There’s a Lot of Things You Learn in English That You Can’t Really See

There is presently a strong national interest in using portfolios for student and school evaluation of writing. To facilitate this evaluation, there is frequent talk of ways to standardize student portfolios. Our experience has shown us that standardizing portfolios does facilitate scoring and evaluation, but it does little to help foster understanding among teacher evaluators. The greatest lesson we have learned is that portfolios help students to learn, to understand, and to reflect. It is this understanding and knowledge that develop the strong individual voices of our students. We have also learned that teachers’ voices change when the portfolios remain in the students’ hands. Teachers forget teacher issues and concerns and continue working to understand what helps their students learn best. As teachers, they understand these portfolios best when the student writers are present.

In the beginning...
Our portfolio assessments were quite conventional. At the end of each year fourteen of us in the Mount Vernon High School English Department would gather together to score a sample group of thirty cumulative high school portfolios.

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Linda Durrell arrives early on the teacher work day. She sees the thirty targeted student portfolios stacked on the table and multiple copies of the rubric the department has developed to evaluate them.

Once the other teachers arrive, Ms. Durrell and her fellow English teachers discuss the rubric, clarifying terms like “completeness.” Ms. Durrell asks about “revision” and how she is to judge it. There is some uncertainty, but the department agrees to look at the rough drafts for evidence of revision and to read the students’ reflection letters for clues.

Linda Durrell joins Marge Evans to discuss their observations of one of the cumulative portfolios. Fifteen minutes later they stop to talk with the rest of the department about the rubric. Ms. Durrell wonders aloud why their portfolio doesn’t have rough drafts. When Bill Gage says many of his students revise on word processors, Ms. Durrell senses the complexity of portfolio assessment.

Ms. Durrell and her partner read another portfolio and score it according to the department rubric. She wants to know why there was so little revision in the “letter to a favorite author” assignment.

Two hours later, Ms. Durrell and Ms. Evans have scored five portfolios. During the post-scoring discussion Ms. Durrell asks her revision question. Jim Crown explains his letter assignment and other teachers respond by explaining similar
assignments. The discussion ends with Ms. Durrell still wondering.

For four years we were dissatisfied with our assessment results. Thirty portfolios were scored, but there was little exhilaration in the post-scoring discussion, which featured more criticism of student writing than understanding of it. To improve the process after the second year, we made our scoring guide more general, encouraging more comments than numbers. Then we set clearer department standards for portfolios to improve the readability. Finally, we interviewed teachers of the sample students to decrease their defensiveness when their student portfolios were being evaluated. There was little change in our discussion, which still showed more judgment than understanding.

Our greatest difficulty was understanding the context of the writing. What was assigned? Who read it? What resources were available or used? What did the teacher say? We tried to see where the student writer fit into the writing class and to understand the role of the teacher in student progress. Did Kendra choose the excellent images in her poem, or did the teacher lead her to this discovery? When the portfolio was sloppy or lacking in quality writing, had the teacher not guided students in preparing their portfolios or did the students have poor writing or organization skills? However, this only created more questions, for when we began dissecting Kendra’s process, we needed more information than the portfolio provided. Without the student writer present, we had to recreate the context, not just for one writing but for many, each with its unique circumstances. We wanted the portfolios to explain or demonstrate what was happening in our writing classrooms. Rather than answering questions, the portfolios raised more:

Why was so little revision evident in the portfolios?
Why was there so little evidence of beautiful or powerful language?
Why were the writings so error-free?
Why was there so little evidence of self-selected topics?

There were clues in every portfolio, but nothing conclusive. When the scoring ended, we teachers hadn’t discovered much. Familiar judgments became answers:

Students are too lazy to revise.
Students don’t read enough.
Teachers have to do too much of the correcting.
Students do better when they are assigned a topic.

In time...

We discovered the value of interviewing our sample group of students about their portfolios. When we extended the community, or actually included everyone who really belonged in the the writing community (both teachers and students), something changed profoundly.

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Richard is one of thirty students invited in the middle of the school day to discuss his portfolio. He is a high school senior and has been part of a four-year assessment study of Mount Vernon High School’s writing program. Each year he has returned to review his writings and explain to teachers and students his views on writing assignments and instruction at his high school.

Ms. Durrell and other teachers greet Richard and the other students and assist them in reviewing and discussing their portfolios. In his small group Richard talks about his frustrations with essay assignments, “especially when a certain topic is required.” Then he listens to Kendra talk of her love for her ninth grade poetry and Allison’s surprise at how
much she wrote in eleventh grade. At the end Richard agrees to be the spokesperson and report their findings to the large group.

In the large group, students and teachers listen to Richard's report, comparing what he says to what the other groups have said. After nearly two hours, the group of teachers and students reaches several conclusions about writing at the school, conclusions based on portfolio evidence and explanations from student writers. The evidence and conclusions become the data for multiple teacher discussions to take place over the next few months.

Examining and analyzing their portfolios before participating in the discussion, the students spoke from their experiences as writers and researchers into their own writing processes. They spoke with assurance, sincerity, and honesty. They believed what they were saying, and they believed that we were truly interested. Their responses were based not only on their feelings, but also on the discoveries they made in their portfolios. Their responses could be measured against the responses of other students experiencing the same research and evaluation. They could validate their findings or have them challenged by fellow writers. And instead of teachers telling them what it all meant, Ms. Durrell and other teachers were asking them what they thought it all meant. When they responded, teachers took notes, asked questions, asked for clarification, speculated on the significance of student findings—in short, valued them and their writing experiences. There was a community. The evaluators now included students as well as teachers who understood what they had done in their portfolios. Together they worked to find additional meaning in the student portfolios.

Of particular interest is the effect these portfolio interviews had on teachers. When we looked at how these student/teacher discussions affected individual teachers, we had to stop and ask: What happened here? What does it mean? For years teachers had assessed student portfolios, only to restate their same convictions and judgments. After meeting with students and listening to them honestly and convincingly talk about writing, teachers began to hear in a new way. Students told us how grading affected their writing processes:

Allison (after examining her portfolio): *When I write to a friend and I know it's not being graded, I express myself more, but when I know it's being graded, I don't experiment.*

Kendra: *I think when a teacher is reading the stories ... they don't really think about how much effort you put into it ... they grade it on spelling and paragraphs, not on whether you took the time to come up with your own thoughts and write them down on paper. ... Writing standard things is easier to get higher grades.*

Richard: *When I write something right the first time, and I get graded down because I don't have several drafts, I don't like it when the teacher requires a certain number of drafts.*

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This gave us insight into our role as teachers:

Mr. Gage (during the interview): *I was surprised what a negative factor grading is. The rejection and criticism hurts them ... from what they were saying grading gets in the way of their honesty. They end up writing just to do what the teacher wants. And I don’t like having to grade either. I wish I didn’t have to do it.*

Ms. Evans: *Maybe that's why they hate me. I mark up their papers with red marks. With many of them I see*
it working over a longer period of time. But I am not sure with other students.

Unlike the teacher evaluation sessions, the portfolio-interview assessment encouraged understanding. But why? How?

First, the portfolios helped the students be more reflective and objective.

Roy: I don’t have much variety. I should experiment with it and try different styles of writing.

Anna: I got out of the habit of writing stories, and I'm finding it hard to pick that back up this year with all the essays and papers we write now.

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Second, sitting with students who were going through this process helped teachers see beyond their last assignment.

Mr. Gage: ... the point of what was said ... not all writing needs to be revised. Sometimes we give them a choice of topics, other times we give them complete freedom. But the variety the students want more of seems related to the amount of revision as well as the forms. They may want to leave it as it is.

Ms. Durrell: Requiring feedback on every writing is like mandating all students to write three drafts or five paragraphs for an essay. Everyone’s process is different.

Teacher-student interaction gave a fuller vision of student writing, something we were only able to achieve when we included students in the discussion of writing instruction. There was a balance of positive and negative points, with the final student/teacher discussion resembling a community celebration of the writing of students and the teaching of the department.

Allison: Over the past four years we (the group of students) have been able to see, unlike our other classes, what we have learned. I can look back at my papers and see how I can change them. Four years ago I couldn’t have done that. We could see how English will help us ... like later on.

Richard: We said that over the last four years we have written almost everything. We said we could go into college and not be frightened when teachers said to do something and we wouldn’t know how to write it. We’ve written short stories, essays, research papers ...

Kendra: And when I see my folder, I’m surprised I wrote all this kind of stuff. Like wow, you know?

Gary: I never really think about what I have learned in math ... I mean, you just do problems ... but as you look back on this (portfolio), you see actual progress ... you’d never think you would.

Teachers liked what they heard:

Mr. Gage: I found it very interesting that they are able to see improvement in English. I find that rather odd because initially people would see English as all the same ... but when they look a look at their papers, they could see improvement they couldn’t see in other subjects. I thought it was great.

Portfolios provide wonderful data for writing teachers to study. Our experience has shown us portfolios become more valuable when kept in the hands of the writers. Separating them from the writers complicated our assessment task, sometimes confusing us, and rarely providing insights to our writing program. In addition, we are finding the portfolio-interview process is a model of learning that teachers and students can follow. This evaluation encourages teachers to include students in decision-making and to lead students in evaluating their writing, whether it is a final or a rough draft. We are now experimenting with an annual portfolio interview in every English class, with teachers and students using the portfolios as the starting place to discuss how writing is learned and taught. We believe the portfolio is a better tool for assessment than it is a target. When Richard used the tool to understand himself and we listened, together we became a perceptive community.

Richard: Looking at my portfolio during the interview has helped me. Being able to look over my stories and see how I grew as a writer ... and what I’ve learned. There’s a lot of things you learn in English that you can’t really see.

... unless teachers and students look together.

Bob Ingalls and Joyce Jones are English teachers at Mount Vernon High School in Fairfax County, Virginia. Bob is department chairperson. This article comes from their department's teacher research project in which a sample group of thirty student writers and their cumulative English writing portfolios were studied over four years.