Using Portfolios to Empower Student Writers

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For the past three years, we have been experimenting with student-writing portfolios, B. J. with her junior-high and Win with his high-school students. What is becoming especially interesting to us is the power of portfolios as teaching tools. Our research has shown us that, for students in an English language-arts classroom, the very act of compiling a portfolio can be a powerful process for many reasons, not least of which is that it helps students see themselves as writers, particularly when it involves many opportunities for self-evaluation and reflection.

The criteria involved in selecting work to include in a portfolio are both internal and external (Linda Rief 1990, "Finding the Value in Evaluation: Self-Assessment in a Middle School Classroom," *Educational Leadership* 47.6 [Mar.]: 24–29). We set the external criteria by describing the kinds of writings which students must include; students choose the specific pieces they will include. The items our students include are quite similar because the external criteria were developed collaboratively by teachers at each grade level (7–12) to reflect the goals of the curriculum—which had also been created collaboratively. Teachers in our district designed a portfolio format that emphasizes a process approach to writing in an integrated language-arts program. At the same time we take into account, on one hand, the implications of a state-wide writing assessment which encourages students to become proficient in a variety of types of writing, and, on the other hand, the need for individual teachers to make decisions about how best to implement those goals in their own classrooms.

Our research is based on our work with the table of contents which has evolved in our district. (See Figure 1.) Each item in the portfolio has important implications for our teaching. We have found that selecting and preparing the various items provides students with many opportunities to reflect on their abilities as writers.

Introduction

In the introduction students speak to the audience, the readers of their portfolios, by introducing themselves, describing their characteristic writing process, and summarizing the contents of their portfolios. The introduction comes first in the portfolio but is written after students have assembled the body of their portfolios.

Diana, a twelfth grader, concludes her introduction by writing,

> I am proud of the contents of this portfolio. It represents my hardest and best work, and I believe the three papers which get progressively more polished clearly track my progress as a writer.

Students' introductions are fascinating to read since they give insight into how students see themselves as writers. As Roberta J. Herter states (1991, "Writing Portfolios: Alternatives to Testing," *English Journal* 80.1 [Jan.]: 90), "Portfolios involve students in assessing the development of their writing skills by inviting self-reflection and encouraging students to assume control over their writing." In their introductions, students invite us to look at what they can do, not what they can't; at what they have instead of what they haven't.

Sample of Timed Writing

The way the portfolio is set up, students are asked to include at least one example of a timed first-

draft writing. While a process approach is at the core of the district writing program, teachers also acknowledge that academic situations frequently require students to formulate, organize, and write their thoughts in limited time periods. Asking students to include one sample of such writing is a way of ensuring that the portfolio reflects that aspect of school writing.

When teachers first decided to include timed writings in the portfolio, we asked students to include two examples of the same type of writing, both completed in a forty-five-minute time period (thus simulating the California direct writing assessment), one sample from the beginning of the year and the other from the end of the year. The assumption was that since the type of writing called for would be one of those that teachers had agreed to concentrate on at that grade level, the students would have had multiple experiences with that kind of writing during the year. We hoped that the later sample would demonstrate higher achievement than the earlier one.

The timed writings for the portfolio need not be thought of as artifacts that are produced simply for inclusion in the portfolio outside the context of the curriculum. It may be possible, even desirable, to design a timed-writing experience as an integral part of an instructional unit, thus achieving one of the goals of authentic assessment, that assessment be virtually indistinguishable from instruction.

For example, Win incorporated a piece of interpretive writing on John Cheever's short story "Reunion" into a unit on rites of passage. After they had read the story, students wrote their responses within a time limit. Their essays went into their portfolios for future reference. Near the end of the year, Win asked his students to respond to a

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Portfolio Table of Contents

✓1. **Introduction**

✓2. **Sample of timed writing**

✓3. **Different types of writing, one with evidence of process**

4. **Sample(s) of writing to learn**

   Possibilities include but are not limited to copy change, dialogue, word-weaving, creating a persona, imitation of author's style, transition from author to student voice, dialectical journal, reading log, quickwrite, drawing inferences, note-taking, learning log.

5. **Creative writing sample**

6. **Student-selected best writing with rationale**

7. **Two pieces selected by student and/or teacher**

   Possibilities include but are not limited to creative writing, special projects, evidence of collaboration, evaluation of oral presentations, evidence of listening, selections from other curricular areas, annotated reading list.

Figure 1a

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similar prompt requiring them to read and analyze a short prose passage in the context of a different instructional plan. As part of compiling their final portfolios, students re-read both papers and the scoring guide; they wrote comments about the differences they noted in their writing, speculating on what accounted for them and reflecting on the classroom experiences which had influenced the growth. The papers, as well as the self-evaluation and reflection, were included in the end-of-the-year portfolio. Advanced-placement students, who had been working on the kind of writing required for the AP literature exam, generally noted that the two samples showed they had become practiced at writing a focused essay using technical analysis; second-language students were able to point out dramatic evidence of their increased fluency in English; and other students often found that the comparison of the two papers offered concrete proof of their growth as writers.

Different Types of Writing, One With Evidence of Process

The statewide direct-writing test administered to eighth and eleventh graders by the California Assessment Program (CAP) identifies ten different types of writing. In our district, teachers have integrated these CAP writing types into our core literature units. It is from these writing types that we ask students to select three essays, one of which should be a packet including evidence of a complete process: prewriting, planning, writing, revising, editing, and rewriting. In most cases, students have several essays from which to choose their best three. They include their entire writing packet, for one essay of their choice, to show evidence of the writing process.

For example, before reading *Anne Frank: Diary*

of a Young Girl, B. J.'s eighth-grade students interviewed someone who had firsthand experience in a war. James, an eighth grader, interviewed his father who had been a child in London during World War II. His packet included notes from library research on WWII, his interview questions, the tape of his interview, his word-processed rough draft with revisions and corrections inked in, a response sheet completed by a classmate, and the computer printout of his final draft. As his other two choices, James selected an autobiographical incident he had written as a timed-writing sample for the NCTE Promising Young Writers' contest and a speculative essay written in response to *Flowers for Algernon.* He chose not to include his short story, a tall tale, or his character analysis of Jeremy Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird.* In order to make his selections, James had to reflect and evaluate the body of his work.

By showing examples of the whole process, the notion that it is the entire process which contributes to a satisfying finished product is reinforced. Since students include three essays in this section, they are able to show examples of writing for different purposes. These writing samples reflect the curriculum, the teacher's application of it, and the students' choices, making the portfolio inextricably tied to what goes on in the classroom.

Writing to Learn

One of the most valuable lessons that students can learn is that writing is a powerful tool for learning—that writing, far from simply being the product of thinking, can actually shape thinking, a phenomenon that James Britton calls "shaping at the point of utterance" (1982, "Shaping at the Point of Utterance," *Prospect and Retrospect: Selected Essays of James Britton,* Ed. Gordon M. Pradl, Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton, 143). Through exercises such as double-entry literary journals, classroom quickwrites, conscious imitation of an author's style, and other activities common to a student-centered, integrated language-arts classroom, students come to find out what they know through the act of writing.

Recognizing the importance of this aspect of writing has certain implications for teaching; teachers can reinforce the value of such writing in several ways: by designing such opportunities so that they build on one another, by providing students with the opportunity to clarify their thinking before discussing a text, by asking students to syn-

thesize in writing their thoughts after discussion, and especially by encouraging students to go back to their "writing to learn" as they draft more formal papers based on ideas developed during their own discovery processes.

We have found the process of sharing their choices with other students provides a valuable lesson. The reasons students give are varied:

> because I wrote about a really personal connection I noticed between Stephen's experience and my own
>
> because by the time I finished writing the different questions that the poem made me ask, I had already started to answer my own questions
>
> I wrote some questions which I took to my collaborative group and they were the beginning of a really good discussion
>
> this quickwrite was actually the inspiration for the final paper I wrote about the book

Seeing the uses others have made of such writing opportunities often is instructive to students, and it reinforces the importance of such writing more powerfully than our repeated assurances that such activities are good for them.

Creative Writing

We recognize that all writing that is not simple copying is creative, and we want our students to recognize that, too. The term springs from an unfortunate assumption that most academic writing is done according to some rigid formula or must somehow conform to strict guidelines which somehow constrain the writer. According to this thinking, all other writing in which the writer is not constrained is more spontaneous, more creative, more fun.

When we and our colleagues designed the first table of contents and looked at the kind of writing assignments we offered students, we recognized that some of our students' best work did not necessarily fit the other categories in the portfolio. We agreed that by requiring students to choose at least one creative-writing piece for the portfolio, we were implicitly providing more opportunities for students to do such writing.

Often the pieces chosen to fulfil the creative-writing requirement are written in response to a piece of literature or are written as a means of deepening understanding or appreciation of an author's technique or style. Win's students, for example, have chosen to include autobiographical pieces about early childhood written in the style of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,*

new chapters for *The Grapes of Wrath,* parodies of the style of Joseph Conrad, satires inspired by Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal," and "found poetry" based on *The Good Conscience.*

The creative-writing section might also contain a writing sample that was not written in response to a particular piece of literature or as a specific writing type. Students who write as a pastime can include their personal writing in this section. Poetry is a popular choice.

The creative-writing category reminds us that it is important to allow students the opportunity to write freely, to explore their ideas in their own way, thereby expanding the repertoire that they can present in their portfolios.

Student-Selected Best Writing with a Rationale

By requiring students to select one piece of writing as their favorite, this category allows them additional personal choice, thus adding to their authority as writers. The best writing selection might be something that is included in another category also, or it might be something the student has saved for the special designation of "my best writing."

Although students have used their own criteria to evaluate each time they select a piece of writing for their portfolios, in the rationale they state their standards and show how the best writing sample reflects those standards.

Andrea, an eleventh grader, near the end of her first year in this country, wrote,

I chose the paper I wrote about *Glass Menagerie* because it was the first paper I am able to say in English exactly what I want to say. Even though it took me a lot of hard work to do it these are the ideas that I had in my head and I can say them. Before was frustrating because even with dictionary I knew I could not explain myself. When I finish this paper I know I have made a big step to learn English.

Carmen, an eighth grader, took a firm stance when she wrote her rationale.

I think that my best writing is my autobiographical incident because it's whole and pure. It was not anything I had to make up or lie about. All it says is the truth.

Tanya, an eighth grader, shows her enthusiasm for her best writing by commenting on her process.

I feel it is my best piece of writing because it was exactly what I wanted to write. I just knew the poem was perfect when I finished. The first sentence of my poem says, "Starvation and misery pluck at my heart." That is the exact way I wanted those words to come out. I could scream, I think my paper is so great.

Brian Johnston says, "Students do not learn writing simply through having many experiences of doing it. To learn to control the medium they must also reflect, conceptualize and experiment" (1987, *Assessing English: Helping Students to Reflect on Their Work,* Milton Keynes, Eng.: Open UP, 105). Selecting their best writing allows students to evaluate their own work while the rationale asks them to internalize their own standards to support that choice in writing.

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✓5. **Creative writing sample**

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✓7. **Two pieces selected by student and/or teacher**

   Possibilities include but are not limited to creative writing, special projects, evidence of collaboration, evaluation of oral presentations, evidence of listening, selections from other curricular areas, annotated reading list.

Figure 1b

Two Pieces Selected by Student and/or Teacher

The vague requirement that the last two items in the portfolio be "two pieces selected by student and/or teacher" is perhaps the most obvious example of how an agreed-upon set of portfolio contents can be flexible enough to allow for diversity. Among the possibilities for these pieces are creative writing, special projects, a collaborative piece, evidence of reflection on collaboration, evaluations of oral presentations, evidence of listening activities, an annotated reading list, or writ-

ing for other content areas. A teacher may define the criteria for choosing one or both of these items in order to ensure that the portfolios reflect an important aspect of the curriculum, or the choice of one or more items may be left up to the student so that the portfolio includes what the student believes to be most important.

Since collaboration in both the writing process and in the process of making meaning from a piece of literature is central to the way he teaches English, Win wanted his students' portfolios to reflect the importance of collaboration, so he required them to include in their portfolios an item labeled "evidence of collaboration." During the course of the year, students were frequently asked to reflect on the collaborative process in various ways. For each major paper they wrote a metacognitive piece about their process, including an analysis of how collaborating had influenced the

changes in their writing at various stages. Sometimes, to encourage collaboration, they were asked to list all the sources from which they had gotten help. Occasionally, after engaging in small-group discussion of literature, students would write notes to each other, commenting on what the others in the group had contributed to the discussion. They wrote self-analyses as well. At the end of the first semester and again at the end of the year, students looked over all this evidence, reflected on it, and attempted to synthesize what they had learned about themselves as collaborators and about the collaborative process.

A few examples of insights from their portfolio entries about collaboration serve to illustrate what happens when students are invited to engage in such reflection. Some students observed that collaboration had particularly influenced their understanding of literature.

More on Portfolio Assessment

While the use of portfolios as an assessment tool is just beginning to materialize, several publications are available. The few listed below were selected with the assistance of Willa Wolcott, Director of the Reading and Writing Center at the University of Florida. BGP

Portfolios: Process and Product. Pat Belanoff and Marcia Dickson, eds. 1991, Boynton, 325pp., $20.00. ISBN 0-86709-275-0

Divided into four main sections (Portfolios for Proficiency Testing, Program Assessment, Classroom Portfolios, and Political Issues), this collection of teacher-written articles provides clear, straight-forward information on portfolio assessment. Each section addresses issues relating to the practical application of portfolio assessment, such as training teachers and grading portfolios. Articles on implementing portfolio assessment, increasing collaboration with portfolios, and using portfolios in the academic areas and in business writing aid teachers in understanding key issues in portfolio assessment and in establishing a portfolio-assessment program.

Portfolio Assessment in the Reading-Writing Classroom. Robert J. Tierney, Mark A. Carter, and Laura E. Desai, eds. 1991, Christopher-Gordon, 179pp., $18.95. ISBN 0-926842-080

Designed to assist teachers in implementing portfolio assessment in the classroom, this book contains reproductions of teacher materials and examples of student portfolios across grades and subjects. The book concentrates on "the spirit of portfolios: developing classroom practices and traditions that reflect a student-centered approach to assessment" (vii).

Portfolio News. Portfolio Assessment Clearing House. San Dieguito Union School District, 710 Encinitas Boulevard, Encinitas, California 92024.

To facilitate the exchange of information among those interested in establishing portfolio-assessment programs or in embellishing programs already in place, Portfolio News provides descriptive articles and poses questions and concerns those involved in portfolio assessment may be facing.

"This is My Best": Vermont's Writing Assessment Program. Vermont Department of Education, 120 State Street, Montpelier, Vermont 05620. 100pp. (report with attachments), $5.00.

This booklet provides a detailed look at the "background, methods, and results of a project that is, so far, unique in the nation" (2). That project is a statewide portfolio-assessment program that was conducted during the 1990–91 school year in forty-six schools. With sections on the why of portfolio assessment and an appendix that provides the general questionnaire, the directions, and the prewriting and editing suggestions given to students, "This is My Best" is full of valuable information.

Portfolio Assessment Newsletter. Northwest Evaluation Association, 5 Centerpointe Drive, Suite 100, Lake Oswego, Oregon, 97035. $25.00 annually (3 issues).

The goal of this newsletter is to provide an information network for educators that are interested in portfolios and portfolio assessment. Published three times each year, the newsletter contains articles, conference announcements, and descriptive information about portfolio programs.

I am really grateful for those discussions in which the layers of my confusion are slowly peeled away by my peers.   Ronnie, twelfth grade

I like how my classmates can throw out their ideas, and how I can tell them mine, but then I can choose what I think is the "right answer." I also like collaborating because it is like figuring out a puzzle where you have to find the pieces first, and later put it together. The most important thing I have learned is that there is no definite right answer, and that my answer does have the potential, if supported, to be correct. I also have learned that I am capable of analyzing literature, that I can figure it out, that I can be right. It is not some process that only English wizards can do.   Donna, twelfth grade

Others came to understand the role of collaboration in the writing process:

[A]lso an important skill is knowing when to listen to your own writing intuitions and when to yield to the suggestions of the group. Although there may be a degree of safety in numbers, you have to be wary of losing your voice or original intent under the well-intended, but not always healthy . . . suggestions of the group.   Gary, twelfth grade

The Finished Product

Assembling their portfolios at the end of the semester or year is a way for students to celebrate their accomplishment. Students agonize over which pieces to select and ask their classmates for advice. As Herter points out, "authority as writers, editors, and audience is validated by their experience with one another's texts" (91). The time students spend organizing portfolios is valuable time to reflect and evaluate. When we allow time for students to assemble their portfolios, they often revise their work and share it informally before it "goes public" in the finished portfolio.

Students can present their portfolios to the class or a small group. B. J. asks students to show their parents the portfolio before presenting it to her. She includes a letter to parents which summarizes what the portfolio represents, and she encourages them to give positive, specific responses to their children. Sending portfolios home strengthens an important link among teacher and student and parents.

Once students submit their portfolios, we read the introductions and rationales carefully and page through the rest, which we've seen before as assignments, stopping to read whatever strikes us. We add a final positive comment, then return the portfolios to the students. We continue to experi-

ment with how to incorporate the portfolio into end-of-term grades. Once we have returned portfolios to students, they are theirs to keep. And why not? They are the creators, the writers.

Portfolios can be a valuable source for summative evaluation by teacher and student; at the end of the year they can provide an accurate measure of what students have accomplished. By the same token, portfolios have potential for formative assessment. When students make tentative selections for portfolios and especially when they compile interim portfolios, evaluate them, and reflect on what they notice, they can reinforce their own learning processes and set goals for future learning. Often, writing about their reflections in such interim portfolios can help them see where they have come from and clarify where they want to go. For example, at the end of first semester Bruce, a twelfth grader, wrote,

This year a combination of techniques has finally allowed me to expand my abilities, which is wonderful. But it also means that I feel like I've started over, and I found that it is like learning how to write again. These techniques have revolved around two areas—expanding my reading capabilities with more original, personal responses in the form of homework, and then, in class sessions involving the gathering of so many different ideas and opinions. With these new concepts of responding to literature, it is impossible that my writing abilities and attitudes wouldn't change.

After he explained how specific papers in his portfolio illustrated various stages in his struggles as a writer, Bruce concluded,

even though there are occasional pieces with discouraging results, the fact that I can finally write outside the boundaries of the five-paragraph essay is refreshing enough to keep my full interest and attention for what I'm sure will be all year.

We have come to believe that, when students become more conscious of the many decisions they make in order to improve their writing, when they begin to be aware of the processes they must engage in to produce effective writing, and when they finally look over a body of their work, judging it against a set of criteria they have developed and internalized, they are engaged in the kind of thinking characteristic of writers.

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