

# Theme-Based Portfolio Assessment in Social Studies Teacher Education

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**Portfolio assessment** is often described as an effective means for social studies teachers to evaluate their students' progress.<sup>1</sup> Because beginning teachers tend to have had little experience with portfolios, however, they may be hesitant to try portfolio assessment, thus missing the opportunity to take advantage of this potentially valuable teaching method. To keep that from happening, teacher educators should consider having their students develop their own portfolios while in teacher preparation programs.

The theme-based portfolio—which we have found to be the most useful kind—is perhaps most effectively described as “an ongoing conversation between student and student, student and teacher, and student and self.”<sup>2</sup> Joining in this “conversation” by modeling portfolio assessment practices will help future social studies teachers become more familiar and comfortable with portfolio assessment, thus encouraging them to find ways to use this teaching method in their own classrooms. In that way, social studies methods instructors will help achieve their mission to “prepare prospective teachers to select, integrate, and translate knowledge and methodology from the social studies into curricula suitable for the grade levels at which they expect to teach.”<sup>3</sup> By modeling portfolio assessment practices, teacher educators will encourage students to reconsider their conceptions of assessment and to develop the reflective thinking necessary for effective and creative teaching.<sup>4</sup>

## How Does a Theme-Based Portfolio Prepare Better Teachers?

A portfolio may be defined as “a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas.”<sup>5</sup> For our theme-based portfolio, we have our students select a theme from the social studies curriculum as the focus for their portfolio development. As the term proceeds, the student is challenged to reflect on and apply to his or her theme new knowledge from course activities, class discussions, and readings. For instance, a prospective social studies student might select “revolutions” as the theme for his or her portfolio and then, when different learning strategies are being studied, consider how a cooperative learning strategy could be used to teach about revolution.

Students are also given opportunities to collaborate with their classmates in the development of their portfolios. Peer-review sessions throughout the term encourage students to continue to develop their portfolios by applying new knowledge gained in class. This constant effort to find practical applications for what they learn reinforces social studies content knowledge and encourages students to develop the reflective thinking necessary for effective teaching.

## What Is Included in the Theme-Based Portfolio?

Although students are encouraged to think creatively when designing their portfolios, we have found it useful to provide some guidelines for them to use as they collect materials. All materials are meant to provide students with opportunities for reading, writing, and reflecting.<sup>6</sup> Some of those materials are required, and some are left up to the student to select.

### Required elements

Materials all students are required to have in their portfolios include the following:

*Reflective journal.* The journal is where students record their weekly responses to readings and class discussions, particularly as they pertain to the student's chosen theme. In some instances, students respond in the journal to specific questions from the instructor regarding required readings and/or class discussions. The journal provides students with a single place to note questions, reflect on readings and discussions, and thoughtfully consider real-world applications for class activities. It also allows the instructor to monitor each student's understanding of readings and class discussions.

*Annotated bibliography.* This continuously updated collection of resources related to the portfolio theme is divided into two sections. The first section includes resources that students can use to improve their knowledge of the theme—university-level texts, journal articles, other secondary sources, primary source documents, Internet sites, and so forth. The second section contains teaching materials and resources that the student will use when he or she becomes a teacher. These might include textbooks, supplemental readings, primary source documents, magazine and newspaper articles, videos, filmstrips, Internet sites, music, pictures, political cartoons, and so forth. Not only does this annotated bibliography provide students with a rich collection of materials to choose from during their first, and even subsequent, years of teaching, but the activity encourages students to form the useful habit of searching for a variety of resources rather than relying on the text as their primary source of information.

*Peer evaluations.* Throughout the term, students are asked to provide thoughtful, written feedback to their classmates on elements of their unit plans (Table 1) and lesson presentations (Table 2). The peer evaluations are based on the criteria that we as teacher educators use to grade these assignments. Students are then given the opportunity to revise their unit plans based on the peer recommendations before submitting them for final evaluation. Each student also includes copies of his or her

Table 1. Questions for Peer Review of Objectives

- ▶ Are the objectives specific and clear?
- ▶ Do the objectives describe potential student behavior rather than a learning procedure?
- ▶ Does each objective contain a specific action verb?
- ▶ Does each objective describe only one learning product?
- ▶ Are there lower cognitive and higher cognitive objectives? Are they grouped correctly?
- ▶ Do the objectives require the attainment of meaningful knowledge and/or skill?
- ▶ Are the objectives realistic for the course and the students?
- ▶ Will the teacher be able to assess whether the students have accomplished the objectives?
- ▶ Do you have any recommendations for improving these objectives?

evaluations of classmates' work in this section, enabling us to analyze their ability both to assess the effectiveness of instructional plans and teaching strategies and to provide constructive feedback to others.

#### Self-selected elements

Experienced teacher educators generally recommend that portfolios allow student participation in the selection of contents.<sup>7</sup> Our students are required to include three self-selected elements. The following are examples that we suggest, but students are free to be creative in justifying the inclusion of alternative items:

*Lesson sketches.* As students develop ideas for practical applications of readings and discussions, they may record these ideas as brief lesson sketches.

*Textbook review.* Students may analyze a section of an elementary or secondary textbook regarding its treatment of the students' themes. A comparison of several textbooks provides an especially intriguing basis for analysis and evaluation.

*Newspaper and magazine article critique.* Students may respond to arguments or propositions made in articles in the popular media about educational issues and trends. They must also relate these critiques to their portfolio themes.

*Interviews with teachers.* A student may interview a classroom teacher to learn how his or her portfolio theme is applied in an elementary or secondary school. A student interested in using cooperative learning to teach economics, for example, may wish to investigate one teacher's implementation of that method.

#### How Is the Theme-Based Portfolio Evaluated?

It is important for all three elements of the theme-based portfolio "conversation"—between student and student, student and teacher, and student and self—to be included in its evaluation. For this reason, we evaluate portfolios based on self-evaluations, peer evaluations, and portfolio conferences.

#### Self-evaluation

Because one of the primary purposes of portfolio assessment is metacognitive development, it is important that self-evaluation occur throughout the portfolio development process. As students select items for inclusion, they are expected to develop and express clear rationales for how these items demonstrate knowledge acquisition and reflective thinking. We require a summary self-evaluation at the end of the term in which students describe how their portfolios provide evidence of their growth as thoughtful and reflective educators. This written summary is used as an introduction to the portfolio.

#### Peer review

Students meet in small groups throughout the term to discuss the themes of their portfolios and the items they have selected. This peer review allows individuals both to share ideas and resources and to receive feedback from classmates.

#### Portfolio conferences

We meet with each student at least twice during the term to discuss the theme of the portfolio, the materials chosen, and the

Table 2. Microteaching Peer Evaluation Form

Domain	Criterion
Organization and Sequence	Did the teacher appear well prepared? Did the lesson follow a logical sequence? Were the materials ready?
Clarity	Did the teacher speak at an appropriate volume and speed? Were the instructions and information presented clearly? Would the lesson be appropriate for secondary students?
Activity and Interest Level	Were students actively involved in the lesson? Was the lesson thought provoking? Was the lesson interesting?
Time and Place	Was the lesson completed within the required time? Did the teacher seem rushed to finish? Did the lesson flow at an even pace?
Social Studies Content	Did the lesson include meaningful social studies content? Was the teaching technique appropriate for the content? Would you consider the lesson to be "powerful social studies"?

rationale behind each selection. The midterm conference is intended as a formative evaluation to check progress and clarify goals. The final conference is a summary evaluation designed as a conversation between student and instructor regarding the progress and growth reflected in the portfolio.

### What Do We Hope to Accomplish?

Wilcox argues that "a portfolio process that encourages teachers in training to practice strategies that result in thoughtfulness will help them avoid entrenchment."<sup>8</sup> We hope that the use of theme-based portfolio assessment in curriculum and methods courses will help students to develop habits of reflective thinking. In addition, these future teachers will become comfortable implementing alternative forms of assessment in their own classrooms. Promoting reflective thinking in teacher preparation programs through portfolio assessment encourages teachers to engage their own students in the thoughtful and reflective activities necessary for active learning. ■

### Notes

1. For example, see: F. Leon Paulson, Pearl R. Paulson, and Carol A. Meyer, "What Makes a Portfolio a Portfolio?", *Educational Leadership* 48, No. 5 (February 1991): 60-63; Dennis M. Adams and Mary E. Hamm, "Portfolio

Assessment and Social Studies: Collecting, Selecting, and Reflecting on What Is Significant," *Social Education* 56, No. 2 (February 1992): 103-105; Ann Lockledge, "Portfolio Assessment in Middle School and High School Social Studies Classrooms," *The Social Studies* 88, No. 2 (March/April 1997): 65-69.

2. Adams and Hamm, "Portfolio Assessment and Social Studies," 105.
3. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1994), 172-73.
4. See E. Wayne Ross, "The Role of Portfolio Evaluation in Social Studies Teacher Education: How Evaluation Practices Shape Learning Experiences," *Social Education* 60, No. 3 (March 1996): 162-66.
5. Paulson et al., "What Makes a Portfolio a Portfolio?," 60.
6. Bonita L. Wilcox, "Smart Portfolios for Teachers in Training," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 40, No. 3 (November 1996): 173.
7. For example, see Paulson et al., "What Makes a Portfolio a Portfolio?"; Adams and Hamm, "Portfolio Assessment and Social Studies"; Wilcox, "Smart Portfolios."
8. Wilcox, "Smart Portfolios," 172.

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