Transitional Portfolios: Orchestrating Our Professional Competence

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Professionalism is marked by reflective professional development and acquisition of personal career goals. Professional development is not a random collection of events, but a carefully constructed medley of professional happenings and outcomes. Reflection on accumulated experiences provides the foundation for creating a career that is rewarding and meaningful.

With rapid changes in health care that have resulted in reevaluation and even modification of the roles and functions of an occupational therapy practitioner, one needs to record career achievements in order to learn from experiences and plan for change. Never before has it been more important for practitioners to be in command of their own careers. Although the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) has defined the 12 major roles and associated skills within the profession (AOTA, 1993) and, more recently, has described various role changes within the profession (Thomson et al., 1995), the future of our profession will depend on the recognition of emerging roles as well as thoughtful professional development enabling competent role performance (Crist, 1996). As delineated by AOTA, “Ensuring competence is the responsibility of everyone, including the individual practitioner, employers, professional associations, and regulatory boards. The key, however, rests with the individual who must be self-directed to attain and maintain competence” (Thomson et al., 1995, p. 4). Professional competence is the outcome of thoughtful self-directed professional development activities. This competence is shaped through careful evaluation of one's experiences and the documentation of one's professional growth.

This article describes the use of transitional portfolios to connect professional development learning experiences, accomplishments, and future opportunities for occupational therapy practitioners.
current knowledge, skills, abilities, and individual learning needs in relation to future career and employment responsibilities.

Maintaining professional competence is an ethical responsibility for all occupational therapy personnel (AOTA, 1994). In 1995, AOTA published Developing, Maintaining, and Updating Competency in Occupational Therapy: A Guide to Self-Appraisal (Thomson et al., 1995) to provide guidelines for practitioners to achieve and develop their competencies. To verify specific practice competence of occupational therapists, specialty certification procedures are available in specific practice areas, such as hand therapy, vocational counseling, neurorehabilitation, sensory integration, case management, and pediatrics. To verify exceptional experience of occupational therapy assistants within an area of occupational therapy practice, there will be a recognition program for advanced practice (AOTA, 1997b). Fieldwork educators will be able to use the Self-Assessment Tool for Fieldwork Educator Competency (AOTA Fieldwork Educator Competency Guidelines Task Force, personal communication, September 30, 1997) to identify the proficiencies or competencies from which they can then direct their professional development. All these tools use self-evaluation regarding what is needed to demonstrate competence and to correct deficits, but they do not provide specific reflective methods beyond the fundamentals outlined in the documents. These tools imply that self-evaluation of competence is basic to professional development, but they leave such evaluation to voluntary self-direction and recording. This article describes the transitional portfolio and associated process as a specific method for facilitating reflection to direct and document one's career development, past and future.

Background of Portfolio Use

A portfolio is a collection of evidence indicating that learning or skills acquisition has taken place as well as the outcomes of specific professional development activities. Portfolios can take many forms, depending on their potential for use by occupational therapy personnel who may move across various roles and settings in their careers (Yancey & Weiser, 1997). In general, they can document goal-directed learning as an outcome, such as attendance at workshops, postprofessional graduate work, a collection of documents to submit for clinical certification processes, or any other process to demonstrate acquisition of a specific set of practitioner skills. They are designed to meet individual needs and include both professional products and processes.

Typically, a portfolio demonstrates the continuing acquisition of skills, knowledge, attitudes, understanding, and achievement (Brown, 1992; Richter, 1988; Wilcox, 1997). Portfolios have gained popularity as an authentic assessment tool for students in education, business, art, medicine, nursing, and pharmacy curricula, but little has been written about portfolio use within health fields (Alsop, 1995a, 1995b; Parboosingh, 1996; Ryan & Carlton, 1977; Snaddon, Thomas, Griffin, & Hudson 1996; Zubizarreta, 1994). Many universities use portfolios as a form of summative evaluation to make promotion and tenure decisions for professors. Educators have the widest body of literature on portfolio use to document competence as a service provider not only for their students, but also for themselves (Wilcox & Tomei, in press). However, there is little empirical evidence on the use of portfolios as a reflective, active learning process (Wilcox, 1997).

In the occupational therapy literature, Alsop (1995a, 1995b) advocated the use of the portfolio to record and verify skill acquisition and learning experiences in career development and to document learning outcomes through retrospective reflection on experiential activities. Alsop advocated reflective use of portfolio information to enhance conceptual understanding and to build a repertoire of meaningful experiences supporting practice. She also advocated the use of portfolios for reflection on accumulated experiences but not as a method to guide professional growth. Kramer and Stern (1994) discussed the use of portfolio evaluation with occupational therapy fieldwork students to measure their emerging clinical competencies. The potential outcome was an awareness of clinical experiences accumulated to date and identification of what future fieldwork experience was needed. Kramer and Stern described portfolio artifacts that were useful to retrospective review and clinical reasoning development after fieldwork but did not discuss portfolios as a dynamic professional development process.

Traditional Portfolios

Traditional portfolios contain two sections—a collection and a showcase—and a reflective journal. The collection section contains resources, references, and other artifacts that might be retained for information and later use, such as handouts, protocols, and Internet sites. These artifacts are used to support and expand one's knowledge base by serving as easily accessible resources or references.

The showcase section, which documents exceptional performance capabilities or superior effort, contains summative works or finished items that one has produced. The artifacts are tangible, definitive evidence of an outcome. Examples are authored publications, a copy of one's thesis, a published treatment protocol from a facility manual, or a presentation of outcomes from a clinical program designed and undertaken. This visual display of work outcomes and demonstrated skill competence can enhance one's curriculum vitae or résumé by providing tangible evidence of statements. Products created for a specific employment site or employer and retained in the portfolio provide evidence of the extent of one's contribution to a product. Additionally, one can include a supervisor's written verification of one's contribution as further evidence.
Transitional Portfolios

Going beyond representations of previous work, the transitional portfolio demonstrates competence and professional development for emerging roles and functions. This application reduces the discrepancy between what one has accomplished and what the current situation demands. Transitional portfolios not only are the basis for retrospective review of accomplishments, but also become a prospective guide for future professional development planning. Documentation of one’s professional growth, through collecting evidence of one’s work to meet a new professional challenge, demonstrates one’s potential for emerging opportunities.

Transitional portfolios show in detail how the practitioner grew through a reflective process by documenting what and how something was learned. They are more than a résumé or curriculum vitae, which are both passive historical listings of professional accomplishments. Rather, a transitional portfolio collates various professional development efforts and outcomes into a connected album of one’s "best practices" and "works or thoughts in progress" created through reflection. The importance of reflection on practice has been heavily discussed in recent occupational therapy literature, beginning with Schön (1987). Reflection on clinical competence is not new, but using the process to document and guide professional development is. As a product, the transitional portfolio bridges gaps, makes connections, and gives importance to our career experiences as it guides new adventures and creates possibilities. For example, an occupational therapy practitioner seeking a new position as a program coordinator can identify work in his or her portfolio that would exemplify his or her managerial abilities and present it during an interview.

In addition to the collection and showcase sections of the traditional portfolio, the transitional portfolio adds two important components—a working piece and a reflective journal—that facilitate engagement with one’s accomplishments in order to guide future professional development. The working section contains works in progress, drafts, or frequently used materials—artifacts that require additional thought, review, or work. Examples are newsletter articles, a state conference presentation, or a journal manuscript that the author is refining and rewriting. Any piece that is continuously changed and updated remains in this section, such as fieldwork student in-service presentations, lecture notes, or annual performance objectives. These artifacts tend to be developmental in nature. When work on an artifact is completed, it is placed in the showcase section. The artifacts will document ongoing special skill competencies used on a day-to-day basis.

The content of the working section is modified in a transitional portfolio to support more than just the listing of or an accumulation of current activities, like in a traditional portfolio. In a transitional portfolio, the working section includes artifacts that outline the plan one is undertaking to attain new skill competence within a role or even new roles in similar or different settings. For instance, the working section may include a checklist of professional development steps being taken to achieve a new certification or handwritten notes of interviews with key informants already in the future desired role or setting.

In another instance, a practitioner is obtaining skills in a new treatment approach. In the showcase section of a traditional portfolio, the practitioner maintains evidence of workshop attendance or other artifacts leading to a certification in a specialty area. With a transitional portfolio, he or she would not be satisfied simply with this passive repository of records. The practitioner would collect evidence of actual cases in which he or she tried out his or her new information and recorded outcomes for later study or for further professional development planning, such as planned future discussion with an expert in the specialty area.

The reflective journal of the transitional portfolio contains contemplations associated with the three portfolio sections. It is a collection of thoughts, ideas, goals, and feelings about one’s reading, research, work experiences, and professional development. The journal is a place to evaluate past outcomes, record current ideas, describe future possibilities, and make meaningful connections from the content. For instance, a clinical idea can be noted in the reflective journal for further reference, self-study, and analysis. Other clinical uses might be to reflect on one’s caseload and important happenings, the outcomes of treatment methods, or personal experiences as a health care provider. For instance, the working section may contain a series of informally written case studies demonstrating the learning of a new clinical competence. Either through self-study or discussion with an advanced practitioner in this skill area across accumulated case studies, the clinician could use the journal to review what skills have been acquired and outline what remains to be learned, demonstrated, and documented to complete the transitional portfolio learning process.

The number of artifacts in each section of the transitional portfolio varies depending on one’s role (see Figure 1). A student typically has many materials in the collection section, whereas a scholar in occupational therapy will have a large showcase section.

Active Transitional Portfolio Use

An active transitional portfolio is a more accurate dynamic tool for evaluating professional accomplishments than a passive traditional portfolio because of the reflective application. Wilcox (1996) described the active process as one in which the person is continually making connections between professional readings and learning experiences, writing about capstone experiences, thinking about ways to construct or demonstrate professional skills development, and interacting with the collection of artifacts to further one’s professional development. This process creates a self-em-
The following cases describe how active transitional portfolios assist professional development:

**Case 1**

Bill, a registered occupational therapist, is interested in taking the AOTA-sponsored advanced certification examination in neurorehabilitation. He has worked for 6 years in the neurorehabilitation unit of a major hospital. Initially, he was concerned about passing the examination because his area of practice was so broadly defined. From reading the information provided in the AOTA brochure, he knew that he had met the qualifications to take the examination, but the brochure provided little information about the knowledge to be tested. Bill decided to look in his portfolio.

With his reflective journal at his side, Bill used a double-entry procedure: one to identify potential content that might be on the examination and one to identify and review resources he already had to prepare for the examination. In the collection and working piece sections, he reviewed bibliographies, conference notes, and readings that he had filed on the topic. He summarized some of his procedural situations from practice. Guidelines published by AOTA on related topics helped him identify potential practice areas where his knowledge was deficient. A journal entry reminded him of a panel he heard at the Annual Conference that outlined state-of-the-art approaches related to occupational therapy in neurorehabilitation. He wrote letters to all the panelists he met during this session to ask whether they could suggest review materials. Finally, he contacted area rehabilitation programs to identify other practitioners who were considering taking the examination and formed a study group. In his journal, he noted, "Meeting 1: Brainstorm potential study topics and assign responsibilities for reviewing. Meeting 2: Share materials with each other."

**Case 2**

Jessica, a certified occupational therapy assistant, had been practicing for 12 years in seven different settings. For the past 2 years, she wanted to be recognized for her acquired skills and competence beyond her documented experiences, annual review(s), and job title. When she reviewed the documents in the working piece section of her transitional portfolio labeled "Potential Involvement in the Profession," she found an article inviting certified occupational therapy assistants to participate in a project to develop an advanced practice recognition program through AOTA. She called AOTA to contact someone about her desire for recognition and was transferred to the appropriate staff member to discuss her goal. From this contact, she learned that such a process would soon be announced, and a fact sheet giving an overview of the program was faxed to her.

Reading this material, Jessica was pleased that she had started a transitional portfolio because noted in the criteria were the requirements to demonstrate completed continuing education in a specified practice area as well as professional activities within six of nine professional areas. Although she recognized that collecting these artifacts or documents for her application would be easier because she had a portfolio already in place, she made notes in her journal as she reviewed the fact sheet regarding other strategies she might want to implement in order to demonstrate qualifications for this recognition.

Students can apply transitional portfolios in their fieldwork experience in order to evaluate acquired learning and learning needs and to list fieldwork accomplishments. Written critical incident reports can be used to record positive or uncomfortable experiences or can be used to stimulate learning during supervisory sessions. From the portfolio review, unmet learning needs can be documented to be acted on at a later date (Snadden et al., 1996). With so many events occurring in daily practice, accumulated learning during fieldwork such as this can pass by in a busy dream without any apparent concrete developments (Snadden et al., 1996). The reflective journal provides a place to document and review new learning questions for future consideration. Likewise, the working piece section provides organization for adding new resources. Reviewing one's transitional portfolio at the end of fieldwork will highlight acquired learning. By sharing his or her portfolio with fieldwork supervisors, the student can gain guidance for future career development. After this reflective sharing, the student can note in his or her reflective journal the creative approaches discussed or potential learning resources to seek.

The transitional portfolio may contain artifacts that capture salient or meaningful events that have contributed to or redirected one's career. Reliance on memory to re-cre-
ate these special moments is inefficient. Memories of facts, details, and relationships fade over time. The transitional portfolio captures finite details of current events for later reference, such as notes on a particular case study or a special outcome from an event that may facilitate later reflection, inclusion, or documentation of one's learning skills or professional development.

In summary, the transitional portfolio can serve three purposes for occupational therapy practitioners:

1. As an assessment tool to move from what they are currently able to do to what they want to do
2. As a learning and planning tool to guide thoughtful professional development
3. As a historical record of professional competence that includes knowledge, practice applications, and contributions to the field that can be reconstructed for career transition

Although each purpose is separate, they are interactive and integrative (see Figure 2). Reflection energizes the interaction among the three purposes, which can enhance clinical reasoning abilities (Mattingly & Fleming, 1994; Rogers, 1983; Schell, 1998) as well as promote innovation in practice. Clinical reasoning is an integrative function resulting from the combination of all three purposes for the transitional portfolio being used on a problem, issue, demand, or opportunity. Engagement in the transitional portfolio model process creates more possibilities for a variety of outcomes than does engagement in any one of the modes alone. In other words, professional competence that results from thoughtful professional development facilitates the interactive and integrative aspects of this portfolio process through use as a reflective planning, evaluation, and learning resource for clinical reasoning.

As an assessment tool, the transitional portfolio focuses on artifacts as evidence of the degree to which standards and competencies have been met—the information mode. Novices must gather facts and build a knowledge base. For example, students can construct initial portfolios by accumulating information through reading and course work and, later, through fieldwork. Practitioners who enter a new area of practice or undertake a new professional role may create new sections to accumulate information related to their new role or to advance expertise in a given approach. For example, a new fieldwork educator might keep a historical record of readings completed or notes from in-service presentations attended on fieldwork processes.

As a learning tool, the transitional portfolio contains artifacts as evidence of learning from practice, such as workshop certifications; supervised practice; or performance-based competency documents such as annual job performance reviews—the practice mode. Instead of a focus on gathering information and remembering, the concern is on "useful information" and practical experiences that indicate thoughtfulness and intellectual growth in the delivery of occupational therapy services. Examples are documentation of procedures and records of cases reflecting "best practice," the experiential building blocks of the practitioner role. Keeping excerpts from practice in a journal provides opportunities to think and learn about one's accumulated professional experiences. The practice content of a journal can be visited and revised, analyzed and synthesized, rethought and rewritten. Gaps in clinical skill or future directions for practice learning can be identified and addressed.

As a historical record of one's acquired professional knowledge, competence in practice, and contributions to the field, the transitional portfolio contains artifacts as evidence of what one knows and is able to do—the knowledge mode. Examples are the documents showing how knowledge was extended, constructed, and shared through publication or presentation, including conference programs and proceedings documenting completed contributions in one's area of expertise. Various, previously unrelated parts of the historical review section can be reconfigured to document components of the transitional portfolio of a new role or professional opportunity.

The following case example demonstrates the addition of the evaluative component of the transitional portfolio and examines how and why reflective professional activities can be useful in guiding future professional development.

Case 3

Kalli, a student, graduates from an entry-level program in occupational therapy. Once employed, she works under the supervision of a clinician who has more than 10 years of experience. As her clinical skills evolve, the new practitioner begins to assume more responsibility within the setting, including administrative tasks and student supervision. She introduces several protocols beneficial to the department and begins to educate fieldwork students regularly. She has acquired enough knowledge to earn the title of "lead" practitioner and continually participates in clinical education courses related to innovative techniques used when treating persons with neurological impairments.

The practitioner decides to formally further her education and completes an advanced master's degree from a local university. While attending graduate school, she assumes total responsibility for the coordination of the fieldwork student program, monthly in-service presentations, and consultation services regarding the treatment of adults with brain injury to area clinicians. She not only is recognized locally as an expert practitioner, but also is described by students as an enthusiastic educator with a knack for teaching.

The practitioner is considering a career move into a faculty role and inquires at a local university about the credentials she would need to assume an academic position. The program director at the university asks her to consider the following questions:

- What evidence of learning, through mentorship or through advanced education, have you documented throughout your professional development history that would be useful background for teaching?
- Do you have documents to demonstrate your capabilities in terms of entry-level faculty member role expectations and responsibilities?
- Do you possess any reflective pieces regarding the transitions that you have encountered throughout your career that demonstrate how you approached your professional growth and the current decision process to look into the faculty role?
- Is there tangible evidence suggesting that the students engaging in fieldwork at your site found you to be effective as a clinical
A useful transitional portfolio is carefully designed and historical record focus. Justified as evidence of professional growth and development are important in a society where "information available in the world doubles every 5.5 years" (Grabe & Grabe, 1998). The allocation of both time and energy to achieving one's goals are guided through assembling an individualized portfolio. The time between reviews depends on the person's use of the portfolio but should not be more than every 3 to 6 months. Otherwise, important artifacts or documents of professional development activities will be left out or, worse, forgotten altogether.

Transitional portfolios can be kept in three-ring binders, paper files, or zip™ files. Portfolios should be packaged for convenience and easy access because they are modified through years of practice and learning. Artifacts move in and out of a portfolio so that the portfolio will be a current, living history. A table of contents with a specific index makes it easy to locate artifacts.

**Portfolio Evaluation**

Transitional portfolio materials serve as a catalyst to guide discussion and further professional learning (Snadden et al., 1996). Ongoing evaluation by the organizer can occur with intermittent analysis of contents with a peer, supervisor, or other valued person. Portfolio evaluation can be carried out by various evaluators, including the creator, peers, teachers, fieldwork educators, and even a potential employer. Ultimately, each practitioner must evaluate his or her own work to decide what goals are most important to achieve, to determine how best to meet them, and to create a transitional portfolio that manages his or her own learning.

The evaluation of portfolio artifacts can be both summative and formative. Summative evaluations are more formal and traditional, such as examinations, discussion after a formal presentation, or annual merit performance reviews at work. The outcome is usually an all-encompassing final grade, score, or rating. Formative evaluations are used to im-
prove ongoing performance, practice skills, writing ability, or instruction. During this evaluation, peers, supervisors, and others can encourage more learning through reflecting on a peer’s opinion of a paper, reviewing one’s clinic program proposal draft, reviewing a recent job interview, or presenting a synthesis of one’s current professional growth to peers. During formative reviews, depth of understanding and refining current performance becomes more important than evaluating outcomes.

The most important aspect of the evaluation process for transitional portfolios is the continuous engagement and thoughtfulness of the portfolio keeper. The degree of continuous engagement in one’s transitional portfolio determines its importance in guiding one’s professional development. Simply recording reflections, organizing artifacts, and reviewing its contents has merit, but when the evaluation process is sustained through open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and lifelong learning, a portfolio “spirit” becomes evident, active, and prospective in orchestrating professional development.

Summary

The local classified advertisements in newspapers reveal the many career opportunities available in positions not listed under occupational therapy but ideally suited for our knowledge and skills. These and other new challenges and circumstances require new roles and competencies in occupational therapy; thus, extending our knowledge base through reflection and learning is a constant. The transitional portfolio can be used as a tool to connect our experiences, new knowledge, and practitioner competence as we move from student to practitioner to leader and expert in traditional as well as in emerging environments. Engaging in the transitional portfolio process means that one is documenting the learning, competence, and clinical reasoning that has already taken place. Most importantly, the transitional portfolio provides evidence of meeting new objectives or competencies. By approaching this process through reflection via a reflective journal accompanying a collection of artifacts, one can positively influence professional development, including the expansion of career and life opportunities. The process energizes the occupational therapy practitioner to recognize success, fill gaps in knowledge and skills, seek goal-directed learning opportunities, and gain confidence in professional competence to practice in chosen roles and settings. This self-evaluation encourages a practitioner to be flexible to pending change or potential challenges and to orchestrate, direct, and even celebrate successful professional transitions and growth. ▲

References


Table 1
The Transitional Portfolio at Different Stages of Professional Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Collection</th>
<th>Working</th>
<th>Showcase</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Novice practitioner</td>
<td>Artifacts pertain to the novice practitioner’s educational experience. Examples may include class notes, handouts, exams, and completed assignments.</td>
<td>Artifacts are pieces of work that the novice practitioner may continually review, modify, or use. An example is a final project that the novice completes to graduate from an occupational therapy program.</td>
<td>Artifacts should reflect an effort focused on high-quality work that speaks for itself. Examples include an article that the novice has submitted for publication, a thesis, a diploma, or a certificate awarded for outstanding work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Entry-level reflective practitioner</td>
<td>The practitioner may submit artifacts that he or she has collected during orientation to his or her first position as a practitioner. Examples may include facility protocols, the standards of practice, frames of reference used at the site, valuable information issued in the classroom, and journal articles retrieved relating to different conditions.</td>
<td>Artifacts may be documents related to the ongoing development of annual staff in-service programs, treatment protocols from current literature, and yearly performance goals.</td>
<td>Artifacts may include favorable performance evaluations, completed presentations, and letters of thanks from clients.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate reflective practitioner</td>
<td>The practitioner may collect artifacts such as continuing education literature, literature pertaining to a particular treatment area, or guidelines related to becoming a fieldwork educator.</td>
<td>Artifacts may include materials developed by the practitioner related to educating his or her first fieldwork student, total quality management, data collection, or protocols dealing with a specialized area of practice.</td>
<td>The practitioner may submit personal letters of recognition, an outstanding fieldwork educator award, journal articles accepted in a refereed publication, and state or national presentations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advanced reflective practitioner</td>
<td>Artifacts may include treatment protocols universally accepted within the facility, manuals obtained from more in-depth continuing education seminars, fieldwork education documents, and fieldwork profiles.</td>
<td>Artifacts may include lecture notes used to educate local university students, partial data collected during outcomes studies initiated at this facility, and feedback that the practitioner may be using from students to implement changes in the fieldwork program.</td>
<td>The practitioner may submit certificates of appreciation from local universities, letters of thanks from students, submitted research studies, and evidence of formal advanced education credits.</td>
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Note. According to the Occupational Therapy Roles document (American Occupational Therapy Association, 1993), all occupational therapy practitioners participate in various roles (e.g., scholar, fieldwork educator, entrepreneur).


