

Portfolios for Lutheran Teachers

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A teacher portfolio is a purposeful collection of artifacts and experiences that demonstrate a teacher's talents and approach to learning. This article examines research studies that have been conducted to validate the use of portfolios as a tool for teacher evaluation. These studies also indicate some of the pros and cons of its use for administrators and teachers alike. The research focuses around four basic questions concerning the use of portfolios:

- 1.) Do teacher portfolios contribute to a valid assessment of teacher performance?
- 2.) Could teacher portfolios provide a value-added factor to teacher evaluation systems in terms of differentiating quality of performance?
- 3.) What are the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding the use of portfolios in teacher evaluation?
- 4.) How do teacher portfolios contribute to professional growth for teachers?

“Each (question) serves to inform the overarching question of whether portfolios improve the effectiveness of teacher evaluation systems by offering greater accountability for performance of defined expectations and promoting professional development” (Tucker, Stronge, Gareis, & Beers, 2003).

Question 1: Do teacher portfolios contribute to a valid assessment of teacher performance?

In gathering materials to be placed in a teacher's assessment portfolio, four common features of artifacts exist: alignment with professional teaching standards (Did you know WELS is developing these for our teachers?) and individual/school goals (e.g. a copy of a teaching license or classroom test scores), selected samples of work (e.g. specific lesson plans, student assessments, or thematic units), captions and commentaries that explain and reflect (e.g. notes on student work or personal reflection journals commenting on a week's teaching), and mentored or coached experiences including conversations with colleagues and supervisors (e.g. post-observation conference notes given by an administrator or colleague). “There is no question among educators that teacher portfolios with these components are valuable tools for professional development across teachers' careers” (Shaw & St. Maurice, 2004).

Tucker et al. (2003) found that the artifacts collected in a teacher portfolio validated assessment of their performance when they adhered to the four broad domains in their chosen teacher evaluation system: lesson instruction, assessment of student work, classroom management, and overall teacher professionalism. Each were documented in the teachers' portfolios thereby validating the portfolios' ability to address each major domain of teacher responsibility and thus their overall performance. Of all the samples reviewed in Tucker's study, 90% of the artifacts selected were valid representatives of one or more of the designated teacher responsibilities.

A study of pre-service teachers from Missouri required the provision of similar artifacts in addition to corresponding reflective narratives addressing their state's teaching standards in an electronic portfolio format. These electronic portfolios were submitted at initial, midlevel, and final reviews and were reviewed by teams of professors who stayed with the teacher through the three checkpoints. The use of the portfolio "provided the candidates with opportunities to *reflect on* their teaching and a better *understanding* of the state standards. However, the participants did not believe the portfolio measured the construct of their teaching *competencies*" (Yao, Thomas, Nickens, Anderson-Downing, Burkett, & Lamson, 2008).

Considering these two varying results, administrators, head teachers, or department chairs will have to consider strongly their use of portfolios for the purpose of assessing performance. What is your goal: teacher assessment or teacher reflection? The two studies compared here do not allow for a definitive conclusion, but do allow for the fact that portfolios for teachers can apparently be successful in serving both functions well.

Question 2: Could teacher portfolios provide a value-added factor to teacher evaluation systems in terms of differentiating quality of performance?

Generally, administrators rate teachers at the highest designation available. (Shaw and St. Maurice, 2004) Surely, this doesn't happen in our WELS schools...(sarcasm intended). If teachers are all judged to be equally outstanding (or if they all worry too much about call lists – and not teacher quality – by putting all 5s on their performance assessment reports) it can undermine the evaluation system and discredit the individual ratings. Could a portfolio-based teacher evaluation system do a better job than a traditional evaluation by observation in differentiating outstanding, acceptable, and unacceptable teaching? Tucker et al. (2003) shared comments from administrators who felt more able to discriminate between capable and exceptional teachers:

- "It's amazing how much more you know about the teachers."
- "Poor teachers have poor portfolios."
- "I feel I have more basis to rate teachers lower."
- "In the old evaluation system, there was nothing to show. They told you and it was up to you whether or not you believed it. It's easier now that the material is provided."
- "The portfolio allowed me to be able to work with these people to improve."
- "Portfolios help to contribute to the evaluation system and have greatly improved it. I think we have a more comprehensive approach."

"With the current trend toward standards, accountability, and authentic assessment, portfolios have emerged as a promising tool to support teacher professional growth and as a measure of teacher performance" (Attinello et al., 2006). "In general, research suggests that portfolios used for the assessment of teachers will enhance teacher evaluation both in accountability and for professional development purposes" (Tucker et al., 2003).

It is time. WELS teachers need real feedback on real teaching. WELS principals need real data from real teaching. Our synod office needs real data to responsibly keep track of teacher ability. Portfolios, if created in a joint faculty effort, could be the answer to all of these needs.

Question 3: What are the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding the use of portfolios in teacher evaluation?

Teachers should play a role in determining their own evaluation and professional development as well as the manner in which they raise their level of professionalism (Attinello, Lare, & Waters, 2006). Studies show that both teachers and administrators view portfolio assessment to be fair and accurate as well as valuable for self-reflection (Tucker et al., 2003). Average ratings of portfolio fairness, usefulness, feasibility, and accuracy in a survey of 309 teachers using a four-point Likert scale varied minimally. In another study, administrators felt they received a broader perspective of the teacher's work than they would get from a simple observation-based evaluation. The key ingredient of success came in the form of the opportunity to reflect on one's practice with a colleague (Attinello et al., 2006).

There is another form of portfolio assessment method gaining popularity in teacher evaluation. Mentioned earlier, electronic portfolios allow teachers and administrators to digitize assessment. Artifacts are downloaded or scanned into files and stored electronically for viewing at any time on the internet or in a secure school file. One study tells of positive teacher and administrator perceptions. This study of a technological trend in portfolios focused on the assessments of newer teachers. It reported that 90% of new teachers shared their e-portfolio with mentors and colleagues and another 76% of new teachers said that their administrators supported their use. (Jun, Anthony, Achrazoglou, & Coghill-Behrends, 2007)

Interestingly, despite the time commitment necessary to thoroughly review e-portfolios mentioned above as they related to the study with new teachers, over 90% of those administrators indicated that they would encourage teachers in their school to build and maintain an e-portfolio for licensure purposes and/or their regular assessment process. Even further, 72% of the administrators showed an interest in developing an administrator's portfolio program linked to standards for leadership in their state (Jun, et al., 2007). Similarly, another study found that 77% of administrators were ready to review teaching portfolios for all beginning teachers in their building.

Question 4: How do teacher portfolios contribute to professional growth for teachers?

Study results are least definitive in this area since "growth" is hard to quantify. Tucker et al. (2003) discovered that teachers and administrators varied in their opinions on the use of portfolios for this reason. In general, teachers reported more self-reflection as a result of portfolios but that the self-reflection had little impact on teaching practice. Administrators, on the other hand, were encouraged by the possibility for portfolio use as a professional growth tool, but they commonly discussed the need for teachers to get over the anxiety of the process first.

To me, that anxiety is the issue in our WELS school circles as well. Right now, we want the best of both worlds. We want to find ways to help our teachers grow professionally through the formative assessment of our teachers. We also need to have an organized and official way of summatively assessing our teachers for the purpose of reporting and recording teacher performance for the Commission on Lutheran Schools office. The problem is that our WELS principals are doing both jobs and our teachers are anxious about this tension when he comes to

visit: “Is the improvement objective that I’m working on with the principal during my formative assessment going to ‘come back and bite me’ at the end of the year when we do the summative evaluation?” I remember those meetings, and that tension is palpable with teachers. How do we get over this? How do we relieve – or at least lessen – this tension?

First and foremost, I wonder if we’re too caught up in/worried about getting a divine call. If we could just focus on how to be the best teacher/administrator we can be, the Holy Spirit will take care of the rest. Pride is another factor. The sinful nature bristles at the word “evaluation.”

Could it be that portfolios for teachers can help with this issue? We need a plan for professional development. We need evidence for teachers to look at and reflect on, for a colleague to look at and help their co-worker with professional growth, and for a principal to look at for the purpose of summative assessment. The evidence is the key.

A word of caution: “Portfolios cannot be considered in isolation” (Shaw & St. Maurice, 2004). It’s true with anything in education. When an idea comes along it has to be “taken with a grain of salt.” Certainly there is no one best way to evaluate instruction, just as there is no one best way to write or teach a lesson. There are many factors in any school building that play into whether or not portfolios could be a proper tool for evaluating a teacher’s classroom performance. Experienced and new in-service teachers alike must have an attitude of willingness when it comes to sharing what goes on in their classrooms. An administrator must be able to lead his faculty to appreciate and embrace a feeling of wanting and doing whatever is necessary to benefit students most. This of course is balanced with the need to adhere to teaching standards as well as synod and school goals. It appears that the biggest factors in this discussion are portfolio content and entry/analysis time. Can good judgment and cooperation be implemented in deciding on what goes into a teacher’s assessment portfolio? And, can accommodations be made to allow teachers and administrators the time necessary for a thorough review of classroom practices at multiple levels? In my opinion, the pros of establishing portfolios for teacher assessment far outweigh the cons when it comes to the end game: teacher improvement that leads to greater student achievement.

Bibliography

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