

The Benefits of Developing a Professional Portfolio

What curriculum styles are you most familiar with, and which do you follow most closely?

What would a daily schedule look like in your classroom?

What tools would you use to communicate information to families?

Degree in hand, thousands of early childhood students leave college each year with dreams of making a difference in the lives of young children. Countless veteran professionals interview for new or different positions or share their beliefs with colleagues and families. Even climbing the career ladder within the same program may require an interview for each new position.

Yet how many times have we prepared for interviews only to draw a blank when the time comes to share our knowledge and understanding? What can we do to prepare to articulate our thoughts, ideas, and beliefs when we apply for an early childhood position? How might we organize documents reflecting our philosophy and goals, professional growth, and experiences?

My years of work with preservice early childhood teachers, new professionals, and organizations that

recruit beginning professionals have helped me identify key activities and documents to be incorporated into a professional portfolio. A well-organized portfolio can help newer practitioners effectively express their beliefs and experiences during the interview process as well as document their ongoing professional growth. Walking into an interview or other meeting with a portfolio in hand speaks volumes about the professional that you are, and a portfolio often impresses the interviewer or peer. It can be a determining factor in whether a program considers you a good fit.

What a portfolio is and is not

Before discussing what a portfolio is, let's determine what it *is not*. A professional portfolio

- *is not* a photo album. There is a place in the portfolio for photos, but they should directly relate to a lesson plan, letter to families, or other document on display.

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- *is not* a scrapbook. We will discuss the creative display of materials, but your portfolio should highlight your skills, not distract from them.
- *is not* a package to hand to the interviewer to be read from front to back.

So, what *is* a portfolio, if the employer is not supposed to look through it? What is the point?

The kind of portfolio we are talking about documents your beliefs, professional development, experience, involvement in the field, and classroom/program use of best practices. It is a visual tool to help you verbally answer questions. You can use the contents to demonstrate or illustrate a key point. Many interviewers are required to ask applicants identical questions, and a portfolio lets you stand out from other candidates.

The key to success lies in how you organize and use the portfolio. Think about what you would like to talk about at an interview, anticipate possible questions that may be asked, and then include items in your portfolio that illustrate these points. Referring to the items provides visual cues for verbally sharing your philosophy, experiences, and pedagogy. With

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This article is available in an online archive at www.naeyc.org/yc/pastissues.

thoughtful preparation, your portfolio will not only provide a distinct interviewing advantage but also will help you grow professionally.

Obvious benefits of a portfolio

Imagine that you apply for a teaching position at a preschool. When you arrive for a scheduled interview, one of the first questions the interviewer asks is, “We are very interested in the creative development of children. Could you please describe a creative experience you planned and explain what you like about it?”

Without a portfolio as a guide, you might rack your brain trying to recall a suitable art activity, then respond, “Hmmm. Well . . . I remember one time when I laid contact paper out on the table and peeled off the back so the sticky side was up. The children then used things like feathers and sequins to decorate the contact paper. I guess I like this activity because it is open-ended and doesn’t focus on a specific end product.”

Instead, portfolio in hand, you turn to a lesson plan on creative development and say, “I have a perfect example here in my portfolio. [Pointing to the title and objective of the lesson plan] I planned a sticky

collage activity for children to work on in small groups. The objective was to have children work together while exploring creative materials. After asking what materials might stick to the contact paper, I encouraged the children to work together to select and place materials.

[Pointing to the extension section of the lesson plan] “I also prepared open-ended questions I could use to stimulate explorations, such as, ‘What do you notice about the way these materials look together?’ or ‘How might we make a flower on this collage?’ For children who needed more creative challenges, I asked questions such as, ‘What makes that a good idea?’

“I really liked this experience because children could take the lead in choosing which materials to use and how they wanted to use them, based on their previous experiences and knowledge. It required children to communicate with each other and to work together throughout the process. See, in these pictures, it’s clear how involved the children became—the happy and focused looks on their faces show how successful the activity was.”

Both answers refer to the same activity, but using the portfolio led to a well-thought-out, immediate example that did not require frantically thinking of all possible art activities and deciding which one would sound the best. In this response, you were able to present a thorough description and justification, providing not only a visual example of a detailed small group lesson plan, but also images of children engaging in and enjoying the creative activity. (For other potential scenarios, see “Sample Interview Questions and Supporting Portfolio Documents.”)

What to include in a portfolio

Several types of materials can be included in a quality portfolio. The contents, of course, are modified based on personal



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Sample Interview Questions and Supporting Portfolio Documents

Question: How would you design your classroom, and what materials would you include?

Supporting documents:

- Drawing of a classroom floor plan
- Sample weekly lesson plan showing learning centers and materials

Question: How are you involved professionally and/or in the community?

Supporting documents:

- Membership certificates
- Volunteer certificates/letters
- Conference/training attendance certificates

Question: What types of things would you do to maintain good home-school relations?

Supporting documents:

- Family update
- Formal letter to families
- Announcement of family event
- Parent volunteer calendar or materials
- Statement of philosophy

Question: If a child in the class refuses to come inside from the playground with the rest of the group, what would you do?

Supporting documents: Sample of language and steps used during child guidance

Question: Please describe one of your favorite classroom experiences.

Supporting documents: Selected lesson plan and photos

Question: Name three of your strengths.

Supporting documents:

- Statement of philosophy
- Lesson plan in your area of strength
- Letter to families
- Reference to general organization of portfolio

Question: What curriculum styles are you most familiar with and which one do you follow most closely?

Supporting documents: Lesson plan and reference to curricular goals and objectives

Question: What types of child assessment techniques have you used or do you consider appropriate?

Supporting documents:

- Statement of philosophy
- Sample anecdotal record (with child's name removed)
- Sample of assessment tool
- Reference to sample of children's work

Question: What does "working as a team" mean to you?

Supporting documents: Statement of philosophy

experiences and the portfolio's purpose. Typical contents include

- table of contents (see "Sample Contents Page")
- résumé (visit www.careers.cmich.edu for résumé samples and résumé-builder tools)
- statement of philosophy on early childhood care and education (see "Writing a Statement of Philosophy")
- letters of reference
- records of workshops and other training
- list of professional memberships
- certificates of achievement for volunteer work or professional development

Sample Contents Page

Contents

Résumé, Statement of Philosophy, and References

Professional Development

- Professional memberships
- Certificates of achievement
- Training and development

Classroom Experience

- Lesson plans
- Family communication
- Sample daily schedules
- Sample classroom floor plan and design

- lesson plans (my college students include a weekly plan showing possible activities in each learning center and outdoors; detailed large group plans that list stories, finger plays, and movement and transition activities; and two to four detailed small group plans focusing on children's ongoing investigations and the learning objectives met by the investigations)
- field trip announcement/letter (or a list of field trip experiences with related goals)

- a few photographs or samples of children's work related directly to (and placed with) the featured lesson plans or field trip letter
- sample letter to families or other form of family communication
- sample daily schedules for half- and full-day programs (or by age group)
- example of steps taken to guide a child's behavior

Additional items, not on display but tucked in a plastic sleeve behind a blank piece of paper, include

- transcripts
- medical documents
- criminal history check
- other employment items as required by licensing

The presentation

Once you have assembled the materials to be included, it is time to focus on the presentation. Keep in mind that the first glimpse a potential employer

Keep in mind that the first glimpse a potential employer or colleague gets of your portfolio is the cover.

or colleague gets of your portfolio is the cover.

The cover should be kept in nice condition, withstanding the test of time. My students use black or white three-ring binders with an insert panel for a self-designed cover (more economical, less professional); faux leather scrapbook portfolios (economical and professional); or genuine leather or faux leather portfolio binders that snap or zip and sometimes even have handles (professional but not always economical)—all of which can be found in office supply or other stores.

I encourage students to make sure their name stands out in a way that identifies them as the creator of this professional document. This is done by including a cover page, inserting a

business card inside the front cover, or placing a title such as "Professional Portfolio" and your name above the table of contents.

Here are some tips to aid in the development of a well-organized, creative, and highly effective portfolio:

- Insert all contents into plastic sleeves.
- Divide the portfolio into sections (such as résumé and philosophy, professional development, volunteer experience, classroom experience, and so on).
- Use the section titles as your headings on the contents page.
- Select a good quality résumé paper to use for the cover insert or cover page, contents page, and section title pages. Students often use the same

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A portfolio is an excellent vehicle for tracking your development, assessing changes in your philosophy, and sharing your beliefs with others in a clear way.

paper for their lesson plans and other portfolio pages as well.

- Store extra copies of your résumé, philosophy, and letters of reference in the plastic sleeve, behind the originals.
- Support your best examples on the facing page with either a photo of children engaging in the activity or a sample of a child's work or words resulting from the experience.

Know your portfolio

Finally, be familiar with your portfolio. Once you have the format established, practice using it to share your beliefs, qualifications, and experiences. By organizing the portfolio in general categories, you can add new materials to the appropriate sec-

Something new in 2010

Online chats, video clips, and podcasts are among the online features that will enhance readers' *Young Children* experience starting in 2010. Check *Young Children's* Web site in January for a schedule of upcoming interactive features.

tion without having to reorganize or change the table of contents.

Educators often document young children's work, collecting information to be used to track and assess learning and to plan appropriate curriculum. Think of your portfolio as documentation of your own growth and development. Focus on giving an in-depth look at your professionalism. A portfolio is an excellent vehicle for tracking your development, assess-

ing changes in your philosophy, and sharing your beliefs with others in a clear way. Veteran professionals may find that organizing a portfolio provides inspiration for continuous development.

We often do so much on a daily basis for children and families that we forget that we too need encouragement and support. Carefully crafted portfolios reflect who we are as professionals. They clarify and reaffirm our beliefs; document our valuable experiences for colleagues, families, programs, and the profession; and inspire us to try new things in the exciting world of early care and education.

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Writing a Statement of Philosophy

A personal statement of philosophy about early childhood education can send a strong message about you, and if you mail it with your cover letter and résumé, it can serve as an introduction well before someone meets you in person. It can share your values and beliefs about children more deeply than a résumé or cover letter. When interviewing teachers for our university preschool program, we often select (or eliminate) candidates based on the contents of their philosophy statement.

A philosophy is generally limited to one page. It can begin with an opening paragraph followed by bulleted highlights, or be written completely in paragraph form.

To get started, students and new professionals should reflect on and distill their views on ethical conduct, developmentally appropriate practice, values, theory, inclusion of children with special needs, diversity, guidance, child assessment and evaluation, and family support and involvement. Seniors at Central Michigan University begin the process by reading the 64-page *How to Generate Values in Young Children*, by Sue Spayth Riley (Boson Books, 2005), or the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct. They highlight at least five significant points (and always discover more than five), summarize each point in their own words, and bring their selections to class on note cards. These points of value are the foundation for the students' statements of philosophy on early childhood education.

Next, the students add additional text on topics of their choice, such as philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of child development that guide their professional practices. They then use their creativity and their own style to format the final statement. As a gesture of commitment, they usually sign or type their name at the bottom of the page.