The Birth and Death of Portfolio Assessment 1992–2000

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The following article is a chapter from the recently released National Writing Project book, The Whole Story: Teachers Talk About Portfolios, edited by Mary Ann Smith and Jane Juska. In this piece, a veteran California teacher recalls "the good old days" when she and her colleagues created a portfolio assessment program, only to watch it crumble as conditions changed.

One by one the soon-to-graduate students at Buchanan High School in Clovis, California, file to the front of the room. As they read from what they consider the best work in their portfolios, they beam with pride. Today is Senior Showcase Portfolio Day.

Sadly, however, Senior Showcase Portfolio Day is all too aptly named. Through no fault of the student readers, this event has become a show, a kind of charade. Indeed, the use of portfolios in my school has withered to a state of show-and-tell with students collecting work each year to put in a folder accompanied by a superficial introduction essay. I say "superficial" because most essays lack any insight into how their portfolios demonstrate their writing processes or how their writing and thinking are improving. An excerpt from a typical tenth grade essay:

My writing really improved a lot this year and I worked hard to make it happen. I tried to correct all of my mistakes. I notice that I'm making fewer mistakes and my essays are longer. In my first essay I wrote about my mother. My friend said it was really good. Maybe it was good because I really love my mother. I hope you like this essay.

Of course, many students offer far greater insight into their work, but too many make no attempt to reflect on their growth or provide the reader with evidence to demonstrate progress. They give no examples, make no comparisons, and draw few conclusions. Not uncommonly, they depend on mechanical transitions of "my next essay," "my third," and so on, offering the reader no sense that the writer has actually thought about what she or he has learned. But to blame the students for these perfunctory performances would be to blame the victims. These students cannot be held responsible for what they have not been taught. Neither would it be reasonable to blame the teachers. They also have not been taught. Almost none of them were around in 1992 when a group of us were won over to the then-revolutionary concept of portfolio assessment. We became committed to the idea that portfolio assessment could shed light on the invisible: the struggles, the small steps forward, the intellectual progress over time. We spent many hours wrestling with the means to achieve these lofty ends.

The teachers who came along later had had no part in this dialogue. For them, students just weren't getting it. "The kids just don't know how to reflect. So why are we doing this?" they would ask. "Isn't this really too much work for what we're getting out of it?" I do not believe they would be asking these questions if they had been with us in 1992. At the risk of romanticizing some golden age of literacy education now obscured in the mists of time, I want to recall our work in that year and the years following.

The Birth Process

A new high school had been built in my district in California's Central Valley, and I was returning to the classroom after seven years of being a teacher on special assign-
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ment. "A perfect opportunity," I had said to a
close colleague and friend, Joan. We had
often talked about what we would do if we
were in charge of the educational world.
Now was our chance. The principal, who
also believed the time had come for change,
hired us along with four others. Jake, Nan,
Joan, and I were veteran National Writing
Project teacher-consultants,
Dave was working on his
thesis for a master's degree,
and Dawn, the youngest
member, had taught in
another district for five
years.

Our work began in August—
a long week of trying to
come together. After setting
our goals for the department and reviewing
the curriculum, Joan and I suggested we
design a portfolio system to help us meet
our goal of improving student writing. In
our enthusiasm, we both started talking at
the same time, wanting to tell our stories of
what we had learned about portfolios, our
voices stepping on each other's, perhaps
mine being shamelessly the louder.

I had attended an inservice workshop for
the San Joaquin Valley Writing Project
(SJVWP), at which Mary Ann Smith (then
director of the California Writing Project)
demonstrated from her work at Mt. Diablo
High School that much can be learned
about teaching writing by looking at
students' writing over time. I shared my
excitement about Mary Ann's presentation,
and, in fact, all of the teachers on our team
had either read about or heard about this
new concept and were ready to give it a try.

To move our process forward, Joan sug-
gested we write for fifteen minutes about
why we would want to assess student
writing through portfolios. When we shared
our quick-writes, we gave surprisingly
similar reasons. We believed that we could
see what students were actually learning if
we compared early work to later work. We
believed we could determine which
assignments were well presented and which
were confusing. We believed students would
be able to see their progress in fluency and
belonged to the students, not to us, and
therefore should consist of only their
choices.

We debated the merits of these opposing
views for an entire morning. Joan, whom we
later called "O Thoughtful One," came back
from lunch with an idea. She explained that
if we truly wanted to give
students ownership and
choices, while we gleaned
information about our
assignments, they needed to
write several pieces in
different genres. In this way,
we would identify categories
from which they could
choose while ensuring that
the work revealed the types
of writing we were teaching (journal
writing, response writing, narrative writing,
interpretive writing, argument, and so on).

"Won't that take a lot of time?" Dawn asked,
which launched us into ways to weave
writing into the study of literature. From
these conversations, we began to realize
how a portfolio system was going to change
not only how we assessed students but also
how we taught. The hard work lay ahead in
our daily and weekly planning.

To achieve our first purpose, that students
see and think about their growth, we agreed
to include all drafts of process papers and
to provide opportunities for students to
select what they thought was their best
work each quarter. Dave suggested they
write a "letter to the reader," while the rest
of us preferred a reflective essay format. His
argument for letter format was based on his
belief that a letter might be less intimidat-
ing. The rest of us argued that an informal
letter would not encourage the kind of
reflection we intended to teach. After
another hour of debate, we settled on the
letter format for ninth-graders and the reflective essay writing for tenth-graders. At the same time, we reminded one another that whatever we decided was certainly not carved in stone.

But we were wrong. For all practical purposes our work was carved in stone. Other than creating a rubric that fall for scoring the end-of-the-year portfolios and eliminating, at the end of two years, the bulkiness that came with too many drafts, we never again questioned the process or design. We felt some guilt about this, but we thought we had an excuse. Our new school was growing so fast, with so many new teachers, that finding a time when everyone could meet became difficult. So we simply gave up. Our innovative school settled into being not so innovative.

The Inevitable Death

Eight years later, only two of our original six teachers are still teaching in the department, and twenty or more new teachers have since been hired. As a department, we no longer discuss student learning. Instead, we talk about raising test scores. The spirit of inquiry that characterized our little band of explorers metamorphosed into a spirit of disillusionment and then disappeared.

Today I ask myself, how did this happen? What became of our lofty plans to use portfolios as an assessment tool to measure our students' growth as writers and our growth as teachers? What happened to the philosophical base we had constructed that guided our decisions about how and why we wanted to establish a four-year portfolio assessment system? Most important, what happened to our desire to be reflective practitioners to improve our teaching and to teach students to be reflective learners to improve their writing?

There are two answers to these questions: the simple one and the complex one. The simple answer I have already alluded to. As the school grew larger, teachers communicated less. Additionally, frequent changes in administrative staff resulted in a lack of informed support. The complex answer is that educational reform cannot be sustained, regardless of how pedagogically sound the practice may be, if new staff members are not acculturated to the beliefs and values that lay behind the establishing of the practice. Stated another way, school reform and those responsible for carrying out these changes need constant attention. We will not bring about change merely by demanding obedience. We cannot expect a group of teachers to buy into a program they do not understand and had no role in creating. In 1992, we were given the chance to welcome new ideas, and we were provided opportunities for growth and rediscovery. Presently, our teachers are given no such opportunity.

So we get the doubts: "Why are we doing this? The kids don't see any value in it! What should I say to them?"

"My kids say they are going to stay home on Senior Showcase Portfolio Day. What should I do? Lower their grades?"

"My kids do a lousy job of reflecting. They just don't know how to do it! Maybe they're too young. Maybe we should rethink why we bother to use portfolios."

Their comments jolt me. As I look in earnest at their faces, it strikes me that we are no longer the same department. These teachers have not read and argued and explored. They have not been asked to bring their experiences to the table. Over the years, the many new teachers who have been hired were told about the portfolio process, but the description was all nuts and bolts; there was no time to discuss philosophy. As we grew from a student body of 1,500 to one of 2,700, we made serious mistakes that perhaps can serve as a caution to others interested in school reform.

A Look Back

Error #1: We assumed that the newly hired young teachers had learned about the value of portfolio assessment in their teacher education classes. What we ultimately discovered was that they had read about portfolio assessment but felt ill-prepared to make decisions about process or design. Unfortunately, we gave this second generation of teachers only a set of operating instructions: "Tell your students to save all written work in this folder. At the end of the year, they will pick four pieces and the rest will be taken home. Then they will evaluate these pieces and write a reflective essay about what they have learned this year. The essay will be graded holistically on a six-point scale (see the department chair). At the end of their senior year, they will present their portfolio with sixteen pieces at Senior Showcase Portfolio Day."

Without a firmer base, some of the teachers quietly ignored the rules, hoping they would go away. Their students did not collect work. Therefore, they had nothing to select from at the end of the year. Neither was there anything to reflect on. Our innovation was gradually dying from neglect.

Error #2: We assumed that the acculturation of our new teachers would take place naturally as they learned the system. After all, we shared a large department office. What talk there was, however, centered on questions of "how" instead of "why," and our band of explorers soon became the minority voice, learning a hard lesson along the way: passing along how we do some-
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thing but not why we do it not only results in uninform instruction, miscommuni-
cation, and lack of motivation, it also limits progress. "Where do we go from here?" is a ques-
tion that can be answered only by those who know where they have been. With only
two remaining English teachers from the
original six, we were essentially an English
department without a history, with no
collective knowledge of the bad old days
before portfolio assessment or the struggle
to make things better. As far as the new
teachers were concerned, portfolio assess-
ment was much ado about nothing. The
kids were too immature to reflect mean-
fully, their selections had no effect on the
curriculum, and if the works were already
graded, then the teacher had unwittingly
classified the student's work as good,
average, or poor writing. Why bother
keeping a writing folder? Only now do I see
our folly, believing that the new teachers
could live our history by rubbing shoulders
with us. I see that any reform movement
must include an invitation to bring new
people on board, a careful plan that works
toward inclusion. We had held tightly to our
inner circle, believing we were the core, and
circled the others around us. All that we
lacked were crowns!

Error #3: We assumed that our beliefs were
the best because we had come by them
through hard work and so invited no
discussion and left no room for questions
that threatened our system. We explorers
had become settlers. We were proud of
ourselves, and our pride shut out each new
teacher to the department because we saw
ourselves as the experts. If we had opened
up for change, we feared that new ideas
would have rendered ours invalid, old. Per-
haps it was our age difference that threat-
ened us, that prevented us from inviting
questions about process. Except for Dawn,
we were all forty- or fifty-something. We
were writing project teacher-consultants.
We had master's degrees. The new teachers
were in their middle to late twenties. They
could be our children.

Our school reform attempt crumbled, but I
do not believe aborted efforts at change are
unique to our district. In fact, I would argue
that in many school districts, whether the
change is to portfolio assessment or to
some other innovation to improve student
learning, the lack of attention to new
personnel and the unwillingness to
embrace new teachers in continuous
grassroots talk will prove fatal for any
reform movement. I feel sad that our story
typifies many educational reform move-
ments across the nation. "What is in this
year?" teachers often joke with one another.
"New math or old math? Whole language or
phonics? Project-based learning or back to
basics?" How do we survive the chaos?

In this environment, I have come to believe
that the National Writing Project may
provide one of the few opportunities for
sustained improvement in education. The
model provides opportunities for teachers
to come together over and over again as
they pursue professional growth and allows
them to belong to a professional commu-
nity that sustains and nurtures that growth.
In fact, it was at a California Writing Project
writing retreat that I began this article,
receiving the support I needed to reflect on,
and learn from, my experience. The project
empowers teachers with their own knowl-
dge and provides a home for the likes of
me, an old teacher with a young heart yet
one who is never too old to learn, even from
failure.

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