Mary Ann Smith and Sandra Murphy

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This call was one of six or more, all sounding the same, that came to the Bay Area Writing Project in September. Portfolios, each call suggested, are the newest game in town. Someone has to "do" them. Fast.

In some ways, this call for help is familiar. Earlier on, people used to say, "Could you please send us the Bay Area Writing Project," as if the project were some kind of catalog item. More recently, National Writing Project Directors attending meetings in Seattle bemoaned the frequent requests they receive for topical workshops — one-time guest spots on "hot" subjects.

Requests such as these are difficult, if for no other reason than that they contradict one of the basic assumptions of the NWP: "Real change in classroom practice happens over time; effective staff development programs are ongoing and systematic, bringing teachers together regularly throughout their careers to test and evaluate the best practices of other teachers and the continuing developments in the field" (The National Writing Project: Basic assumptions, NWP flyer).

Yet the expectation that Writing Project or other staff development agencies, for that matter, can jump in and "do" for someone else has a long history. Consider several of the findings of the 1987 PACE study (Little, 1987) of most staff development in California:

- Staff development is largely market-driven; that is, consists of a lengthy menu of discrete offerings available on a sign-up basis.
- Staff development occurs on the periphery of school and classroom life.
- Most staff development is still short-term.

These findings in no way diminish the accomplishments of the California Writing Project nor of the 832,326 participants in NWP programs since 1974. In fact, the PACE study found the California Writing Project the exception in state staff development efforts, a Project that "has earned the admiration of teachers and administrators throughout the state" and "has served as a model for other university-sponsored staff development programs" (Little, 1987, p. 53).

The dilemma, however, remains. If many schools and districts see staff development as a piecemeal effort, if they patch together random, reactive offerings, Writing Project sites throughout the NWP will continue to need thoughtful ways of responding.

Portfolios only add to the problem. Legitimately, districts want to take part in what seems to be the wave of the future or at the least, the tonic of the nineties. Yet the rush to be au courant can be, in our experience, the catalyst for one-size-fits-all thinking. In truth, portfolios come in different shapes and sizes. They have never, as far as we know, cured a virus. They do not have lives of their own, as recent phone requests would suggest. At their best, they are inexorably wrapped up in other considerations in the teaching and learning of writing. Certainly, they don't lend themselves to a drive-through workshop.
Nevertheless, the invitation to take on portfolio inservice offers Writing Project sites several potential advantages:

- **Portfolios thrive in classroom writing communities.** Portfolios did not come out of a vacuum. They emerged from the practices of exemplary teachers of writing. These teachers have created the climate that makes portfolios not just possible, but successful. Nurturing this climate means, at the very least, an extended inservice program which includes ample time for teachers to “test and evaluate the best practices of other teachers and the continuing developments in the field” (The National Writing Project: Basic Assumptions).

- **Portfolios can offer another door into the same room.** The room, in this case, is an inservice program that deals with possibilities and approaches and rationales, not simple “how-to’s” or quick fixes. Like teachers in other Writing Project series, teachers in a portfolio series can come to grips with issues of curriculum (what might go into the portfolio), with various teaching strategies (what teachers can do to teach students to write), with evaluation (what kinds of responses help students), and equally important, with intent (what teachers and students hope to accomplish together).

- **Portfolios encourage conversation and decision making.** At their best, Writing Project workshops also provide for conversation and decision making. In the case of an inservice program that includes portfolios, talk can revolve, in part, around artifacts — selections of writing — which represent different aspects of teaching and learning. From these selections, teachers can question and build on what they know.

- **Portfolios reflect the features of a writing program.** An extended inservice program, therefore, would invite teachers to think about the whole in relation to the parts, just as portfolios do. That whole includes the classroom culture, the accumulation of processes and products, and the progression from September to June, from kindergarten to the grades that follow. What to do on Monday morning, then, is defined by the larger picture.

**Case in Point: Preparing for Portfolio Inservice in Mississippi**

On the evening of October 3, 1991, thirty-five Writing Project teacher consultants from around the state came together on the Mississippi State University campus to begin talking about ways to use portfolios in their own classrooms, along with ways to provide inservice on portfolios to their colleagues in Mississippi. Director Sandra Burkett had asked these teacher consultants to bring a portfolio that represented some aspect of their lives. They hailed in all manner of artifacts: books, bird nest, journals, shells, paintings, pictures of children, clock, calendars, clay pot, student work, keys, family trees, telephone receiver. Tables and passage ways between tables were cluttered. After dinner, the teachers gathered up their portfolios and introduced themselves to other teachers in their small groups. Then they wrote about their portfolios, about how they made their selections and why. They noticed with some amusement that the elementary teachers put great stock in the portfolio container itself. Secondary teachers, on the other hand, threw their belongings into paper sacks or settled for no container at all. They noted the value of presenting themselves through choices and reflections.

During the next two days, these teachers studied student writing portfolios while they thrashed out tentative plans for portfolios in their own classrooms. They invented ways to engage students in reflecting on their learning. (“I’ll ask them which pieces they’d like to put in the Bunsen burner,” offered science teacher John Dorroh, referring to the critical aspect of choice, the writing students decide to leave behind. “Then I’ll ask them why.”) They tested their newly-developed approaches and rationales on each other. They agreed to bring beginning student portfolios — two pieces and two reflections — to the next meeting.

Indeed, the student portfolios, along with the teachers’ own journals, became the centerpieces of their November gathering. Beginning in the evening, each teacher read from the portfolios or journals. Then they wrote and read their writing to each other — new journal entries about what they were learning from this experience and what questions they had. In the discussion that followed, teachers talked about their students (“This is a boy who’s never ever liked to write and now he’s becoming a writer.”) and about themselves (“What’s amazing to me is what I’m learning about my own teaching.”) and about their concerns (“What I’m worried about is what if I don’t find any growth in the students’ writing.”). They also took note of each other. “I love knowing that there is a sensitive, progressive group of teachers as close as my phone,” wrote Mary Kay Deen. “What a comfort!”

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The following day, the teachers made and addressed a giant list of their questions and issues, ranging from “what happens if the state requires portfolios from everybody” to “how can I help students with their reflections.” In the afternoon, they immersed themselves in each other’s portfolios (twenty or more from each classroom) which were spread on tables around the room. They milled and picked up folders and read and asked questions and learned from student work that came from all parts of Mississippi.

The teachers in this group, now called the Portfolio Assessment Task Force, have set aside a total of ten days to work out the processes and products of portfolios that make sense to each of them and to think out the possibilities for inservice. Four of these are summer days. The teachers will continue to write regularly in their journals, reflecting on what is happening to children and to teaching as a result of this project. And no doubt their conversations will continue to be about the real stuff of classrooms. As one elementary teacher observed: “If I didn’t already believe in portfolios I might abandon them because the students’ first selections were so disappointing. And their reasons for choosing them were surface reasons. Things like ‘pretty handwriting’ that I’ve never talked about.” To have a forum for honest talk, to have a situation in which, according to Sherry Swain, “everyone is going about their teaching in a different way but respecting and learning from each other,” to have access to collective wisdom—these are, indeed, comforting circumstances.

**Portfolio Assessment: A Professional Development Program**

The purposes of a good professional development program for teachers, it seems to us, parallel the purposes of portfolios in the classroom for students: to improve writing. To this end, if we were to think of an inservice series as a kind of portfolio, what might it contain? Its contents, we believe, would be a teachers-teaching-teachers program that might emphasize the following for teachers and their students:

- **Writing for different purposes and audiences.** Because writing portfolios can be selections of papers written in and for a variety of situations, they give teachers and students opportunities to talk about the demands of writing for different purposes and audiences and to come to some agreement about the nature of those demands. They also encourage teachers and students to move beyond single assignments, to examine how strategies that a writer might use in one situation transfer, or are transformed, in another.

- **Writing to learn.** Portfolios invite reflection. They also invite teachers to know as much as possible about teaching students to reflect. Reflections help teachers understand what their students have learned, what views they have about effective writing, and how they assess themselves as writers. Reflections also help students recognize what they do well and what needs doing next. In other words, successes can become more than happy accidents; problems can become goals or challenges that students set for themselves.

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- **Writing as a process.** Portfolios bring another dimension to teachers’ efforts to help their students become authors, making the choices that authors make — of what topic, what genre, what pieces to submit to their readers. Indeed, portfolios can capture the “biography” of the author’s work, as Denny Palmer Wolfe calls it, the story or process behind the product.

- **Revision.** Portfolios can provide another impetus for revision and for teachers to try out various ways to teach revision. With portfolios, for example, a short term goal is intensive revision as students prepare their pieces for display. Long term, students can revisit earlier pieces for inspiration and for the sources of new pieces.

- **Response to writing and to students as writers.** Portfolios encourage students and teachers to respond to single pieces of writing, to paired pieces, to whole collections, to growth over time, to particular writing techniques and so forth. Response becomes a way to dig beneath the surface of one moment or one student effort and instead, to talk about how young writers solve the problems that writers solve, how they progress, what strengths and special talents they have, to what extent they can assess themselves and so forth.

- **Beginning to read and write.** Portfolios demonstrate the jagged line of development in learning to read and write. Teachers can use them to examine the steps children take — both forward and backwards — on their way to becoming increasingly literate. Portfolios can also be the raw material for literacy profiles of students (Taylor, 1990).

- **Portfolios.** Undoubtedly, the subject of portfolios will thread its way through the inservice. At some time,
teachers may want to concentrate specifically on decisions about purpose, contents, ways to respond/evaluate and the like.

We do not want to suggest here a menu or package or theme-park approach to staff development. The above list is not meant to be a list at all, except in its specificity, which may provide some ammunition when the call comes to “do” portfolios. By having concrete notions about the teaching and learning that accompany portfolios, we can, indeed, lead our callers to consider the paucity of a single session or a “how to” workshop. And we may be able to portray the above as just what they are — crucial considerations in the practice and research of teaching, learning, and assessing writing. However we frame the argument, we can surely point out the similarities between portfolios and professional development, that is, both require and inspire experimenting, generating, learning over time.

In other words, we want to suggest that portfolio inservice should look much the same as any good in-depth inservice series on the teaching of writing. There are multiple sessions during which teachers teach teachers. Between sessions, everyone tests out a new approach and takes note of what happens. There is a spirit of inquiry. People eat too much. People look at a variety of classroom strategies. People write.

At a recent portfolio day for Bay Area Writing Project teacher consultants, Rebekah Caplan noted that while the focus was on a particular assessment strategy, “What we keep talking about is our teaching.” Why would it be any other way?

References


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