

Hiring Agents' Expectations for New Teacher Portfolios

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ABSTRACT

Digital portfolios are tools for new teachers to present their knowledge and skills to hiring agents of school systems. The purpose of the showcase portfolio is essentially to assist the new teacher to obtain a job with a school system. In this study two universities surveyed hiring agents to determine what portfolio items are desired by potential employers. Results indicated that hiring agents' technology savvy is an indicator of their level of acceptance of digital portfolios. The top four items that hiring agents expect in a portfolio are resume, recommendations, work experiences, and resumes. Most school systems do not require electronic portfolios as part of the application process, but hiring agents responded that they will view them if they are provided by prospective teachers. Teacher education candidates should continue utilizing electronic portfolios to provide snapshots of their skill set both as supporting documentation of their résumé and as evidence that candidates are qualified.

Introduction

Digital portfolios are becoming a common form of assessment for evaluating teacher education candidate performance. Recent research identifies several advantages of portfolios in education. Portfolio-oriented approaches provide individual candidates

with a sense of ownership and accomplishment while allowing the capability to be expressive and creative in representing both their work and themselves (Berlach, 1997; Barrett, 2004; Zeichner & Wray, 2001). Portfolios also offer learners the opportunity to reflect on their work, knowledge acquisition process, and facilitate self-directed growth while helping them build the self-review habits necessary for good teaching (Berlach, 1997; Batson, 2002; Wetzel & Strudler, 2005).

Portfolios encourage collaborative dialogue and enriched discussions on teaching. They also allow documentation of the candidate's growth over time taking into consideration each their diverse experiences and integration within their personal teaching preparation experiences (Kaye & Morin, 1998; Barrett, 2004). Portfolios can also be used as assessment instruments to evaluate the performance of teacher education candidates. Finally, portfolios may be used for employment purposes. However, within the context of use for employment purposes, little research exists regarding how many employers actually examine pre-service teacher portfolios and the role these portfolios play in the hiring process. This study examined how K-12 hiring agents in two sections of the country perceive student teacher portfolios. Research focused on whether hiring agents examine new teacher portfolios, the format in which hiring agents prefer portfolios, and the content hiring agents expect portfolios to contain.

Literature Review

In the current professional environment, prospective employers use portfolios to gain insight into an individual's skills, abilities, interests, and potential (Hartnell-Young & Morris, 1999; Britten, Mullen, & Stuve, 2003). Portfolios allow an individual the opportunity to showcase creativity, originality, and individuality, and to demonstrate the acquisition of expertise gained through education and work experience. In areas where professional standards are widely varied and an educational degree may not be indicative of one's talents, a portfolio can be used as a tool to promote or highlight an individual's unique capabilities and breadth of experience. Artists, graphic designers, and architects, for example, have used portfolios to showcase their best work for employers and also to demonstrate their strengths and their range of expertise and creativity (e.g. Adams, 1989; Valencia, 1990; Reis & Villaume, 2002). Recently, portfolios have become a standard feature in many educational programs (district, school, and university level) and educational organizations at the national and state level (Wolf, 1996; Strudler & Wetzel, 2005).

An increasing number of universities across the country are adopting the pre-service teaching portfolio as an integral part of teacher education programs. The portfolio not only allows for documentation of accomplishments and demonstration of growth, but also provides an opportunity for assessment that can lead the candidate to a deeper understanding of philosophy, pedagogy, goals, reflections, and reasoning abilities (Carroll, Porthoff, & Huber, 1996; Strudler & Wetzel, 2008). The portfolio offers teacher education students the opportunity to consolidate all the aspects of their learning experiences into one succinct, comprehensive package.

The purpose of the showcase portfolio is essentially to help the new teacher/pre-service teacher obtain a job. This portfolio is semi-structured, with a portion of the

contents determined by the organization conducting the job search, and an additional portion, selected by the teacher, to fit the position requirements. The contents typically include standard job search materials, as well as materials prepared by the teacher (e.g., lesson plans and student work samples). This portfolio might also contain unique information requested by the organization conducting the job search (Lockledge & Weinmann, 2001; Reis & Villaume, 2002).

When utilized as an employment portfolio, this tool usually has a slicker, more visually appealing appearance than either assessment or working portfolios. Since many times, principals and hiring committees are likely to judge the appearance of a candidate's work along with its substance, the slick showcase portfolios can work well for the applicant placing him/her in the best possible light. The showcase/employment portfolio is usually less extensive than either the learning or assessment variety because busy administrators and teachers are not likely to spend hours reviewing an applicant's materials (Lockledge & Weinmann, 2001; Wetzel & Strudler, 2006).

Method

Researchers at University of Wisconsin Whitewater and the University of Louisiana Monroe created a survey instrument with the following questions:

- What are the demographic and job responsibilities of the hiring agent?
- What is the technology skill of the hiring agent?
- Does the district require teacher applicants to present a portfolio of their work during the hiring process?
- If a portfolio is not *required* for the application or hiring process, does the person responsible for hiring decisions review portfolios if they are submitted voluntarily?
- In what format would the hiring agent prefer a portfolio to be?
- What kinds of artifacts are preferred in a portfolio?
- Does a digital or electronic portfolio increase an applicant's chance of getting hired?
- Is an applicant's technology skill an important component of teaching?
- Is a digital or electronic portfolio an adequate measure of a potential teacher's technological ability?

Approximately 900 surveys were mailed to administrators in Wisconsin as part of a large study. Wisconsin participants included 41 superintendents, 172 principals and 6 human resource administrators, who returned their surveys via regular mail. In Louisiana, approximately 700 surveys were distributed to administrators via fax. Louisiana participants included 2 superintendents, 291 principals and 1 human resource administrator. These participants returned the survey responses by fax.

Results

Results from the survey indicated that 48% of the hiring agents rated themselves at the intermediate level as technology users, while 35% rated themselves in the range between intermediate and advanced. Seven percent considered themselves advanced, and 10% considered themselves as below intermediate level as technology users.

In terms of whether the district requires their applicants to present a portfolio of their work during the hiring process, 90% of Wisconsin respondents and 92% of Louisiana respondents answered that portfolios are not required. However, 94% percent of the hiring agents in both states responded that they would review the portfolio if a candidate brought one voluntarily, even if the portfolio is not required for the application process.

More than half of the hiring agents (58%) indicated they prefer portfolios to be paper based, while 38% prefer portfolios in a digital format, such as on a CD (21%) or accessible through a web based program (17%). Four percent did not respond to this question. Next we looked at the technology skill level of the hiring agents versus their choice of portfolio format type. Hiring agents who rated their technology skill level at or below the intermediate level preferred to have an applicant's portfolio in the paper format. Hiring agents who rated themselves above the intermediate level were divided between paper and digital format.

When surveyed about the preferred content of an applicant's portfolio, the hiring agents generally wanted to see traditional types of teacher job application artifacts. A detailed breakdown of the various artifacts hiring agents prefer is listed as follows: 92% résumé, 88% recommendations, 83% work experience, 75% lesson plans, 73% teaching philosophy, 71% transcripts, 64% technology project, 60% professional growth plan, 56% documentation of meeting standards, 41% community involvement, and 29% action research.

When asked whether a digital or electronic portfolio increases an applicant's chance of getting hired, 54% of the hiring agents answered no. Only 12% of hiring agents stated yes, while 33% were neutral. In comparing the technology skill level of the hiring agents to their perceptions of whether a digital portfolio increases an applicant's chance of getting hired, 30% of those who rated themselves above intermediate stated the portfolio would increase the applicant's chance of being hired. Of the hiring agents who rated themselves at or below intermediate level, only 17% of hiring agents stated that presentation of a digital portfolio would increase the applicant's chances of being hired. Finally when asked if a digital or electronic portfolio is an adequate measure of a potential teacher's technological ability, 47% of the hiring agents stated no, 18% stated yes, and 35% indicated they were neutral.

Conclusion

Administrators view themselves as moderately savvy technology users. Only those administrators who were technology-confident preferred digital portfolios; the majority of administrators prefer paper portfolios. Portfolios are not considered an

integral part of the hiring process but items that administrators prefer to have included in a portfolio (in rank order) are résumé, recommendations, work experience, lesson plans, and transcripts. The order of preferred items seems to indicate that administrators do not appreciate the portfolio as evidence of teacher skills but rather as an extension of traditional job application materials.

Through this survey it is evident that while electronic portfolios are becoming increasingly popular among teacher education candidates, the existing hiring agents for potential employers do not appreciate them to the fullest extent. As with any technology, the more it is used on a daily basis the faster it should become more prevalent in the daily lives of others. Thus, we strongly encourage teacher education candidates to continue utilizing their electronic portfolios to provide snapshots of their skill sets both as supporting documentation of their résumés as well as evidence that candidates are qualified.

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