Using Portfolios to Reflect on Practice

Seung-Yoeun Yoo

Personal reflections encourage teachers to observe students carefully and to develop appropriate individualized instruction.

Portfolios have recently gained recognition as an effective way for evaluators to assess a teacher's professional growth and for teachers to reflect on their own instructional practices (Borko, Michalc, Timmons, & Siddle, 1997). Writing in reflective journals—an important part of the portfolio process—provides opportunities for self-evaluation and helps teachers develop their personal teaching values and strategies.

In Korea, teachers are not accustomed to expressing personal points of view or making the independent decisions that developing a portfolio requires; on the contrary, they prefer evaluations that call for rote answers and conventional approaches to the curriculum. The traditional Confucian culture of Korea is conservative and hierarchical, and teachers maintain clear demarcations of rank and authority. So when I assigned portfolios to my graduate class of professionals in elementary and early childhood education—teachers in and directors of elementary schools, kindergartens, or preschools—the most difficult challenge that my students faced was finding their own voices as decision makers, researchers, and inquirers.

To help my students develop their own values and individualize their teaching, I asked them to express their feelings, thoughts, struggles, stories, theories, beliefs, and inquiries in class discussions and by writing several pages in their portfolio journals each week. I struggled to encourage them to become knowledge producers rather than knowledge receivers.

Throughout the course, I emphasized that portfolios have no standard form and encouraged my students to produce different types of portfolios according to their individual goals and interests. With some difficulty, the students decided what areas they were interested in and gradually developed their own approaches. They then used their portfolios to develop plans for individualizing instruction for each student's readiness level. Those who were not classroom teachers spent part of the school day with a teacher and in some cases studied teachers' collaborative strategies.

To encourage my students to develop an individual approach to the assignment, I borrowed an analogy from another portfolio (Fox, 1996), pointing out that diners at a salad bar choose their ingredients and create a salad that is different.

from everyone else's. Each diner can find what tastes good to him or her and what flavors he or she wants to try. A portfolio also reflects its creator's individual interests and values.

I also emphasized that we are all different; if all human beings were the same, we could not distinguish our strengths and weaknesses. Having weaknesses does not mean we are bad or foolish; on the contrary, weaknesses provide us with opportunities to learn and improve. As lifelong learners, we continue to develop at our own pace throughout our lives. Similarly, each child develops strengths and overcomes weaknesses at his or her own pace. The educator's job is to find each student's level of readiness for new learning, to scaffold what each student will be able to learn next in his or her zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), and to take advantage of the window of opportunity when an instructional method will be most potent (Bodrova, Leong, & Paynter, 1999).

Closely observing their students and reflecting on their observations in their portfolio journals helped my graduate students analyze and change their teaching strategies.

**Social Development: Ji-min**

Ms. Lee, for example, chose to focus on her students' social relationships. Her close observations helped her see the social world of the classroom from each student's perspective.

I came to realize that my students' social circles are complicated and diverse; they experience delight, struggle, and competition in their relationships with their peers. As I watched and listened, I discovered many social dynamics that I had missed previously.

As Ms. Lee continued writing in her portfolio journal, she improved her abilities to understand each student's point of view, to notice students with exceptional potential, to pay attention to changes in her students' behavior, and to encourage them to take advantage of their abilities. As she worked on differentiating instruction for each student, she observed how each student made friends and collaborated with peers.

One student in her classroom, 5-year-old Ji-min, was very quiet and always played alone. She appeared not to want to get involved with others. Her reading and writing skills, however, were excellent. Ms. Lee decided to assign Ji-min the role of literacy helper, giving Ji-min the responsibility of helping less-skilled students to read and write. After several weeks, Ji-min's attitude toward her fellow students changed. She became more sociable and engaged in activities with others.

Students who find socializing difficult need help developing relationships with their peers. Teachers can use the observation skills required for portfolios as a powerful tool for focusing on each child's individual pace of social development.
The Mistake That Wasn't: Min-ho

Five-year-old Min-ho drew a picture of a beach for his kindergarten class. His drawing included a fishing boat, many fish, a seagull, a beach umbrella, a lighthouse, and several children swimming. After he finished his drawing, he looked at it for a while and then went to the book area. He stayed there for 30 minutes studying the cover of a book, and then returned to the art area and wrote "butterfly picnic" on his drawing. The observant teacher, who was working on her portfolio, did not understand the title for his drawing because there were no butterflies in it, so she went to the book area and found the book he had been looking at. The book's title was *Butterfly's Picnic*.

The boy who drew the picture of a beach was not able to read or write, but after he had completed his drawing, he thought that it was his best work. He wanted to write down the name of the drawing, so he copied the title of his favorite book, having made a connection between the butterfly's picnic in the book and the beach picnic that he had drawn. The teacher observing this process said that if she had not been watching Min-ho closely, she would have misunderstood his efforts and stereotyped his behavior as illiterate. His behavior indicated that he understood the value of the printed word and could make meaningful connections that would be valuable for beginning the process of learning to read and write.

Open to Imagination

Ms. Kim had her students write letters to fairy-tale characters; if they did not know how to write a word, they used invented spelling to express their ideas. She observed the students' activities, listened to their stories, and collected their work as she sought to develop their writing skills and understand how their imaginations developed.

I didn't realize how many ways my students differentiated between imagination and reality. I asked the children to write letters to Cinderella's fairy godmother. I made a fairy godmother puppet and used a high voice for the puppet godmother as I read the children's letters aloud at story time. One day, my voice was husky because of a sore throat, so I could not produce the fairy godmother's high voice. One child said, "I do not want to talk with you, Ms. Kim. I want to talk with the fairy godmother. Bring her back to talk with me." The child's request made me wonder how the students perceived fairy-tale characters. I asked them if they thought that the Cinderella's fairy godmother really visited our classroom. Their answers were remarkably varied. Some children believed that the fairy godmother just lives in books, not in the real world. Other children, however, believed that she lives elsewhere—in a
mountain cave, in a house in a forest, or under the sea—and some believed that she comes to our city during the night. I was surprised that children of the same age in the same classroom viewed fairy-tale characters so differently. I became curious about the differences among my students' perceptions of fantasy. I read many articles about children's imaginations, but no clear findings explained the development of children's imaginations at each age and level. I realized I had to do my own research to find out how my students' imaginations developed.

Ms. Kim's openness to her students' individual perceptions led her to new research questions and further independent inquiry, an important characteristic of a high-quality teacher.

Qualities of a Reflective Teacher

The ultimate goal of assigning portfolios is to help teachers redesign their curriculums and reorganize their teaching methods on the basis of their observations and reflections. The portfolio process demands a willingness to

- **Be observers.** To understand our students, we need to record each student's learning processes, observe students' behavior, watch and listen to students in both formal and informal settings, and be open to what they are experiencing.
- **Be self-critical.** We need to continually ask ourselves: How am I doing? Did the lesson really happen as I intended? Did I effectively teach all the students at their various readiness levels? If not, what's wrong with my pedagogical goals? Did my teaching methods correspond to my beliefs about teaching?
- **Conduct research.** Like scientists who pose questions, develop hypotheses, and seek objective answers, we can be open to new paths of inquiry.
- **Collaborate.** Sharing ideas with colleagues and solving problems through discussions help us reflect on our theories and teaching methods.
- **Allow room for mistakes.** Allowing students to freely approach new ways of understanding and observing will help them learn. Facing errors, contrasts, and contradictions will help students gather more information, enhance their confidence, and understand that apparent stumbling blocks are the essential elements of forming viable theories.
- **Be lifelong learners.** We can seek knowledge from books, classes, professional experts, and colleagues. The more teachers learn from students, the better understanding they have of their students' culture and behaviors.

By committing themselves to ongoing reflection, my graduate students gained a more holistic view of teaching and learning, problem solving, and curriculum design. They improved their observation skills, which helped them avoid drawing careless
conclusions about their students on the basis of test scores and superficial observations. They avoided stereotyping their students as quiet, antisocial, or offensive. The portfolio process was an important part of my graduate students' professional growth because they were able to see the whole picture of their real practice in the classroom.

References


Seung-Yoeun Yoo is Research Associate in Early Childhood and Elementary Curriculum and Instruction and Teacher Education at the Korea Institute of Curriculum and Evaluation, 25-1 Samchung-dong, Chongro-Ku, Seoul 110-230, Republic of Korea; edukid@hanmail.net.