

Using an Electronic Portfolio to Translate Theory Into Practice for FieldWork In Educational Administration

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe the National University Educational Administration Preliminary Credential Portfolio Fieldwork program, translating theory into practice. This paper will also trace the lengthy developmental process from the traditional hardcopy fieldwork portfolio that candidates have traditionally assembled over the past 20 years to the newly developed e-portfolio. The e-portfolio will be described in detail. Candidates post their fieldwork activities and documentation online, which has encouraged more student/faculty interaction throughout the entire fieldwork process, and has provided more consistent instructor grading from a rubric, and more complete data reporting for the university accrediting agencies.

Brief Overview of National University's Educational Administration Program

National University is headquartered in San Diego, California, and has 28 campuses throughout the state and one in Nevada. It was founded in 1971, so it is a relatively young university. Its mission, then as now, is to serve the needs of the adult learner. Today the University enrolls 27,000 full-time equivalent students, with an average age of 34. Nearly 50 percent of the students are in the School of Education and nearly 1,000 each year prepare to become licensed school administrators not only in California but also throughout the United States. There are a small but growing number of students completing their Master of Science degree in Educational Administration while residing in other countries as well. From start, National University developed an instructional delivery format that has students take one course a month for two nights a week, with one Saturday class, which is replicated in online courses as well. (Hoban & Castle, 2007)

National University, according to statistics provided by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (October 24, 2007), which is responsible for overseeing certification in California, has prepared the largest number of certified school leaders/administrators in the state, approximately 300 a year, for the past several years. In 2006, the faculty moved from an administrative/management based curriculum to a leadership instruction-based curriculum to serve online students. This move came as the result of several years of department discussion, reflection on leadership research, assessing the needs of students, and, above all, responding to the national and international calls as well

as new state mandated accreditation directions for developing standards based school leadership preparation programs (Hoban & Tyler, 2008).

The Field Experience Component--Translating Theory Into Practice

In the National University Educational Administration Preliminary Credential Program, candidates complete:

1. Reflective essays for each of the seven core educational administration course signature assignments.
2. Twelve significant administrative activities within six Tier I program learning outcomes for the Educational Administration Credential Program, which aligns with ISSLIC (Interstate School Licensure Consortium) standards. These activities are designed to apply theoretical concepts studied in core credential classes to practical and realistic settings. Field experiences include both day-to-day functions of administrators and long-term policy design and implementation, conducted in schools with a culturally and linguistically diverse student population.

Previously, students submitted a traditional two to four inch hard copy loose leaf portfolio binder, organized into the 22 separate activities, each with documentation, along with the necessary signed field experiences agreement, field experiences plan worksheet, candidate contact log with the university supervisor, candidate self-evaluation, evaluation of candidate, and evaluation of program by candidate (National University School of Education, 2009).

The Traditional Portfolio—Issues and Concerns

While the traditional portfolio (hard copy loose leaf binder) satisfactorily met the fieldwork course outcomes and requirements, it fell short in several areas:

1. Inadequate and infrequent contact existed between the student and university supervisor for providing formative feedback and evaluation of completed activities until the final submission of the portfolio binder at the end of the course, when all of the activities were signed off for completion.
2. Another concern regarding the use of the traditional, hard copy portfolio has been lack of storage space for student-completed multiple loose-leaf portfolio binders at the University's regional academic centers. Often the binders would disappear or get lost over time and were not maintained or properly stored for easy access in the event of accreditation visits.
3. Other concerns included the absence of a rubric for evaluating the quality of the students' completed activities and inconsistent data collection from the loose-leaf binders when preparing internal and external program assessments. This inconsistency occurred because there are a large number of instructors teaching this fieldwork course who submitted incomplete data or no data at all.

Why an Electronic Portfolio for the National University Educational Administration Program: A Rationale

National University's Educational Administration program, leading to California and other states' equivalent preliminary administrative services credentials, has utilized a portfolio to capture student responses to field work experiences for over 20 years. To complete their field work part of the program, students, as noted immediately above, have been required to complete a portfolio that addresses a short reflection for each of the program learning objectives. They complete two activities for each of the 12 administrative competencies that today align with the California Professional School Educational Leadership Standards (CPSELS) and the ISSLIC (Interstate School Licensure Consortium) standards. Students then produce a self-evaluation and request a site mentor/ supervisor to evaluate them in terms of these standards. These requirements are summarized and outlined in a published Portfolio Manual.

Over the years, however, this approach to portfolio construction was lacking, with faculty consistently recognizing that the student reflection/evaluation piece, especially, was weak. Students typically dismissed the evaluation component with exceptionally brief and often almost meaningless comments. That motivated faculty to find a better way to address this concern. To start, they began with an examination of the theoretical underpinnings of portfolio development.

The literature regarding the construction of student portfolios is consistent. For the most part, it addresses student teacher portfolios and rarely field work completed by candidates seeking to become school administrators. And what can be usually found for administrative candidates is a portfolio approach that archives student projects from completed courses, not actual field work itself.

Helen Barrett in a keynote address to the Eiffel Conference in London, 2009, observed, "Reflection is the heart and soul of a portfolio" (Barrett: <http://electronicportfolios.com/portfolios.html>). Barrett, in another venue, recalled the history of portfolio development:

The use of "portfolio assessment" in education emerged in the late 1980s, primarily in college writing classrooms (Belanoff, Elbow, 1991), to address the needs for accountability: the emphasis on portfolio assessment. In K-12 classrooms, the emphasis was more on portfolios as a showcase of learning, as a counterpoint to traditional forms of assessment or to illuminate capabilities not covered by standardized testing. According to Kathleen Blake Yancey and Irwin Weiser (1997), those purposes are becoming reversed, with post secondary institutions exploring the wide varieties of purposes for portfolios (learning, advising, employment) and with state departments of educations (Kentucky, Vermont, Connecticut) designing statewide models of student portfolios for statewide assessment. (Barrett, June 24, 2009)

It is to this latter aspect of using portfolios—not the archival/showcase process – that educational administration faculty at National University began to turn, especially learning and advising. More specifically, the faculty wanted to redesign the existing portfolio approach from just documenting student progress in completing fieldwork to providing administrative candidates with greater opportunities to reflect upon and to evaluate their actual work and to explore how the field experience might impact their future career performance. In other words, the portfolio was not to be a volume collecting past history of things done, but an interactive tool to be used with faculty in giving meaning to fieldwork experiences and to consider what the Stanford Center for Innovations in Learning explored in its Folio Thinking Project (as cited in Rickards et al, 2008, p. 31-50), “ The reflective practice of creating portfolios enables students to document and track their learning, develop an integrated, coherent picture of their learning experiences, and enhance their self understanding.”

Definitions

An e-portfolio or digital portfolio is a collection of electronic evidence compiled and organized by a user, i.e., a student. Such electronic evidence may include inputted text, electronic files, images, multimedia, blog entries, and hyperlinks. E-portfolios can be a user’s self-expression or a demonstration of a student’s abilities, which is maintained over a period of time. Some e-portfolio applications permit varying degrees of audience access, so the same portfolio might be used for multiple purposes. An e-portfolio can be seen as a type of learning record that provides actual evidence of achievement. Learning records are closely related to an individual student learning plan, an ingenious way for individuals to manage their learning independently.

Students can communicate their learning for understanding to an instructor or others through an electronic portfolio. E-portfolios, like traditional portfolios, can facilitate students' reflection on their own learning and can lead to more awareness of learning strategies and needs. Results of a comparative research between paper based portfolios and electronic portfolios in the same setting, suggest use of an electronic portfolio leads to better learning outcomes.

There are three main types of e-portfolios, although they may be referred to using different terms: developmental (e.g., working), reflective (e.g., learning), and representational (e.g., showcase). A developmental e-portfolio is a record of things that the owner has done over a period of time, and may be directly tied to learner outcomes or rubrics. A reflective e-portfolio includes personal reflection on the content and what it means for the owner's development. A representational e-portfolio shows the owner's achievements in relation to particular work or developmental goals and is, therefore, selective. When it is used for job application it is sometimes called Career portfolio. The three main types may be mixed to achieve different learning, personal, or work-related outcomes with the e-portfolio owner usually being the person who determines access levels. (Wikipedia, 2009, Career Portfolios).

In addition to allowing for administrative candidates to reflect on their fieldwork experiences, moving to an electronic portfolio engages candidates in advancing their own technical skills, something necessary for a school leader these days and well stated by Montgomery and Wiley (2004).

As technology continues to be integrated into schools and classrooms, the principal is viewed as the technology leader. Leadership candidates need to develop sufficient comfort with technology in order to assume the responsibility inherent in the position of principal. An assignment to create an e-portfolio, thereby, offers leadership candidates the opportunity to develop expertise in multiple software environments. Students' technological skills are important factors in the construction of e-portfolios and the success of an assessment system.

Another aspect to portfolio development that has needed to be considered is the assessment of student work, not only for the student's benefit but also to meet the needs of state, regional, and national accrediting bodies. For some time National Council Accreditation Teacher Education (NCATE) has required substantive, documented assessment data as it reviews programs. These data are to be from a variety of sources, including signature assignments in courses, comprehensive program exit examination results, candidate evaluations by site supervisors, and assessments of fieldwork by university supervisors.

These data points are also essential in meeting internal university annual program assessments and state accreditation requirements such as those required by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC) and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), both accrediting organizations of National University's educational programs. Capturing these data in the past had been somewhat of a chore, with heavy reliance on individual faculty reporting of scores and affirmation of field work portfolio assessment being indicated by a "Pass—Fail" designation without individualized discrimination regarding the qualitative accomplishment of students on the competencies/standards addressed in the fieldwork. Developing and implementing an electronic portfolio would enable university supervisors not only to assess individual work using a scoring rubric, but also would allow for an efficient data collection process to be designed that would not rely on manual tabulation and faculty reporting. This would expedite the assessment process considerably as Wetzel, Strudler, Addis, and Luz (2009) discovered in their study of Board of Examiner Reports submitted to NCATE in 2007, which showed that more and more universities were using the electronic format.

The Journey to an Electronic Portfolio

While the National University Educational Administration Department introduced the electronic portfolio as a requirement for completing fieldwork in January, 2009, the journey to develop a usable, student and faculty friendly instrument that

addressed the concerns noted above was long and hard. The Educational Administration Department faculty began exploring the development of an electronic portfolio almost ten years ago. A first effort began with an outside vendor who had difficulty in conceptualizing what an electronic portfolio was expected to provide, and perhaps, not the clearest directions from the faculty who wanted to have an exact replicate of the hard copy version. And, unfortunately on the part of the external development team, most of the concern was for the technical side of development, with a team being sent from Barcelona, Spain to the university to make a presentation on the technology and the mathematical formulae being used to build an electronic portfolio, which was later abandoned. After another attempt for development with another company, a dispute developed over the costs of development, with actual costs substantively overrunning projected costs.

As an interim measure to move beyond hard copy three ring binders with portfolio write ups and selected artifacts, the department decided to require all student materials and artifacts, as formatted in the original hardcopy Portfolio Manual, be presented on a CD that then would be reviewed by university field work supervisors and archived for later manual data retrieval for assessment purposes. This approach solved the hard copies storage problem, but did not address the faculty's interaction with students electronically while building their portfolios during their field work.

In 2006, a faculty committee was formed to develop an electronic portfolio, with attention being given to interaction with students as they were completing their field work. This became more important since the most students were completing the program online, many of which resided too far from the faculty for in-person visits during the fieldwork experiences. In addition, assessment needs had grown for the university to retrieve data from employers regarding student performance on competencies/standards and dispositions/skills needed to become a school leader, and for graded, qualitative assessment of student fieldwork using a rubric.

The faculty committee met regularly and explored several e-portfolio approaches with a design team from E-College headquarters in Denver, and a local university technology expert affiliated with E-College. Several prototypes were presented and tested and faculty issues being resolved, it was decided to "go live" on January 1, 2009, with all new students and continuing students being required to use the electronic portfolio as they progressed through their fieldwork.

Now that the electronic portfolio for fieldwork is in place, students and faculty are using it with relative success. Some adjunct faculty who served as fieldwork supervisors resigned because they did not want to learn the new technology, even after a number of training sessions led by the in house e-portfolio expert and a colleague from the department who is well versed in this approach.

The Final Product

Credential Program candidates currently complete project field work requiring:

1. A reflective essay for each of the seven core educational administration course signature assignments.
2. Twelve significant administrative activities within six Tier I program learning outcomes for the Educational Administration Credential Program, which today align with the ISSLIC (Interstate School Licensure Consortium) standards. These activities are designed to apply theoretical concepts studied in core credential classes to practical and realistic settings. Field experiences include both day-to-day functions of administrators and longer term policy design and implementation, and are conducted in schools with a culturally and linguistically diverse student population.

Prior to the current e-portfolio, the traditional portfolio (hard copy, loose leaf binder) was lacking for faculty recognition of the student reflection/evaluation piece, and weak effective assessment/ evaluation. It also fell short because of inadequate and infrequent contact between the student and university supervisor for formative feedback, assessment and evaluation of completed activities until the final submission of the traditional portfolio binder at the end of the course, and inadequate submission of hard data for university accreditation agency purposes.

This current e-portfolio requires more student/instructor interaction time (almost a year) throughout the process rather than an exclusively summative document in the traditional portfolio. Also, the quality of responses and reflections is improving, with current instructor observations that the quality of reflections and responses significantly better than those found in the traditional portfolio. The e-portfolio fieldwork has now become a true learning and reflective process.

Students communicate their learning for understanding to an instructor or others through an electronic portfolio, reflecting their learning, leading to more awareness of learning strategies and needs. The results of a comparative research between traditional portfolios and electronic portfolios suggest use of an electronic portfolio leads to better learning outcomes.

Appendix A contains an example response to a category/competency required of the student. For each category there is a template that is completed by the students and submitted to the instructor/university supervisor. As the activity is being completed, the student sends a copy to the instructor who provides feedback. When the final version is ready, the student submits the write-up and the documentation for evaluation. Appendix A contains a sample write up, the rubric, the score, and the final comment of the instructor—in this case short because there was more lengthy commentary provided earlier in the process. It is apparent that the student has thought through the activity and has learned from it—the goal of the field experience activity in the first place. This scoring

information, including the site mentor's evaluation of the student, is automatically entered into the University's electronic assessment system.

Some Final Thoughts

Now that the e-portfolio for National University's educational administration has been implemented, there are a number of students who have completed their work using it. While it is most likely too soon to provide any definitive reactions to it, some conclusions can be drawn: The e-portfolio does require more student – instructor interaction time than was usually the case when the old portfolio was presented at the end of the process—taking almost a year—as an almost exclusively summative document. The capability of interaction keeps the students and instructors in touch throughout the process. Also, as the sample shows, the quality of responses and reflections is improving, with current instructor observations indicating that the quality of reflections and responses to be significantly better than those found in the older, hard copy/CD approach. The fieldwork has now become a true learning and reflective process and is considerably more than a chronicle of activities. The educational administration faculty is pleased with the e-portfolio result and looks forward to improving the process and enhancing the learning opportunities for future school leaders.

What did the National University Educational Administration Department learn by its past development mistakes, and would do differently to provide lessons and insights for other institutions to follow, who may want to develop or adopt an e-portfolio platform?

1. Work with the same vendor, i.e. E-College that develops all of the other university online courses, instead of using different vendors
2. Seek out clear direction and understanding from the accreditation agency as to what student evaluative data is needed for accountability records for accreditation
3. Pilot test the e-portfolio product before fully implemented
4. Conduct an external review and evaluation of the student fieldwork e-portfolio for further improvements and updates to reflect accreditation changes
5. Provide quality training an in-service to faculty members on the use and management of field service e-portfolios to gain full faculty acceptance and understanding.

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Appendix A

Student Name:

Category 6. Human Resource Administration

National University

Activity Title: Mock Evaluation

Date Completed: August 1, 2009

Identify the activity:

I will conduct a mock evaluation of a fellow teacher using the union approved evaluation tool. The evaluation will be done on a teacher who agreed to volunteer to let me evaluate them for the purpose of this class. I will hold a post conference just as an administrator would.

Explain the implementation:

I used the union approved evaluation to observe the teacher for one whole period just as an administrator would during a real evaluation. The volunteer teacher was aware that I would be coming in to conduct an evaluation, but would only be using the results to fulfill the requirements for this class. The volunteer also agreed to the post conference after the mock evaluation was completed. Examine the process: I have had experience being evaluated with our approved evaluation tool. Four domains are examined during an evaluation:

Domain A - Organizing Content Knowledge for Student Learning

Domain B – Creating an Environment for Student Learning

Domain C – Teaching for Student Learning D
 Domain D – Teacher Professionalism

However only two of the domains are used when a teacher is being observed in the classroom: Domain B-Classroom Environment and Domain C- Instruction. The other two domains A & D are discussed towards the end of the year during a summative evaluation along with three previously completed classroom evaluations earlier that year.

I used the "Teacher Observation Instrument" which focuses on domains B and C. There are 5 performance ratings that are used during a classroom evaluation for each of the subsections in the two domains: U: Unsatisfactory NI: Needs Improvement S: Satisfactory E: Excellent Not Obs.: Not Observed.

As part of our CIP (Continuous Improvement Plan), I had to observe fellow teachers to see if they had an engaging classroom with engaging activities, so when I went to conduct my mock evaluation I was not too nervous. I briefly scanned the 10 items that are to be observed and evaluated.

The classroom I observed was a science class and the teacher's lesson was a water lab. After a while I decided to get up and actively engage myself in the classroom. Being engaged allowed me to get a better feel for evaluating the classroom environment and instruction, which reassured myself that domain subsections were being met.

The teacher displayed to me every subsection, all with S or E ratings. I gave an E rating for B5: Making the physical environment as safe and conducive to learning as possible and C4: Monitoring understanding, providing feedback, and adjusting learning activities as the situation demands.

Later that day the teacher came to my administrator's office to meet with me for the post conference

I discussed what I had observed, thought the lesson was a great lesson and pointed out strengths and weaknesses. At the end of the conference both of us signed off on the "Teacher Observation Instrument" and made a copy for the teacher to take back with them.

Instructor Comments: I am glad that you had such a successful experience.

Rubric

- 3 A clearly written, reflective and fully developed three part response to the activity. The response demonstrates content mastery and provides substantial documentation.
- 2 An acceptably written, reflective three part response to the activity. The response demonstrates content mastery and provides adequate documentation.
- 1 An unacceptable response with limited or no documentation.

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