
Student Portfolios in O&M: A window into the child's learning experience

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Despite the fact that student portfolios have been widely used in special education for quite some time, a review of the literature reveals no studies in the use of this tool in the profession of orientation and mobility (O&M). This article provides an overview of the nature and common types of student portfolio, discusses benefits and potential for using portfolios in O&M, and provides guidelines for instructors to incorporate this educational tool into their practice.

What are student portfolios?

Portfolios have been defined as purposeful collections of students' work, showing their efforts, progress, and accomplishments in one or more areas (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991). They generally contain a selection of artifacts, documents, and reflections that tell the story of a child's understanding and level of ability relative to specific instructional goals (Jardine, 1995; Seitz & Bartholomew, 2008).

Educational portfolios are not just a collection of students' work, but are developed for a specific purpose (Jardine, 1995; Lynch & Struewing, 2001). Most purposes include providing opportunities for students to process learning and develop pride in their work, recapping key milestones, documenting students' progress, and preserving records of their learning (Herbert, 2001; Safer & Fleischman, 2005). Student portfolios also provide good opportunities and channels of communication with families and others involved in the education of the student

(Carothers & Taylor, 2003; Conderman, Ikan, & Hatcher, 2000; Davis, 2009). Agreeing on a purpose early is important, as it will guide decisions about content, structure, and style of the individual portfolio (Jardine, 1995; Lynch & Struewing, 2001). Portfolios can be organised in a variety of ways. They can be structured around IEP goals, educational units, or around learning highlights, among others (Carothers & Taylor, 2003; Thompson & Baumgartner, 2008).

Student Portfolios and Orientation and Mobility

While there is wide support for the use of student portfolios in general and special education, there has been little discussion about this important educational tool in the profession of O&M. This should not be taken, however, to mean that portfolios are not being used at all by O&M instructors. To investigate O&M instructor's familiarity with portfolios, the authors conducted a 10-question anonymous survey. The survey was created using a google form

and emailed to two main O&M Listservs (AERBVI and BlindCanadians). A total of 42 responses were obtained. Survey questions asked respondents whether or not they used portfolios with O&M students, why or why not, formats used (for e.g., paper, audio, multimedia) and perceived benefits and challenges of using portfolios. Respondents were also asked about their students' and students families' response to O&M portfolios.

When asked if they had experience using portfolios, 18 of 42 survey respondents

answered affirmatively (43%), and 12 of those reported experience using portfolios specifically for O&M (29%). Respondents reported using portfolios to share information at Individualised Educational Plan (IEP) meetings, as well as to facilitate communication with families (Figure 1). The most frequently portfolio format reported was paper, followed by electronic and multimedia. Interestingly, no survey respondents reported using audio format (Figure 2).

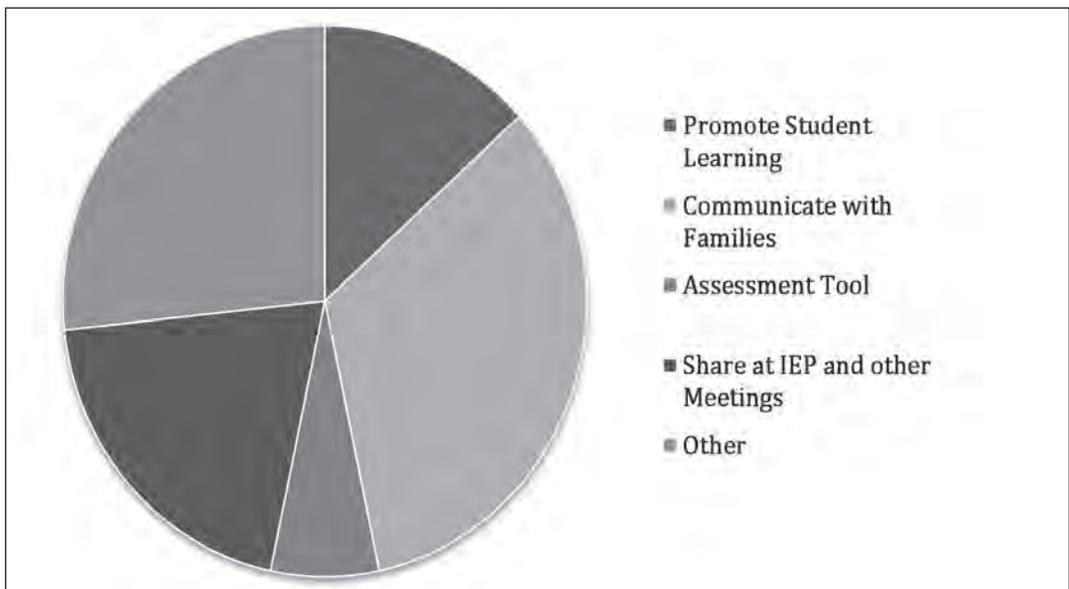


Figure 1. Portfolio use in O&M.

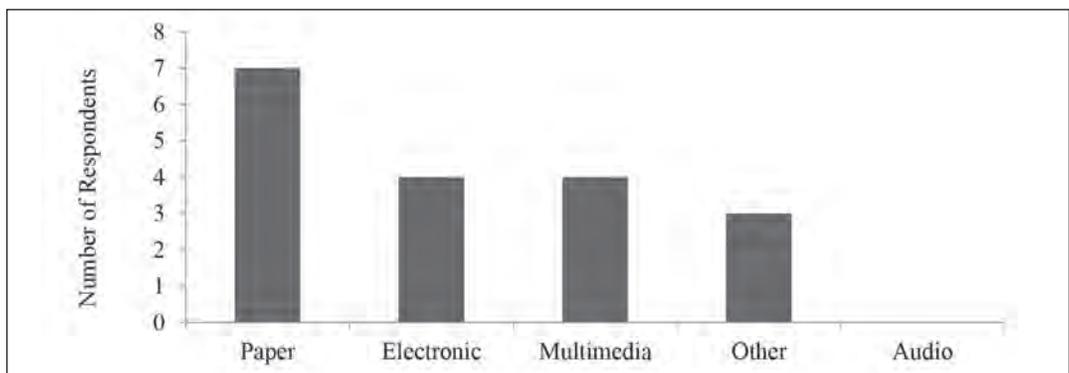


Figure 2. Portfolio formats used.

Considering the nature of student portfolios and their potential benefits to students and families, it becomes apparent that they are well suited to enhancing the O&M experience:

- O&M instruction takes place in natural environments and involves functional tasks. O&M work samples (e.g., photos, videos, maps) are a treasury of authentic work, making them ideal artifacts for a portfolio (Lynch & Struewing, 2001).
- Unlike other education subject areas, the content of O&M lessons is typically not captured or documented for families and/or other professionals. Portfolios help make O&M more concrete for those who may have difficulty understanding the scope and nature of what occurs during instruction.
- Portfolios are helpful tools for students to communicate what they are learning in O&M, and can assist them in sharing their progress at IEP meetings (Fazzi & Petersmeyer, 2001; Juniewicz, 2003; Zatta & Pullin, 2004).
- Mobility instructors often do not have the opportunity to interact with families on a regular basis, but can use portfolios to enhance communication and share students' learning (Carothers & Taylor, 2003; Davis, 2009; Englund, 2009).
- When mobility instructors work with students for long periods of time, they can use portfolios to document student growth over a number of years. This is particularly important when documenting acquired skills and concepts for students who move at a slower pace, as it serves to illustrate longitudinal progress that may not

be readily understood or recognised (Carothers & Taylor, 2003).

- When structured around the student's IEP goals, portfolios are valuable tools for self or shared assessment of progress (Thompson & Baumgartner, 2008).
- O&M portfolios can be used as a resource for the student, containing useful information for example, ordering canes and cane parts, maps, routes to various destinations, useful numbers or websites related to public transportation (Fazzi & Petersmeyer, 2001).
- Portfolios provide opportunities for collaboration when done in conjunction with other professionals also working with the child, such as a shared portfolio between the teacher for the vision impaired and the O&M instructor (Marian, Browne, & Wallin, 2006).
- Portfolios provide a unique opportunity for children to express their individuality. Figure 3 illustrates the way the same task was approached and documented differently by two different students (i.e., comparing a variety of cane tips).
- O&M portfolios can assist students transition from one mobility instructor to another, as they contain records of skills, concepts, and strategies previously worked on.

O&M Portfolios and shared ownership

Above all, portfolios have the potential to motivate and promote student cognitive engagement (i.e., learning through reflection and self-assessment) (Davis, 2009; Thompson & Baumgartner, 2008). Students who use portfolios have been

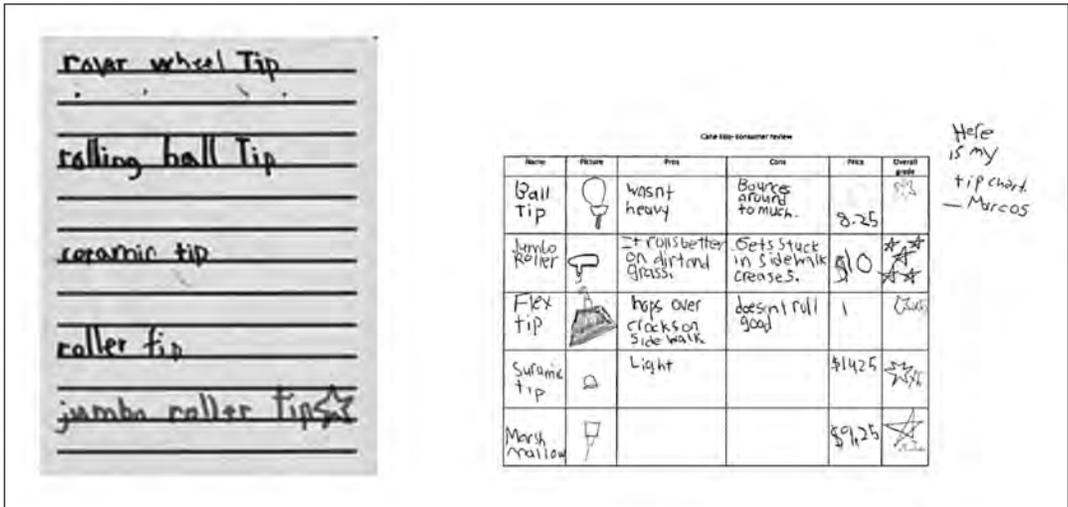


Figure 3. Cane tip artifacts.

shown to be more accountable and more likely to develop ownership of their learning experience (Conderman, Hatcher, & Ikan, 1998, Herbert, 2001; Lynch & Struewing, 2001). The process of documenting learning experiences for inclusion in a portfolio generates the kind of rich discussion and cognitive engagement that are the centre of student ownership (Perla, 2009). In one example, a 10-year-old child documented “lessons learned” from his first drop off experience (Figure 4). Later on, he added a caption on the margin of an earlier entry reflecting on his experience learning to use a long cane (Figure 5).

Literature and anecdotal records suggest that families are generally positive about the use of portfolios (Juniewicz, 2003, Thompson & Baumgartner, 2008) and are interested in contributing (Figure 6).

Respondents to the authors’ survey reported overwhelmingly positive family reaction to O&M portfolios: “Families like seeing what the student does on lessons;” “...they like the feedback and understanding

of goals;” “They love it, it makes skills that seem abstract to them come to life;” “Families love to see what their student can do!” “Supports family investment in tools for independence;” and “They found it interesting to see progress,” among others.

Students’ response to O&M portfolios was also positive according to the professionals surveyed: “Students enjoy putting together a portfolio about themselves;” “Most students really like the process of putting the project together!” “They like being able to reflect on their learning and are proud of the finished product;” and “Took pride in work,” among others. Two survey respondents reported that students were less positive about portfolios when they required work outside of O&M class or when perceived as too much homework.

Getting started- A beginner’s guide to O&M Portfolios

For those with no prior experience with student portfolios, the following guidelines may serve as a starting point:

My first drop off- An Interview

F: Did you know where you were "dropped off" for this exercise?
M: No

F: How did you figure out where you were?
M: By going to the corner. To find the street name.

F: What was most useful for problem solving?
M: Looking for W on the map.

F: What would you do differently next time?
M: Bring more materials (Phone, scope)

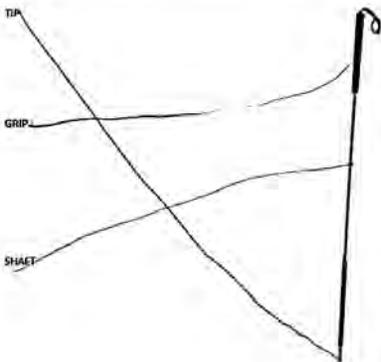
F: What did you learn from the drop off?
M: Takes a lot of effort. There always a different way.

F: Did you enjoy the drop off? Why or why not?
M: It was good. Because I came back strong. I struggled in the beginning and did good at the end.

Figure 4. Student engagement.

I HAVE A 48 inch Graphite Folding cane with a rolling marshmallow tip.

CAN YOU MATCH THE PARTS OF THE CANE WITH THEIR NAME?



Its hard when you first use a cane - Marco

I AM LEARNING HOW TO USE A LONG CANE BECAUSE
I have a condition called Stationary night time blindness. Therefore I can not see at night.

Figure 5. Student reflection.

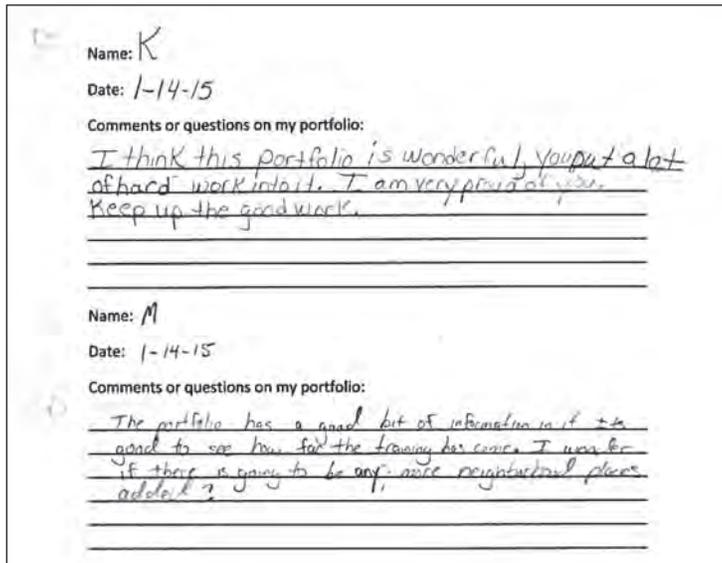


Figure 6. Family engagement.

- ✓ Decide on the purpose of the portfolio. Will it be used primarily to assess O&M progress, to communicate with others, showcase student's work, or as a student resource file?
- ✓ Determine whether the portfolio will be year-long or focused on a particular area/topic?
- ✓ As much as possible, include the child in the decision-making process to promote student ownership.
- ✓ Allow for expression of student individuality in the selection of the portfolio media. Does the child prefer to work on paper, electronic, or other media? Would the child like to include photos or videos in their portfolio? When offering choices, consider what resources are available, time allotted to the project and skill set of both the student and instructor.
- ✓ Communicate with others about the project and discuss possible ways of participating. For example, families may write comments or questions, report a family outing that relates to O&M, note observations regarding progress at home, or simply review the portfolio with the child regularly to find out what they are working on.

Conclusion

O&M portfolios can be windows into the students' experience and provide families and professionals with opportunities to better appreciate the effort, progress, and meaning each child derives from his/her individual learning process. Students can benefit too. Documenting and discussing their O&M experience fosters the development of self-reflection and a sense of shared ownership of their learning.

While portfolios can be valuable tools for O&M instruction, they do not need to be an

“all or none” proposition. Not all students enjoy or appreciate the process involved in portfolio development and sometimes time and logistics may conspire against its implementation. It is also possible to identify “mini” projects that do not last the whole year but are suitable for a particular unit or goal (e.g., the use of public transportation) and create a portfolio around those.

While there are many ways to approach student portfolios, and teacher/student creativity has no limits, the key idea remains that student portfolios are an expression of student individuality and represent *their experience* of the O&M process.

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