

Creating Personal Portfolios

Paula Kluth

One day when I was working in a middle school, a music teacher approached me excitedly to share that Lizzy, a student with Down syndrome in her class, was a pianist. She told me that she had been teaching a lesson on jazz when Lizzy approached the piano and began to play a Thelonious Monk tune. The teacher was absolutely giddy about her discovery and wondered if Lizzy's parents knew about her "hidden ability". This educator was so enthusiastic that I didn't have the heart to tell her that Lizzy had been practicing piano for years and many of her teachers knew about her talent and some had even seen her perform.

It is no wonder why many educators do not have this type of important personal information about learners in our schools today. When most teachers get a student with disabilities in their classroom, they are given very little information on the learner's needs, gifts, abilities, strengths. If they are given personal, detailed information it is usually related to a student's challenges but often without useful information on how to address those challenges. For instance, I recently worked with a team of educators who supported Ezra, a young man with autism. The team knew he was prone to "outbursts" and "tantrums" but when we met to discuss these behaviors, I found that none of them knew that these difficulties occurred primarily when the young man saw or heard other children arguing. He was fearful of fighting and disliked seeing confrontations. When he saw students engaged in these behaviors, therefore, he often began crying and shrieking. When teachers learned of this catalyst, they began to brainstorm ideas for preventing these behaviors. They also called the student's former teachers and learned that the child could be easily comforted when the children engaged in the argument approached him and helped him relax.

When a student with disabilities, especially one with significant disabilities, comes into a new classroom or school, he or she may have limited ways of sharing her needs, preferences, and abilities. Each school year, therefore, the families of students with disabilities spend countless hours communicating important and, sometimes, intimate details to help educators better support and teach their children.

While an IEP or cumulative file does provide some information about a learner, these records often do not provide information about how to approach day-to-day life in the classroom. A psychological report may, for instance, provide the teacher with a student's test scores and may help the teacher understand how the learner performed on these assessments as compared to his or her peers, but how does this information help an educator plan a lesson for Monday morning? A teacher will probably learn more from reviewing a list of adaptations that the learner uses in math class. Or tips on how to help the student effectively interact with peers. Or a description of all of the ways that a student can effectively communicate?

What is a Personal Portfolio?

The teachers of both Ezra and Lizzy would certainly have profited from reviewing a personal portfolio on their student. The portfolio can be thought of as a "positive portrait" of the learner with disabilities; it can serve as a communication method, a socialization strategy and as a staff-development tool. Students who create a portfolio also have a meaningful and tangible document that can be used during their parent/teacher conferences and IEP or transition planning meetings.

Portfolios may include photographs, artwork, written assignments or other samples of academic work, lists of favorite things, or even video or audiotapes. Many students find that using the portfolio is easiest if it is contained in a scrapbook, photo album, or three- ring binder but some students may choose to share information electronically or in a CD or video format. Portfolios can be formal or informal, a few pages or dozens of pages, include only current information and artifacts or serve as a cumulative record of the student's life. One student I know keeps his formal portfolio at home and carries a four- page paper condensed copy with him at all times. Another student developed a creative videotape portfolio complete with interviews of her sisters reading poetry she wrote.

In most cases, it is best to write the text from the learner's point of view. For example, "My name is Scott Austin. This is a book all about me." The learner should, of course, have as much control over the book as possible. If he or she can communicate reliably, the student can dictate the text and explain how the portfolio should be assembled. Students with more significant communication struggles can be involved by choosing (through finger pointing) what products will be included in the portfolio or by being responsible for handing the finished product to new people in his or her life.

A portfolio can be an especially helpful tool for students who do not speak or use a reliable communication system. I worked with one young man, J.D., to assemble a portfolio he would use as he transitioned from middle school to high school. This

young man did not speak and those who met him for the first time often struggled to connect with him. When his teachers first accompanied him to his new school, J.D.'s peers began asking them questions about him: Did he understand them? Did he have any interests? Why did he flap his arms like that? The teachers decided that J.D. needed a way to represent himself so that they didn't need to serve as his voice and liaison. In order to facilitate this process the teachers worked with J.D. to create a portfolio that he could use to introduce himself to new people and to interact with those he already knew. J.D.'s portfolio included:

- Four pages of photographs (J.D. with family and friends; snapshots of him playing soccer at a community park; J.D. working with peers on a biology experiment, vacation photos from the Rock and Roll Museum in Ohio)
- A short "resume" outlining some of the classes he took in middle school
- A list of his favorite movies and compact discs
- A "Learning About Autism" pamphlet J.D. got at a conference
- A glossy picture of the Green Bay Packers, J.D.'s favorite football team
- Samples of his school work across curricular areas complete with notes on how the assignments or products were adapted for J.D.

While it took a few weeks for J.D. to initiate conversations with the portfolio, he soon became comfortable with approaching his classmates to share the book. Individuals who saw J.D.'s portfolio now had a way to interact with him and learn more about his life. Two of J.D.'s classmates even developed their own portfolios to share with him.

All of J.D.'s new teachers had opportunities to review his book before he started their classes; this helped the instructors become acquainted with J.D. as an individual and helped them to understand something about his needs and strengths. One of the teachers even used one of J.D.'s favorite movies in her English class as a result of reviewing his portfolio and another teacher helped him to create some watercolor landscape paintings to include in his growing album.

What Should Be Included in a Portfolio?

I recommend dividing the portfolio into two sections, one that is focused only on learning about the person (the "about me" section) and one that is focused on learning about teaching that person (the "help for teachers" section). Some students may actually choose to create two different books so they can introduce themselves to friends without needing to share personal information about their medical, personal, and academic needs.

Each portfolio will undoubtedly be as unique as its creator but the following elements are suggestions for students across grade levels:

Section I: About Me

- "portrait" of the student including name, personal photos, age, information about family and friends, list of interests and strengths
- lists or photos of favorite things including interests (e.g. hobbies) and preferences (e.g., foods, stores, movies); and important life events (e.g., meeting a celebrity, taking a family trip).
- snapshots or video of the student enjoying activities both inside and outside of school
- samples of the students talents/work: drawings, paintings, poems, completed worksheets, audiotape of the student singing or playing an instrument, photos of personal collections (e.g., rocks, stuffed frogs)

Section II: Help for My Teachers

- IEP goals with a short explanation of how the goals should be implemented in daily instruction
- curricular adaptations that have been effective for the learner including several samples of adapted work with descriptions/captions of how the adaptations were created
- ideas for differentiating instruction for the learner; lesson plans highlighting how the student participated in academic lessons
- a range of work samples across curricular areas (e.g., writing samples, tape recording of reading lesson, quizzes/tests, sketches, reports)
- eds, videos, or photos of the learner successfully engaged in activities in the inclusive classroom
- a "tips for teachers" sheet composed, when possible, by the learner with disabilities
- ideas for creating a successful learning environment for the student (e.g, seating needs)
- information on personal care, health needs, and physical assistance, if needed
- tips on communicating with the student (e.g., whispering, giving "wait time" after asking a question) and on helping the student communicate (e.g., how to position a communication device); information on using the student's augmentative and alternative communication when necessary
- positive behavior support plan (if one exists) and effective supports that help teachers avoid challenging situations
- detailed description of how to use the student's assistive technology

- helpful articles/handouts on inclusive schooling, differentiating instruction or other related topics.

Portfolios for ALL

Of course one of the primary goals of using a portfolio is to help a learner with disabilities connect with, teach, and learn from peers. This tool can help teachers move away from a model where the learner with the disability is viewed as the only unique learner in the classroom. In the past, many teachers have taken time to share "special" information about a learner with a disability and his or her label. While this strategy is well intended, it can lead learners to believe that only some of the students in the classroom have special qualities or unique learning characteristics while others do not. Having all students reflect on their individuality and share their lives through a portfolio can, in contrast, send the message that all students are important and different; that all have struggles and strengths; and that all have something to share.

For More Information

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