developed and refined.

The outstanding teacher has an opportunity through presentations in a portfolio to confer a legacy of ideas and reflections which might constructively inform the practice of other colleagues. Documented examples of exemplary professional practice can be shared with others for adaptation to their own settings, leading to further good practice.

The process of planning and preparing portfolio entries may change the way in which teachers regard themselves professionally. The carefully structured, reflective portfolio confirms the teacher as a professional involved in critical decision making and problem resolution.

Building a professional portfolio

The portfolio will consist of a variety of carefully selected items to represent the teacher's professional practice. These items should be concise, authentic and relevant to the purpose.

In order that the best items may be selected and readily accessed, the teacher should collect a wide range of materials over a period of time, dating each item when it is added to the collection and noting its significance. This will make the process of sifting and selecting much easier.

As long as it is regularly maintained, the collection will provide a resource of current materials which may be drawn upon to meet the variety of purposes for portfolios outlined earlier.

It is strongly suggested that teachers work with a mentor or colleague in selecting the items that will go into the portfolio. Valuable discussion can take place between teachers about which items to include and how the items demonstrate particular professional skills and approaches. According to the size and nature of the school organisation, a variety of people, including the principal, may be consulted.

What should the portfolio look like?

A table of contents should be provided. An insert binder that enables documents to be displayed in clear plastic sheet protectors provides a convenient presentation format. The binder can be divided according to a set of headings (see example 1 on page 5) or the Dimensions of Teaching (see example 2 on page 7). Alternatively, the portfolio may be presented electronically in the form of a multimedia or Powerpoint presentation.

Broadly the portfolio will be composed of two elements:

- the documented extracts of classroom and professional activity
- the reflections which represent the teacher's thinking about those activities.

Documents should be drawn from recent professional tasks and demonstrate an aspect of the teacher's philosophy in practice.

The teacher needs to be highly selective about the material to be included in the portfolio and to limit the amount of documentation. The number of entries should be sufficient to provide evidence of the teacher's pedagogical knowledge and skills. A manageable length is important for both the teacher preparing the portfolio and those who read it.

How should the portfolio be presented?

It might be helpful to regard the portfolio as a story told by the teacher about what has been accomplished in his/her professional practice over a period of time. The narrative needs to be structured appropriately. The framework chosen to arrange the selected elements of a teacher's professional work will depend upon the particular purpose for which the portfolio is being prepared. Two possible frameworks are provided.

The first example presents a way of organising the portfolio according to a set of headings and might suit the purposes of a teacher applying for a position. Such a portfolio could accompany the application as support documentation. The application itself would address the criteria on which selection is based.

The second example illustrates a framework based upon criteria such as the five Dimensions of Teaching which form the basis of the Professional Recognition Program for teachers employed in government schools in Victoria.

Example 1

Heading 1: Background material and philosophy of teaching and learning

Background information about the teacher and a resume may be included in this section of the portfolio. A general statement of the teacher's philosophy of learning and teaching may be provided which is consistent with the school's charter goals or curriculum objectives. This statement should be expressed in language that has personal meaning for the teacher.

An example of such a statement:

"My teaching style ... is based on a desire to see students self-motivate and have a sense of worth, particularly low achievers. I believe in relating to students as fellow beings, as opposed to putting myself at some other level. Each class group and I work as a team to achieve our common goals."

Dennis Wills, Lesmurdie Senior High School, Western Australia

The NEITA Foundation Year Book 1996

Heading 2: Professional practice

Carefully selected examples of the teacher's best work will demonstrate how goals have been met consistent with selection criteria. This second section of the portfolio might include some of the following:

- a unit of work
- a lesson plan
- photographs
- a class newsletter
- video/audio tapes of lessons
- curriculum materials developed
- extracts from a teaching log or journal
- an interdisciplinary project completed in collaboration with others
- examples of student work demonstrating the learning outcomes expected
- evidence of leadership or significant participation in an action research project
- evidence of relevant and recent research undertaken towards a higher degree.

Classroom or other artefacts should not appear in isolation—reflective commentaries should accompany items in order to illustrate the thinking and decision-making that informed the professional task. These statements should make clear the relevance of the selected examples to the teacher’s personal philosophy and the school’s curriculum or charter goals.

An example of a short reflective commentary to accompany a piece of student work:

“This piece helped me understand one of my quiet students a little better. Her response to the issues raised in the worksheet shows she had been really stimulated by the topic. With some gentle persuasion I managed to involve her in class discussion and we all saw another side to her. By engaging her interest and allowing that interest to express itself in ways that were not confronting to her, I feel I helped her achieve success in articulating and defending a point of view before an audience of her peers.”

A set of discussion questions and activities designed by the teacher to introduce the study of a text in English, might be accompanied by the following caption:

The work for second term was to include the study of a demanding novel, Chaim Potok’s *The Chosen*. A class discussion around themes central to the novel seemed a good way to commence the study. I decided to present these themes in the context of issues which might confront students in their everyday lives, using the questions to stimulate a lively discussion. The introductory session was designed to enable the students to connect their own lives with the lives of those characters we would meet later in the novel. I believe that the discussion questions indicate my awareness of student learning processes and the need to use what is familiar to students as a platform from which they can explore new territory.

Heading 3: Professional information

This section could include information about:

- records of performance evaluations
- work arising from a leadership role in a school
- letters of commendation from a principal or parent
- contribution to the professional development of colleagues
- participation in activities conducted by professional associations and network groups
- professional development activities, both informal school-based programs and accredited courses.

Example 2

The portfolio as part of annual review under the Professional Recognition Program

If the portfolio is to be presented as information to assist an annual review assessment by the principal, it should be arranged according to the five Dimensions of Teaching. Within each dimension the teacher can present material to indicate that the principal's expectation in terms of the relevant Professional Standard has been met.

For example, to address the standard “Successfully organise and manage aspects of the wider school program” (Level 1 Experienced Teachers—Dimension No. 5), the portfolio could include a notice to parents and students outlining arrangements for a VCE Information Evening which the teacher has organised.

A short caption may be attached in order to indicate how the document relates to the Professional Standard:

As one of a team of VCE coordinators, it was my responsibility to make all the arrangements for the VCE Information Evening. This involved obtaining a guest speaker from the Board of Studies, setting up the venue, briefing staff and the principal, communicating with students and parents and designing a format for the evening which the audience would find enjoyable as well as informative. I believe the success of this event indicates my capacity to organise and manage a major school program.

What to avoid in presenting a professional portfolio

Teachers should avoid the “scrapbook” portfolio which indiscriminately includes all work (a collection, not a selection) and contains no personal commentary. Nor should the portfolio become a continuous monologue of anecdotes which offer little substance in the form of documented examples of classroom practice. The first kind lacks professional insight and self-reflection, the second lacks concrete information to substantiate the approach described. Neither portfolio allows the reader an informed view of the teacher's approach to teaching and the teaching practice which flows from it.

A “glossy” portfolio which is visually appealing but offers little content in the form of teacher reflection and evidence of teaching practice is to be avoided. The portfolio should not be so large and cumbersome that it is difficult for others to handle. An unfocused selection of material that is not meaningfully structured to suit clearly defined goals will be of little value to the teacher or the reader. Too little material is to be equally avoided. The “thin” portfolio may result in critical and potentially valuable aspects of a teacher's practice being overlooked.

Questions teachers ask about professional portfolios

1. Why do I need a professional portfolio?

There is now an increased emphasis on teachers demonstrating their classroom skills in a number of settings:

- for selection to school-advertised positions
- to satisfy school charter goals addressing student learning outcomes
- as the focus for professional development programs
- for performance assessment
- as a demonstration of professionalism.

2. Is a portfolio mandatory?

No. However for annual review purposes, the principal may regard the portfolio as a suitable format for presenting information on the Professional Standards.

3. How do I find the time to prepare a professional portfolio?

Your portfolio will comprise examples of work arising out of everyday professional activity—the items selected for inclusion should not represent additional work. Update your collection over the course of the year by continuing to add material as it is developed. A short statement explaining the content and purpose of each item is all that is required at this stage.

4. What if my portfolio doesn't look as polished as other portfolios?

Those who read your portfolio will be more concerned with the content than its visual appeal. However, the portfolio should reflect the professional values of the teacher and provide a professional standard of documentation and presentation.

5. How do I decide which of my colleagues to approach for help with putting together a portfolio?

Choose a person you feel comfortable discussing professional issues with, whose judgement is sound and whose experience and approach to teaching and learning is such that you expect to benefit professionally from the advice.

6. How will the portfolio assist me in applying for a position or promotion at another school?

A portfolio provides a portrait of your teaching and learning philosophy and practice. It will demonstrate to a selection panel the professional quality of your thinking about teaching and learning. Thoughtful planning will be evident in the way you structure programs to meet students' learning needs; professional reflection will be demonstrated in your observations about how learning outcomes are achieved; sensitivity to individual learning styles will be revealed in examples of units of work you have designed.

7. How does the reader know if a portfolio is authentic?

In most contexts in which portfolios are presented, there will be focused discussion about it. If someone else has provided the material being presented, the teacher will not be able to elaborate convincingly on its content.

8. How long should the portfolio be?

There is no simple answer to this question. The length of the portfolio will be determined by the particular purpose and audience for which it is being prepared. Whatever the circumstances, the portfolio should seek to portray the **essence** of a teacher's professional work and values. To include **every** example of classroom work over a period of time, without regard to the quality or relevance of the material, defeats this purpose.

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SHOWCASING TEACHERS' WORK, IMPROVING TEACHING PRACTICE

Teachers in Victorian schools are realising the importance of the portfolio as a means of portraying their recent teaching achievements and conveying a sense of the values and attitudes which underpin their professional practice. This information paper offers advice to teachers about the kind of material which should be included in a professional portfolio and how it might be structured to suit particular purposes. The portfolio is often used as part of a performance review process in schools or by graduates and practising teachers to accompany an application for an advertised position.

Other publications by the Standards Council of the Teaching Profession include:

Teacher Appraisal (1994) gives a realistic illustration of a range of appraisal processes currently being practised by schools in Victoria.

Partnerships in Teacher Education (1995) is a series of case studies of partnerships between Victorian schools and universities involved in teacher education.

Adopting Practices for Teacher Assessment in the School (1996) explores the inter-relationship between self-reflection, peer appraisal, professional development, performance review and accountability for teachers.

Teacher Induction (1996) provides the basis for well-planned and conducted induction programs which will benefit both schools and teachers. Examples from a number of systems and countries provide a concrete focus for good ideas for adaptation to any setting.

Teacher Professional Development (1996) explores a series of case studies of professional development courses initiated by teachers and describing general school practice. They cover the content of the curriculum, preparation for leadership, application of teaching and learning strategies in the classroom, and process for supporting career renewal and development.

Professional Development—What do teachers think? (1996) looks at a variety of issues related to the professional development of teachers in a devolved system.

Forthcoming publication

Case Studies in Teacher Annual Review (1997) describes the operation of annual review as part of the Professional Recognition Program in a number of government school settings.