The National Board Certification®
Workbook
How to Develop Your Portfolio
and Prepare for the Assessment Exams
SECOND EDITION

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The written commentary for each of the first three entries begins with the “Instructional Context,” suggested length one page (two pages on a few certificates). This differs from the Contextual Information. Contextual Information is a snapshot of your school/district. The Instructional Context, on the other hand, is a more in-depth view of your class—the one you feature in each entry. You are instructed to describe and analyze the instructional context—those factors, especially the factors related to the students, that influence the teaching choices. You may feature a different class for each of the three entries or use the same one. You may also choose to use the same class, but highlight different relevant characteristics of the class for each entry. The choice is yours.

As with the rest of the NB process, gathering and analyzing information about your current class(es) of students, although important for the assessors, is even more important for you. Who is in your class(es)? What do they know? What can they already do? What misconceptions do they have, if any? What special interests do they share? Who are the students with exceptional needs and what are those needs? (Consult Chapter 8, “Knowledge of Students.” Reread the NB standard Knowledge of Students.) We should make instructional choices based upon who is in our class(es).

Each class in each of my 12 years in the classroom presented different challenges: students’ needs changed, their ability levels fluctuated, the community’s expectations increased. And each year my own knowledge level and range of available strategies grew. Just as I had different students each year, I was also different each year I entered the classroom. I was reading a different variety of books and had had more professional experiences. And the world around us had changed and continued to change. All of this impacted my instructional choices. Accomplished teachers don’t deliver canned lessons devoid of consideration of students’ needs and abilities or lessons free from consideration of the teaching context. We must always be cognizant that we teach students first, then curriculum.

The portfolio instructions prompt you about what to include in each part of your written commentary. These prompts are your writing guide. I recommend that you set up your pages in advance by formatting according to the NB guidelines (1-inch margins, 12 point Times New Roman font, double spaced). Put your candidate number in the upper-right header and the
Instructional Context:

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx.
  Xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
  Xxxxxxxxxxxxx.
  Xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
  xxxxx.

Planning and Teaching Analysis:

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx.

WRITING THE INSTRUCTIONAL CONTEXT

The first two prompts require fairly objective responses, but the third and fourth prompts in this section are more subjective and reflect your knowledge of your students and of your class and school environment. We began this workbook by examining our beliefs about students; here’s where your beliefs become transparent. All of the certificates have basically the same prompts; you should respond to the exact prompts included in your portfolio instructions. Sample responses are included following each prompt.
Prompt. What is your school setting (e.g. preschool, middle, or high school, alternative school)? What are the number, ages, and grades of the students featured in this entry and subject matter of the class?

Sample Response: I teach in a comprehensive high school. In this regular English Language Arts class there are 32 students, ages 14–16; 28 are 9th graders, 3 are 10th graders repeating the class.

Prompt. What are the relevant characteristics of this class that influenced your instructional strategies for this theme or topic of concern: ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity; the range of abilities of the students; the personality of the class?

Sample Response: This class is more diverse than the student body at large. There are 12 Hispanic students, 11 Asians, 7 African Americans, and 2 Caucasians; 17 boys, 15 girls. There is a wide range of abilities, especially in writing skills and style; some write complete essays; others are working on paragraphs. The majority of the students are subdued, but because I enjoy a verbally active class and like to promote considerable academic discourse, they’ve been getting more vocal and more engaged with one another throughout the semester. All of the students speak English, although the conventions of standard English are a struggle.

Prompt. What are the relevant features of your teaching context that influenced the selection of this theme or topic? This might include other realities of the social and physical teaching context (e.g., available resources, scheduling of classes, self-contained classroom, etc.) that are relevant to your response.

Sample Response: Our department divides students into remedial, regular, honors, and advanced classes. I choose to teach remedial and regular classes and I hold high expectations for all students and teach accordingly. Although we have state-mandated standards, they are general enough to allow me to select themes that are relevant for my students. We use our five classroom computers and Internet access to obtain lots of the texts we use in class. Our desks are constantly reconfigured to meet our needs, groups, lecture style, debate teams, etc.

Prompt. What particular instructional challenges do the students chosen for this entry represent? Explain the particular dynamics of the class an assessor needs to know to understand how you involve students in establishing a supporting and stimulating community and how you used your topic of discussion to assist students in accomplishing this goal. This
might include, but is not limited to, a description of your students’ skills, knowledge, and previous experiences that relate to your teaching.

**Sample Response:** During this election year, democracy has been a central theme, and reading, analyzing, and debating political speeches has been the focus of the curriculum for this unit. These students are used to completing worksheets and being quiet, not having and sharing their own ideas. A challenge has been to open their minds and encourage their voices. To prepare students to participate in our democracy, they need to have democracy in their lives. I do a lot of scaffolding, break the text into readable chunks, jigsaw, preread, hold Socratic seminars, and use many other strategies to reduce the barriers to understanding. The cultural differences break down over time as students gain personal voice.

The NB prompt uses the word *relevant*. You can’t possibly write everything about your class and students in one page. The prompts are guides assisting you as you make choices about what information to provide in the limited available space. As you make those choices, consider what is relevant. There’s lots going on, shortened schedules on some days, PA announcements on others, but not all of it is relevant to this entry. A feature is relevant, and should be included in your descriptions, if it impacts your teaching choices. For example, if students have different cultural backgrounds and you include multicultural materials in your instructional choices, you would include that feature in your description.

**Caution:** I have read entries wherein candidates displayed a thorough knowledge of their students, their cultural backgrounds, interests, skill levels, special needs, and challenges for teaching. These candidates did an excellent job of setting the stage for the assessor to understand the candidate’s teaching context. But it is insufficient to know the characteristics of your teaching context if you don’t put that knowledge to good use. When the candidate connects the relevant characteristics of the teaching context to the instructional choices, evidence of student achievement usually follows. But if a candidate describes students’ needs and then ignores those needs when making instructional choices, we don’t find evidence of accomplished teaching. In fact, if after writing a description of the Contextual Information and the Instructional Context, you discover that you have not addressed some of the identified students’ needs in your analysis of the featured lesson and the student work, you might consider omitting some of the characteristics you mentioned, or revising your commentary to include how you responded to students’ needs, or reteaching and selecting a different unit to feature that shows your work as an accomplished teacher—sensitive and responsive to students.
Failure to use the information about your school setting and/or students to impact instructional decisions is worse than not knowing about your students at all. An accomplished teacher does not intentionally ignore an identified student need or strength. Accomplished teachers use their knowledge about students to make instructional choices and to provide differentiated instruction. If you are going to describe Contextual Features and Instructional Context, it is important to specifically reference, in the body of your entry, how your instruction and choice of strategies addressed identified student characteristics.

Draft the Contextual Information and Instructional Context sheet and ask other educators, preferably candidates, to read and comment on them. How to comment on one another’s work is included in a chapter on Cohort Groups (Chapter 16). Remember, the purpose of these two sections, “Contextual Information” and “Instructional Context,” is to set the stage so the assessors examine your teaching practice as it relates to your teaching context, not to an idealized version of what school should look like, but as your teaching reflects where and who you teach.
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