Notes on the Portfolio Approach to Teaching Writing

Over the past several years I have been experimenting with portfolios in my writing classes. Since I first heard the term used in connection with the teaching of writing (at a meeting of the South Coast Writing Project in Santa Barbara), I've been attracted to the word itself, which conjures up for me — as it obviously does for many others — images of the writer-artist at work. Also, I've become increasingly curious about the power of this term over the imaginations of other teachers and my students, for even colleagues who have no interest in composition theory have wanted to hear more about portfolios. And, more significantly, even the most resistant of my students have seemed willing to give portfolios a try.

I began, then, with the awareness that other people, too, were attracted to the portfolio, and I had the notion that it would be, quite simply, a way of collecting student writing throughout a semester. By the end of a year, I presumed, my students and I might be suitably impressed by the sheer weight (or the unbearable lightness?) of their portfolios. They and I would, in these hefty collections, have proof that, as Peter Elbow and others have claimed, writers who write frequently, who practice constantly, gain power. Thus, holding on to student writing over time seemed logical enough, and probably (I believed then) the heavier the portfolio, the more skilled the writer.

Also, since writing is a process of discovery and revision, I reasoned that portfolios would enable student writers and me to see the process entire to trace the emergence of a piece of writing from first jottings to graded product (Britton). And, with this in mind, I began asking students to include a cover sheet of their reflections on the work enclosed.

By the second year, my use of the portfolio looked like this: I made a series of writing assignments over a semester, identifying the dates on which each was due; I gave students a range of topic choice (say six to eight topics) for each assignment; I required that each piece reflect revision; that this revision, as well as all pre-writing (lists, outlines, clusterings, notes) be attached to the finished piece; as the assignments were due, I graded and returned them, sometimes allowing a paper with a low grade to be revised; at the end of each semester I asked students to put all their work into portfolios, to identify their best piece of writing, and to compose a cover sheet of reflection. I collected these (and — I confess — weighed them mentally) and gave each portfolio a final grade.

I was pleased. My system was highly organized. Two colleagues thought they'd include it in their classes. Among students it had the reputation of being "tough but fair." I was, as I say, content — content that is, until I began to see that despite this fairly elaborate system, my students' writing had not improved. It looked neater; it weighed more; but it was still filled with the leaden, I-am-writing-this-because-you-assigned-it prose which Macrorie and others have rightly called "Englishish."

What I had created, I now see, was a slightly different version of the same old thing: substantial but lifeless collections of teacher-based prose. Every aspect of any portfolio revealed that whatever and however students wrote, they wrote for and to me (or for and to a grade). Certainly they did not write to one another. And certainly, they did not address audiences outside the classroom, although some assignments called for, say, "a letter in which you state an opinion and make a proposal." The overall tone of their work showed me they knew perfectly well that I, and I alone, was the audience.

Pondering what changes to make, I became convinced, finally, that if my students were to believe that they were "real" writers, I would have to begin to treat them like writers. I saw the essential difference between what I had been doing and what I hoped to do next as an issue of authority in the classroom. I would have to find ways either of sharing the authority I had over their writing — or of vesting that authority in them. That is, I began to see that no matter how enlightened a place I had
imagined my classroom to be, I was still rigidly controlling what my students wrote, how often they revised their work, and (implicitly, despite my claims to the contrary) their audiences.

Collaborating with a colleague who was also using portfolios, I made several significant changes in my approach as the next year began. I assigned only the kinds of writing and numbers of pieces students were to turn in at the end of the semester. For example, that year I asked that their portfolios contain several poems, a short story, a one-act play or a scene from a play, three letters of various purposes, two personal essays or interviews, and a more formal argument in support of or in opposition to an issue. Topic choices were entirely up to the students. I asked that they revise their work throughout the semester as frequently as they felt it to be useful, but I asked that each piece should reflect at least one revision in response to the review of a peer and at least one revision in response to a review from me. Only at the end of the semester, when all work was turned in, would their writing receive a grade.

In an effort to broaden their awareness of audience, I paired them up to read their drafts to one another (not optional) then encouraged them to read to the larger group (entirely optional), and I published their drafts both on the walls of the class and in the halls outside the class (if they agreed). I also collected some of the drafts and more finished pieces, publishing them under the title “Writing Papers.”

Now they were almost entirely responsible for what they wrote about and for the number of revisions they wished to make. As I responded to their work (often several times) before I graded it, I got the sense they were beginning to see themselves as writers as never before. And I discovered that responding to (rather than grading) their work put me in the desired role of confidant, helper, or coach, and freed them to consider a number of choices for revision, based on the audience they had in mind (Knoblauch). Gradually, they began to notice the clusters of students who read (or at least glanced at) their work in the halls, and they began to write for those students, rather than for me. They had begun to generate what I would call student-based (as opposed to teacher-based) prose.

I can’t, however, claim there were no problems. First of all, students frequently complained that they “couldn’t tell how they were doing without a grade.” I urged them to read more carefully responses from their peers and from me, and to trust their own judgment about how their work was going. Sometimes, in response to pressure from them, I would ask them to assess their own work, to confer with a peer about this, and — if they were adamant — to assign themselves a grade. Then I would review this with them, giving some idea of whether or not I generally shared their view of themselves. Throughout this determined effort on my part to postpone the giving of grades until the end of the semester, I was aware that it is we ourselves who have carefully taught students to write for the teacher and to write for a grade (Walvoord).

Secondly, I was considerably more invested in publishing their work than they were. Even though they noted with pleasure that their writing was attracting readers in the halls, and even through they had begun to write to this student audience, I was the one who pinned up their work. I collected, typeset on PageMaker, and distributed the booklet which, I have to admit, fell instantly, upon publication, into that deep well of silence and disinterest which is the final resting place and only audience for many student newspapers and literary magazines. (More about this later.) Mulling this over, I concluded that, once again I had been subverting the process of their writing by asserting too much authority over which pieces of their work were to be published and what the forms of publication should be.

The following year, my use of the portfolio remained the same except that, after requiring that each student publish several pieces of work, I turned over the authority for deciding how and when that work would be published to the students. Though most classes initially looked to me to organize the way in which they would reach these decisions, after some false starts, most settled on what I would call a “journalism class approach,” identifying those who would do the layout, photocopying, and distribution (or posting work on the bulletin boards in the halls).

Their creativity produced far more satisfying forms of publication than I had imagined. For instance, one class held an informal evening “Coffee House” of readings for the class and friends; one class invited parents and friends to a more formal reading of their work in the library; one class took a thematic approach, posting up writing in the form of “Letters on War and Peace”; one class simply photocopied the best piece chosen from each portfolio.

I would like to dwell on this matter of publication for another moment to underscore a point. What my classes created as they published their own writing had, I’m afraid, almost nothing in common with most school publications. My students found forms of publication which included them all, and, in some cases, forums to which they invited families and friends. In contrast to
this, most school publications make almost no connection to any writing from the classroom; indeed, most school publications involve a handful of students and one (I speak for myself) weary instructor in a labor-intensive, after-school or weekend enterprise generally scorned by all and read by the three students who wrote it.

If we were talking about a typical school newspaper, it would be written on Sunday afternoons by three male students who cover the major sporting events of the institution with passionate care and who care to write about little else. If we were referring to a generic literary magazine, we would discover it to be written by four female students who are close friends and who write and illustrate poetry. This literary magazine would be published once a year, usually in June, usually so late in June that it is read only by the four who produced it and tossed in the halls by the rest. And if we were to consider what these publications cost, we might be convinced that schools and colleges for whom this rings true should seek ways of bringing the work of publication into the classroom so that student writers, like real writers, take on this authority and responsibility.

As I look out now from my own classroom, I observe an increased and increasing interest in portfolios. Entire schools and school districts — even entire states (Vermont's primary schools, for instance) are putting portfolios at the center of their language arts programs. From my experience to date, I would want to ask several questions about the ways these portfolios are being/and will be used:

- Do students choose their own topics?
- Do students get peer and instructor response to drafts before a piece of writing is graded?
- Do students write to different audiences?
- Do students reflect on their own writing processes?
- Do students determine which pieces of their work will be published?
- Is the class as a whole given the responsibility, the time, and the funding for publication?

If, as now seems certain, the portfolio is to become an integral part of most writing programs, I hope it will be used in ways which give over to student writers the authority for choice of subject, for writing, audience, degree of revision, and form of publication which all writers claim.

References


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