Jane Hansen

Evaluation:
"My Portfolio Shows Who I Am"

The portfolio project I write about in this article includes three elementary classrooms, a junior high, and a senior high classroom. In this article I will focus on the elementary classrooms, which include a sixth-grade classroom, a resource room to which small groups of children come for approximately thirty to sixty minutes each day, and a first-grade classroom. A total of thirteen researchers take part in this project, seven from the public schools of Manchester, New Hampshire's largest city, and six from the University of New Hampshire. As one of the researchers, I collect my field notes twice each week in the sixth grade classroom and learn about the other classrooms when the entire research team meets twice each month. To these meetings each person brings a one-page research update with copies for everyone.

We write about the creation of literacy portfolios in the various classrooms. In the following article I show three aspects of these portfolios — how they give students and adults opportunities (1) to select items that show who they are, (2) to set goals for their own growth, and (3) to discover the significance of their decisions.

Sixth Grade

In September of 1991, Karen Boettcher asked her class of sixth graders, "How many of you know someone who was in my class last year?" Several hands shot up and it seemed as if, collectively, they knew at least half of the students from last year. These pre-adolescents, who attend an inner-city school in Manchester, knew the scoop on their new classroom.

Then Mrs. Boettcher asked a second question, "Did any of those students happen to show you their portfolios?" Several had done so.

The students from the 1990-91 class had taken their portfolios home three times during the year and at the end of the year. They shared them with their families and, evidently, with their friends. When the students shared them at home, their families gained a more complete picture of their children than they'd ever received from report cards and test scores. Someone from each family wrote a response on the comments sheet stapled to each portfolio. The 100% response from the families impressed us.

The students had chosen what to put in their portfolios, and valued them. The portfolios were ever-changing collections of items and reflections that gave these pre-adolescents a sense of This Is Who I Am.

"What was in their portfolios?" Mrs. Boettcher asked.

"Notes and things like that." Notes from family members who live elsewhere show that mail is an important part of these students' literacy. We learned at the beginning of the 1990-91 year, when we first asked the students to create portfolios to show themselves as readers and writers, that their literacy wasn't confined to school. We decided that was okay; we'd value them as total people. This may sound obvious, but our preconceived notions of portfolios hadn't included the entire person — only the school child.

"A sports magazine."

"A cover of a book."

"Old pieces of writing and new ones."

The recollections continued and Mrs. Boettcher said, "You will create portfolios, too. Their items showed who they are. What would you put in to show who you are?"

"Something I can read in Greek."

"One of my poems."

"A Nintendo magazine."

Literacy portfolios, as we've experienced them in our University of New Hampshire-Manchester Public
Schools project, place value on the students' perception of themselves. Within the research, *Literacy Portfolios: Students Evaluate Themselves and Their Work*, we highlight each student's self-evaluation. As one sixth-grade student said last year, "Other people may think they know me, but my portfolio shows the real me, who I really am."

**First Grade**

In Brenda Ross' first-grade, 75% of the children receive free lunch, three of the children's fathers are in the state prison, one child came to school this week with stitches in his chin because his father kicked him, and all of the children love books, paper, and crayons. Miss Ross is a magnetic teacher and her students hang on her words. They cluster with each other to read books and they write every day.

To her readers and writers, Miss Ross introduced the notion of portfolios after Christmas of the 1990-91 school year. In preparing students for starting their own portfolios, Rita Georgeau, the principal, shared her art portfolio from high school with the class. She's proud of her collection, which includes her first drawing and her final painting.

Cindy Matthews, the UNH researcher who spends two days each week in Miss Ross's classroom, also shared hers. Cindy, who paints, included some of her art, and a children's story she's written. She also sends and receives cards, so she included some of those. Her several cartoons showed Cindy's belief in the relief of laugh. Evidence of who she is as a reader included the book jacket of her favorite book, *The Little Match Girl*, two articles about poetry, and articles about stress management!

Miss Ross then asked the children what they'd use for their portfolios. Cindy told them about Carolyn Chute, author of *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*. When she came to UNH to teach, she had all her stuff in a cereal box. The children started to bring cereal boxes, shoe boxes, folders, and some of them constructed large pockets in school.

They also brought photos and cartoons, included various pieces of their writing (many of which were drawings), and evidence of their reading. One girl brought an advertisement from a newspaper because she could read some of the words in it. One boy put a paperback book, *The Hungry Thing Returns*, in his portfolio, and gave this as his reason, "I'm putting in this book because I have trouble talking, like him." The character in the book has a speech problem and so does the first grader.

The children's choices and reasons often surprised us. Because our focus for these literacy portfolios is on self-evaluation, we give the children opportunities to answer the question, "Who am I?" They decide how to represent themselves and share their reasons with others. They start to value their efforts, to see worth in their accomplishments.

In answer to my question, "Why were portfolios a good thing to do last year?" Miss Ross answered, "The children taught me what was important to them. I assumed I'd be able to predict what they'd choose to put in, but I would have chosen incorrectly. They showed me they truly could self-evaluate. I don't know that I would have known they could do that."

**Special Education**

The hallmark of the special education students' portfolios is their goals. When Karen Harris, their teacher, introduced her students to portfolios this year, she started by sharing her own portfolio with them. The last section in it is for her goals, so after she had shared hers, she invited her students to write their own goals for the year. Of the various goals the children proposed, here are three: "I want to write " [quotation marks] in my stories"; "I want to read hard books"; "I want to learn how to write monies and large numbers."

Then Mrs. Harris distributed folders and instructed the students to put their handwritten goals in these literacy portfolios. Throughout the year they will put evidence of their growth and new goals. Each student's portfolio will be unique.

As Mrs. Harris' students did last year, these students will live with their portfolios. They will have daily access to them, to peruse them, to add and subtract from them. In her classroom, the portfolios are the center of both evaluation and instruction. These students constantly think about who they are, plan, dream, and reflect on where they've come from.

Some of the items in their portfolios are from previous years of school and from home. They bring books that their mothers read to them when they were little and they bring photos. They put in pieces of writing from previous years and current drafts to show their growth. Mrs. Harris saves all her students' writing each year. One student, Scott, chose a piece of writing from last year to contrast against a current draft. With both items in his portfolio, his growth as a writer was obvious at first glance.

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The reflections the students dictate and write may be even more important than the actual items in the portfolio. With only the item, not only doesn’t a viewer know the significance of the item, but the owner hasn’t articulated her reasons for the choice and may, therefore, have only a hazy notion of why she decided to put it in her portfolio. Consistent with our convictions about the value of writing, when portfolio keepers write about what an item shows about literacy, they learn about its significance as their pencils crystallize their thoughts.

I learned this myself after Jane Kearns, director of writing for the Manchester Public Schools and member of the research team, shared her portfolio with us at a research team meeting. She said, “I learned so much when I wrote about the importance of each item. I think the writing of my self-evaluations was more important than selecting which items I’d put in.” The significance to each adult in the project of our own literacy portfolios deserves paramount attention.

This year we continue to challenge ourselves within our project. Not only will we all, adults and students alike, continue to set goals, choose items to represent our growth, select artifacts to show our complete selves, and evaluate the worth of each item, but we might create portfolios with new emphases as well. In the most recent reflection I wrote about my entire portfolio, I said, “Now that I have this portfolio more-or-less finished, I wonder if I should change the entire thing. The high school students try to represent their many sides in their portfolios. That might be a good challenge for me.”

I think of portfolios as tools to promote literacy. As such, we have barely begun to sharpen them.

Suggested Reading


Jane Hansen was formerly an elementary teacher and now is a professor at the University of New Hampshire, where she directs the Ph.D. in Reading and Writing Instruction and coordinates the New Hampshire Reading and Writing Program. She is the author of When Writers Read, about elementary classrooms in which teachers base their reading instruction on the same principles as the teaching of writing.