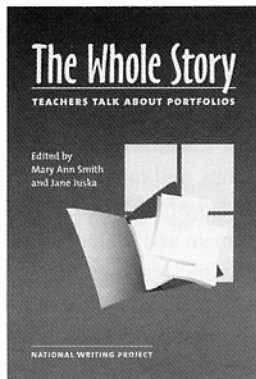


# National Writing Project Publishes *The Whole Story*



“What happens when students are allowed to tell the whole story about their learning, when their accomplishments are not defined solely by a standardized test?” That’s the question that the National Writing

Project poses with its new book, *The Whole Story: Teachers Talk About Portfolios*. It’s also the question that educators Mary Ann Smith and Jane Juska, who served as the book’s editors, began asking several years ago. And the more they thought and talked about this question, with each other and with other educators, the larger the answer became . . . until it became a book.

*The Whole Story* debuted at the 2001 NWP Annual Meeting, held in Baltimore in November. To the delight of many, this book—a follow-up although not a sequel to Smith and Miriam Ylvisaker’s 1993 title *Teachers Voices: Portfolios in the Classroom*—filled book sales tables at the meeting and, better yet, went away in the hands of many people who share the authors’ penchant for portfolios.

With the publication of *The Whole Story*, the NWP now has a history—albeit a short one—of publishing titles addressing portfolios. The earlier title examines how teachers “designed portfolios that put a premium on students’ needs; on serious, innovative curricula; and on classroom cultures that supported rather than sabotaged excellent writing,” basically providing evidence of how using portfolios improved student writing. *The Whole Story* focuses on how portfolio practices have changed in the nine years between the two book releases. As well, the new title has emerged in an educational climate different from that of its predecessor, and *The Whole Story* teacher-writers find themselves pitching portfolios in a “policy environment skewed toward standardized, external assessments.”

At the heart of this book is the work of 11 teachers, including Juska. The teacher-writers take readers into classrooms to “see” students writing, assessing, revising, and assembling the pieces that eventually become their portfolios.

“We began this book three years ago with the thought that portfolios tell the bigger story of a student’s progress. Our hope was that, with some thoughts from our colleagues, we might be able to offer some insight into the current issues surrounding portfolios,” recalls Smith, who is a co-director of the National Writing Project. The resulting book provides honest accounts that consider both the advantages and complexities of using portfolios as a way to support and evaluate student achievement.

In addressing the advantages of portfolio use, the book points up the portfolio’s ability to capture an accurate picture of student growth. “Where end-of-unit or end-of-year tests are like stop-action photos—with their subjects too often caught off guard—portfolios offer a series of shots,” Smith says. By nature, portfolios feature a body of work that students accumulate and revise over time. From the process of creating the portfolios, the authors show, comes another advantage: students learn to recognize their own growth. And all of this, the book suggests, provides a means to assess student learning fairly.

The writers also reveal the complexities of using portfolios in the current educational climate. “Current legal tender, whether a mandated exam or a packaged program, hardly seems to include portfolios,” Smith notes in the book’s introduction. “Yet when teachers are limited to what’s on the page—printed instructions, checklists, or procedures—they often avoid teaching writing because they may lack strategies for doing so. If anything, the activities that make up a portfolio culture are crucial to

teaching and learning: reading and writing with students, creating rubrics, using models, conducting conferences, working through multifaceted revision and editing strategies, practicing reflection and analysis, and responding to student work.”

When all is said, Smith and Juska believe *The Whole Story* will benefit any teacher contemplating using portfolios. Portfolios have credibility at all levels, a fact to which Juska can attest. Juska, a teacher-consultant with the Bay Area Writing Project (California) who has 35 years as a high school teacher behind her, currently teaches both in the teacher preparation program at St. Mary’s College, Moraga, California, and in San Quentin State Prison. She finds portfolios as indispensable to teaching inside the walls of San Quentin State Prison as they were in her high school classroom.

Smith and Juska are especially pleased with the publication of this book because of its connection and parallel to the work of the National Writing Project. “If [one of NWP’s goals] in education is to increase the capacities of teachers and students—to expand their options, their knowledge, and their resourcefulness,” Smith concludes in her introduction, “then portfolios should be high on the list of practices.”

On the strength of its writers and the stories they have to tell, *The Whole Story* will certainly foster the spread of that practice.

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