

Electronic Portfolios:

A Guide to Professional Development and Assessment

Marilyn Heath, Ed.D., NBCT

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table of contents

Author Biography	vii
Dedication	vii
Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	ix
Section One: Considering a Portfolio	1
Chapter One	
What Is a Professional Portfolio and Why Do I Need One?	1
Defining a Professional Portfolio	1
Types of Professional Portfolios	3
The Résumé Portfolio	4
The Showcase Portfolio	4
The Evaluation Portfolio	4
The Professional Development Portfolio	5
Rationale for Portfolio Development	5
Portfolios as Evaluation and Assessment Instruments	6
Summary	7
Chapter Two	
Going Digital: Electronic Portfolios	9
What Is an Electronic Portfolio?	9
Benefits of an Electronic Portfolio	9
Disadvantages of an Electronic Portfolio	12
The Technology Factor	14
Summary	15
Section Two: Planning a Portfolio	17
Chapter Three	
Portfolio Development Considerations	17
Identifying Your Purpose	17
The Résumé Portfolio	18
The Showcase Portfolio	19
The Evaluation Portfolio	19
The Professional Development Portfolio	20
Portfolio Goals and Objectives	21
Portfolio Organization	24
Who Is Your Audience?	26
Summary	27

Section Three: Developing a Professional Portfolio	29
Chapter Four	
Portfolio Development: What Did I Do?	29
The Working Portfolio	30
Identifying Artifacts	30
Selecting Artifacts	31
Organizing Artifacts	33
Summary	35
Chapter Five	
Portfolio Development: What Did I Learn?	37
What Is Reflection?	37
Reflection and Professional Self-knowledge	40
Why Should I Reflect?	41
Reflection and Professional Development	42
Reflecting for the Professional Portfolio	43
Summary	44
Chapter Six	
Portfolio Development: What Will I Do Next?	45
Projecting Reflection	46
Formulating Goals and Objectives for Future Professional Development	48
Summary	49
Section Four: Producing a Professional Portfolio	51
Chapter Seven	
Presentation and Production	51
Presentation: Public or Private?	51
Public: Publishing to the Web	52
Private: Disk or Web?	52
Production: How Much Expertise Do I Need?	53
Production Hardware	54
Production Software	55
Microsoft Word 2000, 2002	56
Microsoft PowerPoint 2000, 2002	58
Microsoft Publisher 2000	60
Microsoft FrontPage 2000, 2002	61
Macromedia Dreamweaver MX	63
Knowledge Adventure HyperStudio 4.5	65
Other Software Programs	67
Microsoft Excel 2000, 2002	67
Adobe Acrobat	68
Image Editing Software	69
Audio and Video Software	69
Summary	70

Chapter Eight	
Portfolio Design Basics	71
Structure	71
Layout	72
Alignment	72
Proximity	73
Repetition	74
Contrast	75
Navigation	76
Color	77
Graphics	78
Type	79
Good and Bad Design	80
Summary	81
Section Five: Presenting a Professional Portfolio	85
Chapter Nine	
Sharing Your Professional Portfolio	85
Sharing with Colleagues	85
Sharing with Students	86
Sharing with Administrators	87
Sharing with Your Audience	87
Publishing to the Web	87
Publishing to a Disk	88
Legal Issues	89
Copyright and Fair Use	90
Summary	93
Chapter Ten	
Pulling It All Together	95
Professional Portfolio Development in a Nutshell	96
A Final Check	98
Summary	98
Appendices	101
Bibliography	111
Index	115

Figure 1.1. Types of professional portfolios	3
Figure 2.1. Comparison of traditional and electronic portfolio organization	10
Figure 2.2. Cost comparison between traditional and electronic portfolios	12
Figure 3.1. Conceptual development of a professional portfolio	23
Figure 4.1. Comparison of two approaches to portfolio development	29
Figure 4.2. Organization process for the working portfolio	34
Figure 5.1. An adult learning theory model	37
Figure 5.2. The reflective process	39
Figure 6.1. Excerpts from sample artifact and accompanying reflection	45
Figure 7.1. Levels of portfolio development expertise	54
Figure 7.2. Computer hardware for portfolio development	55
Figure 7.3. Example of a main page created in Microsoft Word	57
Figure 7.4. Example of a main page developed in Microsoft PowerPoint	58
Figure 7.5. Example of an electronic portfolio created in Microsoft Publisher	59
Figure 7.6. Example of an electronic portfolio developed in Microsoft FrontPage	62
Figure 7.7. Example of a main page created in Macromedia Dreamweaver	64
Figure 7.8. Example of a main page created in Knowledge Adventure HyperStudio	65
Figure 8.1. Examples of incorrect and correct horizontal alignment	73
Figure 8.2. Examples of poor and effective repetition	74
Figure 8.3. Examples of a “pasted on” GIF and a GIF with a transparent background	78
Figure 8.4. An example of bad layout and design	80
Figure 8.5. An example of good portfolio layout and design	81
Figure 8.6. An example of an electronic portfolio main page, objective page, and artifact page	82
Figure 9.1. Comparison of storage media used for electronic portfolios	88
Figure 9.2. Fair use guidelines for copyrighted work used in multimedia productions	91

Appendix A	Portfolio development worksheet (ch 3)	101
Appendix B	Artifact checklist (ch 4)	103
Appendix C	Reflection worksheet (ch 5)	105
Appendix D	Portfolio design worksheet (ch 8)	107
Appendix E	Rubric for electronic portfolio development (ch 10)	109

author biography

Marilyn Heath received her Bachelor of Science in Education and a Master of Arts in Geography from Bowling Green State University (Ohio). She received her MLIS and her Ed. D. from the University of South Carolina and has worked as a media specialist and educator for the past eighteen years. After receiving her doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction, she directed the Media Services program at East Tennessee State University. She returned to South Carolina to resume her work with high school students as a media specialist, and she became a National Board Certified Teacher in 2003.

Dr. Heath has written articles and presented at both state and national conferences on the topic of electronic portfolios; this is her first book. When she isn't working or writing, she reads and gardens. She has one adult son, Michael, and shares her home with her kitty, Gracie.

dedication

This book is dedicated to my parents, Paul and Laura Heath, who have given me a lifetime of support and encouragement.

acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the expertise and generous help of my son, Michael Whited, with the software descriptions in Chapter Seven. Michael, who works in technical support and Web page design, is the computer whiz in the family, and I owe much of my technology know-how to him.

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I first became a media specialist in 1990, and at that time I knew very little about portfolios. However, it was not long before I realized that words on paper could not adequately describe the various aspects of the job I was doing. I began taking pictures—pictures of special displays, pictures of contest winners, pictures of visiting authors, pictures of conference activities, pictures of special events. In addition to my pictures, I had clippings of newspaper articles, letters of support and appreciation, certificates from training sessions, awards, and copies of publications. Eventually, I organized all of these artifacts into a binder, labeled them, and felt satisfied I had created an accurate and informative picture of my media center and my practice. Little did I know at the time I had made my first attempt at creating a professional portfolio.

At about the same time, the media specialists in my district were charged with the task of revamping our evaluation instrument. It had become clear the assessment used for teachers did not adequately measure the knowledge and skills necessary in the library. With much hard work, we developed a new assessment. It detailed pages of performances, arranged by standards, and was scored using a Likert-scale type of assessment. It did a better job than its predecessor, but it was still a generic, one-size-fits-all assessment that did not present a clear picture of what happened in the media center.

Although the new assessment instrument did a better job of reflecting knowledge and skills, I still felt it did not present a true picture of my professional self. I kept adding to my collection of pictures and other artifacts, and my binder got thicker and thicker. I even titled it Professional Portfolio of Marilyn Heath, but it would be several years before I realized that my first attempt at creating a professional portfolio fell short of the mark.

It was ten years later I first heard about electronic portfolios at a technology conference. After that, I made it my quest to find out all I could about professional portfolios, especially electronic ones. I researched, experimented with my own portfolios, wrote, and presented on the topic. The results of those endeavors come together in this book. It is not, however, a culminating experience. You will discover, as I have, that professional portfolios are never truly done—at least not until the end of our careers. Until then, we can keep learning, growing, and recording our progress in our electronic portfolios.

The book is intended to assist practicing educators, as well as pre-service teachers, administrators, and teacher educators, in their development of a professional portfolio, but the book concentrates specifically on reflection and how the reflection process in portfolio development contributes to professional development.

In addition to presenting the conceptual process of portfolio development, the book is meant to be a practical guide to portfolio development. Thus, the chapters are sequenced from the conceptual considerations before the portfolio is begun to the final polish of the completed portfolio. The book is a workbook in the

sense that worksheets and step-by-step instructions are provided to help you through the process from start to finish. By the time you finish the book, you can have a completed portfolio. As you will learn early in the process, even a person with basic computer skills can create an outstanding professional electronic portfolio. Furthermore, you can do it all with software you probably have available to you right now.

However, this book is not intended to serve as a technical manual. Specific, how-to instructions for software programs or particular pieces of hardware are not included. It is expected that the user has or will achieve a functional level of expertise before attempting portfolio development. Discussions of software and hardware are meant to inform readers as to their appropriateness for portfolio development—nothing more.

With that said, a closer look at the book's contents is in order. The book identifies ten steps of portfolio development in five distinct sections. The first two chapters are included in Section One: Considering a Portfolio. This section of the book is conceptual, and the chapters examine what a portfolio is, why a professional portfolio is beneficial, and the advantages of choosing an electronic portfolio. With a firm conceptual grounding, the book moves on to explore various organizational considerations in the second section, Planning a Portfolio. This section looks at the importance of identifying the portfolio's purpose, identifying the prospective audience, and developing specific objectives.

Developing a Professional Portfolio is Section Three of the book, and each of the three chapters addresses a specific question that will help you develop your portfolio. This section helps to determine what your portfolio should include, your reflections on those artifacts, and plans for the future. Reflection is an integral part of an effective portfolio, and it is covered thoroughly here.

Section Four explores the issues to consider in Producing a Professional Portfolio. Hardware and software choices are explored, as well as the basics of good design. The final section of the book is Presenting a Professional Portfolio. This section suggests ways to present your portfolio to peers, students, administrators, and, of course, your portfolio's intended audience. It also reviews the portfolio process and provides a final check sheet and discussion of how to give your portfolio the final polish it needs to be flawless.

The book is organized to help you move through the portfolio development process step by step. Even if you are not fully convinced you need an electronic portfolio or are unsure you can develop one, the goal for this type of portfolio is professional growth; the process is every bit as important as the product if it is to help you achieve your professional goals. A good approach would be to read the first section to decide if an electronic portfolio fits your needs. If so, then continue with Section Two to consider organizational issues. If, at this point, you are convinced that you should develop a portfolio and feel confident that you can develop an electronic portfolio, then you are ready to begin.

You may copy and use the worksheets located in the appendices to help you through your own professional growth process, and don't forget the final, crucial step of checking your work to apply a professional polish.

Chapter One

What Is a Professional Portfolio and Why Do I Need One?

Portfolio development has been part of the educational scene for several years. Pre-service teachers often develop a portfolio as evidence that they have met professional standards and as a requirement for graduation. Later, a new graduate may use the same portfolio as a supplement to her résumé to land her first teaching position. Then, unless the educator is applying for National Board certification or some other achievement, that portfolio is put on the shelf and rarely, if ever, used again.

It is time to take a fresh look at portfolios. Portfolios have the versatility to offer a rich and authentic portrayal of our professional practice, and can be used in a variety of situations that require documentation of professional activities. Most importantly, no matter what their purpose, a portfolio provides the author with a unique opportunity for professional growth and development.

Defining a Professional Portfolio

Before considering an electronic portfolio, it is important to understand what a professional portfolio is and what it is not. We are familiar with the term in other contexts: Artists have portfolios, as do interior designers and architects. Investors have portfolios of stocks, bonds, and other assets. Very likely, we are also familiar with the term in the context of education: Our students develop portfolios over the course of the year or semester in order for us (and them) to assess the quality of their work and their growth over time. We might use their portfolios as a showcase of their best efforts or as a way to accurately convey their strengths and weaknesses to parents or other caregivers.

All of these types of portfolios have various elements in common. They are all collections of artifacts either created or owned by the portfolio author, all in a virtually constant state of flux as artists add new pieces, investors buy and sell, and students learn and grow, and all in a constant state of scrutiny, most importantly by the author, but by others as well. Interior designers display their portfolios to potential clients, investors sell high and buy low, and teachers grade and assess. Ultimately, all these portfolio authors want their portfolios to be truly representative of their best efforts.

The same can be said of a professional portfolio for educators. It, too, is a collection of artifacts that represents the author's best efforts. Over time, it will reflect the professional changes and growth of its author, and it will be examined, evaluated, and assessed by a varied audience.

What else should we know about a professional portfolio? Searching for a definitive description in literature leads to almost as many definitions as there are publications on the topic. However, most agree on the following characteristics:

- A professional portfolio is an *organized collection*. A professional portfolio must be organized so it displays the author's artifacts in the best possible light and in logical order so that the audience can make sense of the author's intentions.
- A professional portfolio contains *self-selected artifacts*. Self-selection is an important attribute because it allows the author to critically assess her own work and accomplishments and apply her professional judgment in selecting pieces to include in the portfolio. It allows the author to inject her own personality into the portfolio.
- A professional portfolio is structured around *goals and objectives or standards*. Goals and objectives or standards provide the organizational basis for the professional portfolio. Just as a carpenter would not build a house without a blueprint, an educator cannot construct an effective professional portfolio without a plan of how it will be developed.
- A professional portfolio documents a *variety of skills and knowledge*. Typically, a professional portfolio is developed to highlight knowledge and skills related to the goals and objectives or standards around which the portfolio is organized. In most situations, this requires a variety of artifacts.
- A professional portfolio is developed for a *specific purpose*. Purpose is one of the criteria by which artifacts are selected. Just as a focused piece of writing has a purpose, so does a focused professional portfolio.
- A professional portfolio is targeted at a *specific audience*. A focused professional portfolio is aimed at a specific audience, another criterion for selecting artifacts.
- A professional portfolio contains *reflections* on the artifacts collected. Reflections are the heart of a professional portfolio. More than any other element in the portfolio, reflections exhibit the author's ability to thoughtfully and critically examine her own work.
- A professional portfolio demonstrates *growth over time*. Growth over time should be the natural result of reflecting upon one's work. A professional portfolio should capture that growth, whether the time span is a semester, a year, or a professional lifetime.

We can say, then, *a professional portfolio is an organized collection of self-selected artifacts and self-generated reflections, developed for a specific purpose and audience that demonstrate the author's professional knowledge, skills, dispositions, and growth over time.*

In this context, an artist's or interior designer's portfolio shown to a potential client in the hope of acquiring a new commission or contract would be a professional portfolio. So, too, would be a teacher's portfolio developed for job-seeking, evaluation, showcase, or professional development purposes be considered a professional portfolio. These types of professional portfolios might contain many

of the same artifacts and reflections but would be organized quite differently because they would be targeting different purposes and audiences.

It is important to keep in mind a portfolio should contain each of the defining elements in order to effectively portray the author’s professional expertise. A professional portfolio is not difficult to develop, but a truly effective portfolio takes time and thought. A search for professional portfolios on the Internet results in thousands of hits, but a cursory examination of these sites reveals many examples of what a portfolio should not be. Many of these portfolios are ineffective because they lack a clear purpose or audience. Often the organization is poor or does not fit the purpose of the portfolio. Some do not even contain artifacts to document knowledge and skills or growth over time, and many do not include clear, thoughtful reflections. Portfolios such as these are an indication of the popularity of portfolios in the field of education today and the myriad misunderstandings concerning their purpose and development.

Types of Professional Portfolios

Many types of portfolios can be found in literature; for example, references to working portfolios and presentation portfolios are common. These terms identify portfolios by stage of development. This book, however, classifies professional portfolios by purpose and includes the résumé portfolio, the showcase portfolio, the evaluation portfolio, and the professional development portfolio. Because all four are used for various types of evaluation and assessment, they share many characteristics such as the inclusion of reflective pieces and the opportunity for professional growth. The differences among them rest in their purpose, audience, and organization (Figure 1.1). A brief look at each of these portfolios will help clarify their similarities and differences.

Figure 1.1. Types of professional portfolios.

	Purpose	Audience	Organization
Resume Portfolio	To document author’s knowledge and skills in order to obtain employment	Department chair School principal Human resources Superintendent	Organized similar to a traditional resume or according to professional standards
Showcase Portfolio	To highlight exceptional work of author to obtain special recognition, such as grant or award	Agency or individual responsible for administration of grant or award	Organized around criteria established by the governing body
Evaluation Portfolio	To portray author’s competency to obtain tenure or to meet ongoing evaluation requirements	School principal Human resources superintendent State licensing agency Higher education administrators	Organized around goals, standards, or competencies used for evaluation
Professional Development Portfolio	To document and enhance professional growth	Colleagues Administrators Students Self	Organized around skills, knowledge, dispositions, and evidence of growth, usually of author’s choosing

The Résumé Portfolio

The résumé portfolio, as its name implies, is intended to portray a rich and accurate picture of a job seeker to a potential employer. The purpose of a résumé portfolio is to display a wide variety of knowledge and skills to a school principal, department chair, human resources director, and/or superintendent so that the applicant procures a position. With this purpose in mind, the author should organize the portfolio around professional standards or as a traditional résumé would be, with sections for education, previous experience, etc. It should be tailored to fit the specific position for which the applicant is applying. To tailor the résumé in this way might mean inclusion of some artifacts and reflections for one position but not for another. The objective in this instance is to portray knowledge and skills in relation to a specific position so that the applicant is offered the job. The professional résumé portfolio must be organized, structured, and developed with this purpose in mind at all times.

Many education school graduates leave college with portfolios tucked under their arms, a fact that has important implications for veteran teachers in the job market. Even though their portfolios may not strictly be résumé portfolios, these neophytes still have professional portfolios. They are familiar with the portfolio process and probably with the process of reflection. Even though they may not have the classroom experience of a veteran educator, they have experience creating a portfolio, and they will present it to potential employers. Potential employers are likely to expect applicants to present résumé portfolios. As portfolios become more endemic in education programs as requisites for graduation, they are showing up with increasing frequency in interviews. To be without a résumé portfolio in an interview may put the applicant at a decided disadvantage and may even create the impression that she is out-of-date or less than qualified.

The Showcase Portfolio

The showcase portfolio, as the name states, is developed for the purpose of showcasing the author's best work. Depending upon the specific purpose of the showcase portfolio, its scope could be broad or quite narrow. There are a number of instances when a showcase portfolio would be appropriate for a veteran educator: applying for a promotion or tenure; documenting achievement for an award, such as teacher of the year; applying for a grant; or documenting credentials for a consultancy. A preservice teacher may also have need of a showcase portfolio when applying for licensure, grants, scholarships, awards, or assistantships.

The professional showcase portfolio is organized around the knowledge, skills, or attributes required for the goal in question. The organizational components are used as criteria for selecting artifacts from the author's best work.

The Evaluation Portfolio

Today, more than ever, educators are taking an active part in their own evaluation process. For most educators, the days of standardized instruments are gone. Now teachers can often select their own evaluation criteria with goals-based evaluation. Such personalized evaluation allows educators to use portfolios to address evaluation goals in a richer and more thorough way than other types of

evaluation documentation allow.

An evaluation portfolio is created by practicing educators and used for ongoing employment evaluation. In some instances, evaluation portfolios are mandated by school or district policy. The distinguishing characteristic of this type of portfolio is that its purpose is to help administrators *examine and judge* the work of a professional employee for the purpose of continued employment or identifying professional strengths and weaknesses. This purpose distinguishes it from the professional development portfolio.

The evaluation portfolio should be organized according to the goals or standards by which the author will be evaluated. In some instances, such as goals-based evaluation, the author is responsible for selecting her own goals. In this situation, professional development is sometimes a component of the evaluation process. In other situations, evaluation focuses on predetermined goals or standards for which the employee must show competence.

The Professional Development Portfolio

Professional development portfolios are created by practicing educators and used to examine specific areas of professional knowledge and skills for the purpose of professional growth. Sometimes, educators themselves decide to author a professional development portfolio. For example, a group of colleagues might decide to develop portfolios as a basis for discussing and evaluating their practices. In other instances, a school or district may require professional development portfolios of its professional staff.

Whether or not the educator has been involved in the portfolio decision, she should have a voice in selecting the professional areas included in the portfolio according to the knowledge base of her field. These areas then become the organizing components of the portfolio. They should also be used as the criteria for selecting artifacts that put the author's skills and knowledge in the best light. During this process, the focus should be on personal assessment by the portfolio's author—determining the contextual importance or value of an artifact—rather than on evaluation or judgment of the author's work by an administrator. The purpose of personal versus external assessment is what distinguishes a professional development portfolio from an evaluation portfolio.

Rationale for Portfolio Development

Professional portfolios are more frequently required by colleges of education as a graduation requirement, by licensing agencies as a certification requirement, and by school districts as a requirement for employment and tenure. Often these agencies rely on performance-based standards similar to those developed by professional organizations, such as the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). It is not unreasonable to suggest that in the near future, all practicing educators will be required to develop and maintain some type of evaluation or professional development portfolio.

A primary reason for the growing popularity of professional portfolios is the move toward authentic assessment. Traditional assessment tools, such as standardized tests, do little to inform an employer of a potential employee's

effectiveness as an educator. Portfolios, with their variety of artifacts and reflective narratives, provide a unique picture of how the educator functions in an educational context.

A particular advantage of portfolio development is the inclusion of artifacts and reflections is a powerful documentation tool. It is one thing to list accomplishments and competencies on a résumé or grant application; it is quite another to show evidence of those skills and achievements. For example, as a school media specialist you are held accountable for meeting state, district, and national standards in your area. A portfolio not only provides documentation through self-selected artifacts, but the reflections provide thoughtful analysis of your practice and intended growth.

"A professional portfolio . . . can be a convincing, effective vehicle for you to demonstrate to others in a meaningful way the skills and knowledge you have gained in something as complex as teaching" (Cambell, Cignetti, Melenyzer, Nettles, & Wyman, 2001, pp.2-3).

The benefits of developing a professional portfolio are substantial. The résumé portfolio gives a decided edge to a job candidate by presenting a variety of artifacts and reflections that are not possible to include in a traditional résumé. Similarly, the showcase portfolio highlights and contextualizes carefully selected examples of the author's best work. The evaluation portfolio helps administrators judge skills and abilities accurately by presenting them with specific examples, and the professional development portfolio explores the depth and breadth of an educator's practice with an eye toward professional growth.

Portfolios as Evaluation and Assessment Instruments

Professional portfolios have certain important characteristics in common regardless of their purpose. First, the portfolio provides an in-depth look at professional accomplishments most other vehicles merely hint at. Unlike other evaluation and assessment instruments, such as standardized test scores or transcripts, a portfolio is as unique as the author. Although many educators work toward the same professional goals, the different ways those goals are accomplished make each educator unique. A portfolio is a way to showcase an individual's professional personality.

Furthermore, because the design and contents of a portfolio are self-selected, the author has the opportunity to be pro-active by highlighting artifacts that attest to her expertise and growth. This aspect of a portfolio can be especially valuable as a way to enlighten administrators who may not fully appreciate the complexities of particular positions, whether it is that of a media specialist or drama instructor.

The most important benefit of developing a professional portfolio is related to the reflective elements. Without reflection, a collection of professional artifacts is

only that—much like my first binder. That collection may very well fit all the other characteristics of a professional portfolio, but reflections are what make it a portfolio. Reflections help give the portfolio the individuality and personality that make it unique. Reflections place each artifact within the context of the author’s professional life. They reveal the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of the author. No other evaluation or assessment instrument provides these insights or is so personal.

Finally, a professional portfolio acts as a record of growth over time. Most of us have had the experience of turning the pages of a photo album that documents the growth of a loved one. We see birthdays, holidays, and personal milestones recorded on the pages from birth to the present. In much the same way, a professional portfolio functions as the documentation of our professional growth. By turning the pages, so to speak, examining the artifacts, and reading the accompanying reflections, we can witness our own professional growth. Again, no other assessment instrument offers such an insightful picture of our careers.

Summary

A professional portfolio is an organized collection of self-selected artifacts and self-generated reflections, developed for a specific purpose and for a specific audience, that demonstrate the author’s professional knowledge, skills, attitudes, and growth over time. Many types of portfolios are mentioned in the literature; a common distinction is made between the working portfolio (the portfolio in progress) and the presentation portfolio (the finished portfolio). However, by assuming most professional portfolios are used for some sort of evaluation or assessment, it is helpful to differentiate them by the purpose they serve. In this context, it makes sense to identify the résumé portfolio, the showcase portfolio, the evaluation portfolio, and the professional development portfolio.

Increasingly, portfolios are being required for university graduation, for licensure, for employment, and for evaluation. Standards developed by national organizations such as INTASC and NBPTS are frequently used as organizational elements by many evaluating agencies. Professional portfolios are gaining popularity because they provide an authentic way to evaluate educators. Portfolios provide a unique, in-depth look at an educator’s knowledge and skills, practice, beliefs, and attitudes by means of self-selected artifacts and accompanying reflections. In addition, portfolios provide a valuable record of an educator’s growth over time for evaluating agencies and for the educator herself.