

## Portfolios & Writing Folders

At the moment, writing folders, portfolios, and portfolio assessment are "hot" topics. One of the problems with a hot topic is that it is so new that people don't necessarily define the subject in the same way. Therefore, it might be helpful to begin with some clarifications.

For our purposes a writing folder is nothing more than a container for each student's writing. It is a holding place that is used for only a year. In it, students store all of their writing—prewrites, drafts, checklists, polished pieces, and anything else related to composing. Occasionally, perhaps these folders are cleaned out, leaving only the most essential papers or possibly none at all. In some cases, students carry these folders to and from class daily, but in most situations, the folders remain in the room.

Writing folders help students keep track of papers, and they can be very useful in conferences to show parents and other teachers the kind of work being done by students. However, writing folders as defined here serve no instructional or evaluative purpose. The teacher rarely looks at the folders. Evaluation is based not on an overview of the contents of the folder, but on the individual papers, many of which are graded and then stored in the folder.

There is one exception to this. In many writing workshop classrooms, the students work on their own projects at their own pace. Periodically, the teacher examines the contents of the writing folder to assess what students have accomplished during a given period of time. A grade is then assigned often on the basis of the quantity and possibly the diversity of writing.

What, then, you may be asking, is a portfolio? How is it different from a writing folder? Physically there may be no difference. The real difference is in how the portfolio is created and used. There are generally 2 types of portfolios. One is a collection of all the students' written work. In that respect it is identical to a writing folder. What is different is that individual papers do not receive grades. Instead, the contents of the portfolio as a whole are periodically examined and assessed. Often they are discussed by the students and the teacher. A grade is given or other assessment is made on the basis of the entire collection or on the basis of the collection and the student's ability to analyze and evaluate his or her writing and writing processes. Evidence of progress over a period of time is a crucial element. The use of this kind of portfolio necessitates a great deal of instruction and feedback from peers and the teacher while writing occurs. Thus, none of the papers in the portfolio should be new to the teacher. On the other hand, many of the pieces in the portfolio may be rough and incomplete.

The second type of portfolio is similar to an artist's portfolio. It isn't a collection of everything but a selection of particular pieces. The selection may include only the best of the writer's work or a range of forms to demonstrate versatility. It may include samples of various kinds of writing as specified by the teacher. Another kind of portfolio intentionally includes both the best and the worst. In some cases students are allowed to select for themselves alone. In other cases students must not only select but also write explanations for their choices. In other classrooms students discuss their choices with their teachers. Sometimes students and teachers must agree on a selection before it can go into

the student's portfolio. And on the far end of the continuum there is the situation in which the teacher alone decides what goes into the portfolio.

One other possibility which needs to be mentioned is the long-term writing portfolio. This is a kind of permanent student record that begins when the student starts kindergarten or 1st grade and is added to each year until the student graduates to another level of schooling (i.e., moves from elementary school to middle school) or continues until the student's precollegiate schooling is finished. Usually these portfolios contain a very early writing sample and then one or two examples of the student's best work from each school year. The intent of this portfolio is to verify progress throughout his or her school career. At the end of his/her schooling the portfolio is returned to the student. Some schools ask students to assess their own progress in writing when the portfolios are returned.

And finally there is the cross-curricular writing portfolio which may be either short- or long-term. The key difference here is that the contents of the portfolio are not limited to writing done in English classes. These portfolios may contain samples from some or all other classes. Again designs may differ in that students may have much, some, or no control over the selection, and there may be no, some, or many required samples.

If this all sounds vague and nebulous to you, that's because it is. As a profession we have yet to reach agreement and define our terms clearly. There is at least one expert (if anyone can be called that in such an ill-defined field) who says that portfolio assessment has nothing to do with a folder containing writing samples; instead, it is a philosophical stance toward assessment which is based on collecting data from many different sources, including teacher observations and recommendations, peer discussions, test results, and so on, what educators have long advocated as the best kind of evaluation. The Riverside Publishing Company advertises a portfolio program which shows that a student portfolio contains not only exhibits and work samples but teacher-made tests, norm-referenced test results, anecdotal records, observations, and checklists. However, calling this approach portfolio assessment only muddies the turbid waters further. You need to be very conscious of the fact that what one person calls a writing folder, another calls a portfolio. And when people talk about portfolio assessment, they may be talking about neither the same kinds of contents nor the same kinds of evaluation procedures. It is more than legitimate to ask: What kind of portfolio are you talking about? What are the contents? Are they selected and, if so, how? What kind of assessment do you mean? What is its purpose? Who will assess? On what basis?

If you are interested in portfolios and portfolio assessment for yourself or your school, these are questions that you will have to answer. There are several models that schools are trying, and the whole state of Vermont is using portfolio assessment. But these programs vary greatly. Each has advantages and drawbacks. Few actually reduce the paper load of teachers. Except for those which give either students or teachers total power to select, all seem to demand one-on-one conference time with students.

There are a couple of potential problems which need to be considered. One is that the teacher or school can nearly drown in portfolios and filing cabinets. Furthermore, while maintaining long-term portfolios may well be quite valuable if at some point students review the contents, there is reason to question their value as a diagnostic tool since they resemble permanent records which many teachers ignore.

The second concern is that the development of portfolios and/or portfolio assessment will overshadow composition instruction. Many proponents of portfolios argue that, when students are directly involved in or control the selection process and when selections are discussed, instruction will be enhanced. However, teachers are laboring under great pressure to produce better results and if those results are measured by portfolio contents, then the approach itself rather than learning may become the focus of attention.

There is another element that you might want to think about if you are considering portfolios. One of the major reasons that portfolio assessment was contemplated initially was the fact that single-sample writing tests often failed to reveal the writer's true ability. Multiple samples are considered preferable and portfolios do respond to this criterion. However, another major reason was the desire to assess the process as well as the product. This is the motive behind plans which call for assessing all prewriting and rough drafts, as well as polished pieces. However, these are products, too. Surely observations of and discussions with students would reveal more about processes than what appears on paper in any form.

With these thoughts in mind, what are some advantages or potential values of portfolios and portfolio assessment? Not surprisingly, these vary depending upon the design of the portfolio. Simply storing papers in writing folders has little educational value, although a formal review of the contents at the end of the year can be a revealing experience for students. However, when students must make choices about which to save, they must judge. When they explain their selections, they must articulate reasons. When the portfolio has to contain a variety of discourse, students must attempt a range of writing tasks. Examining papers written over several years can build the student's confidence when he sees his own improvement displayed before him. When students are asked how they produced certain pieces of writing, they can become more conscious or metacognitively aware of their own thinking, decision-making, and writing activities.

Will portfolio assessment improve evaluation? This seems possible in that it forces teachers to move away from the meticulous error-correcting and grading which has been typical. Assessing portfolios means looking at several papers simultaneously which may cause teachers to reconsider the standards they have used and to seek out noticeable trends in performance. This could cause a positive shift in instructional practices.

Will the use of portfolios improve student writing? This, of course, is the key question. The answer is that we don't know. Portfolio construction does offer some opportunities that other writing activities do not, and portfolio assessment has definite advantages over single-sample standardized assessments, but whether portfolios will improve writing remains to be seen.

Recommended Further Reading:

Arter, J., & Spandel, V. (1992). Using Portfolios of Student Work in Instruction and Assessment. ITEMS (Instructional Topics in Educational Measurement) Instructional Module published by the National Council on Measurement in Education. Spring issue, 36-44.

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Murphy, S., & Smith, M. (1991). Writing portfolios: A bridge from teaching to assessment. Markham, Ontario, Canada: Pippin Publishing.

Portfolio Assessment Clearinghouse (1993). Development of criteria for evaluating portfolios. Portfolio News, 4 (3), 4-5. (especially figure 1 entitled Portfolio Evaluation Framework)

State of Vermont (1990-91). "This is my best": The report of Vermont's writing assessment program. Montpelier, VT: Vermont Department of Education.

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Yancey, K. (Ed.) (1991). Portfolios in the writing classroom: An introduction. Urbana, IL: NCTE.