When the Mt. Diablo High School English teachers gathered around the chalkboard last fall, they were risking a thing or two. Politely and one by one they put their philosophical cards on the table. Why should this department take on a portfolio project? To what end? One teacher wanted the portfolios to motivate his students; another saw portfolios as a way to rethink the four-year writing curriculum. The list of possible purposes ran off the board. So did the list of papers that could go into the portfolios. And somewhere in the middle, teachers said things to each other like, “Oh, your kids do journals too? I didn’t know that.”

Portfolios are obviously more than collections of artifacts. They are, even before the unfilled folders are home from the store, a reason for talking. And, depending on the way the talk goes, the portfolio can take many different forms. In a sense, coming up with a portfolio project is like choosing what to teach. The decision automatically creates possibilities and limitations. In the infinite scheme of what can be taught, teachers choose for their particular classroom communities. In the same way, they can make decisions about portfolios with themselves and their students in mind.

The first decision teachers need to make is what they want the portfolios to accomplish. They can consider all kinds of purposes: motivating students, promoting learning through reflection and self-assessment, evaluating or changing curriculum, replacing or validating other tests, establishing exit requirements for coursework or graduation, tracking growth over time, evaluating students’ think-
Talking about Portfolios

continued from previous page

ing and writing processes, and so on. Whatever they decide, selecting a purpose or purposes is the key, the decision that will shape all the rest.

Who selects what goes into the portfolio? Do students make the selections? Do teachers? Should the selection process be collaborative?


How much should be included? How many pieces can be discussed, evaluated, or interpreted, given the limitations of time and money?

What might be done with the portfolios? If the portfolios are evaluated, what are the criteria? If the portfolios are scored, should they be scored as a whole? Should separate scores be given for individual pieces? If they are planned for conferencing, display, documentation, curriculum planning, daily instruction, how will the portfolios be used?

Who hears about the results? Students? Teachers? Parents? School boards, state agencies, the public? Who communicates the results?

What provisions can be made for revising the portfolio program? How can experience with portfolios be used to improve what they do? How can the portfolio program become a “moveable feast,” something that evolves to meet changing needs?

While there are undoubtedly better and worse ways to answer these questions, there is no single right way for everyone. There is no such thing as *The Portfolio*. In fact, various groups have made different decisions about their portfolios, and rightly so, because at their best portfolios serve the needs of individual communities of teachers and students. For example, in three schools in California, teachers have designed quite different portfolio projects to meet the needs of their school communities.

**Bret Harte Junior High School**

For the past two years, students at Bret Harte Junior High School in Oakland, California, have filled their portfolios with papers they’ve written in several subject areas. Their teachers are interested in what the students’ writing looks like across the school and how it might change when the audience and purpose change. Each year the teachers have been pleased with a great deal of what they see, like this journal entry from a seventh grade student:

**Keenan’s Journal**

Saturday, June 18, 1988

After a breakfast of rice and noodles we headed out on the palm and bamboo lined streets towards the National Central Library in Taipei. Once inside it was hard to imagine that 235,000 books could fit on such small shelves until I found out that there were 14 more rooms! The Library contained 121,376 volumes of rare books and manuscripts. After a couple of hours in the library, my dad and I were ready for lunch.

*Back at the hotel we had peppery lamb with green onions, which was quite peppery, with sizzling rice soup and fried rice with shrimp.*

Next we caught the bus up the mountain to visit a visitors center, along the way we saw terraced hills where rice was growing. Once at the top, through clear skies we saw the vague outline of buildings of mainland China.

After going swimming in a designated area of the Tanshui River, we were ready for dinner. I felt like something Americanish, so my dad and I drove around until we found a place that sold American food. We finally ended up in the parking lot of a MacDonald’s Restaurant. I ordered a McDonald’s T.L., strawberry milk shake, and large fries. My dad ordered a filet of fish, fries, and coffee.

When we returned to our hotel room we realized that we were out of “new dollars,” Taiwan’s form of currency. We planned to get some more first thing in the morning. We fell asleep soon after.

While this journal entry, written in a social studies class, delighted the Bret Harte teachers, it also opened up a number of questions. Its author, Keenan Booker, had never been to Taipei and his real travels—down the hall to his English class—seemed to inspire a less interesting, less informative effort in comparison:

**Final Victory!**

Last June my friend, Ben, received a Sega master system for his birthday. I went to his party and we were playing great baseball and no matter how hard I tried he beat me every game. Then one, everytime I went to his house he beat me in baseball; my record was about 0-9.

Then one night I spent the night at his house and we played great baseball. I started beating him 3-0 in the 9th inning but he came back with four runs in the 5th inning. With the score 3-4 in the 7th I got two runners on base and then P.O.W a
homerun! I got two more homers following that one. I shut him out the next 2 innings and I got another homerun in the 8th. The final score was 9-5.

What happened to Keenan? Why is his writing more engaging in social studies than in English? And why was it the same for so many other students?

Try to imagine those questions in an assessment program from which teachers were excluded. The questions would sound like an attack. Everyone would be too busy working on a line of defense to learn anything. But here, where this assessment exists because of good teachers, where its goal is to learn from multiple snapshots of student writing, the conversation was anything but defensive. Keenan’s teacher, Jack Sheehan, gave a rundown on the social studies paper. He’d asked Keenan to pick a city that interested him and to visit it—with the adult of his choice—in five journal entries. Then he’d loaded the room with travel books and maps and places to sit and read and talk. Postcard pictures from cities around the world crowded the bulletin boards. What he got in return was writing that is enjoyable to read and that helped students learn, not just about foreign countries, traditions, and people, but about themselves—about the way they might operate in another world, about the choices they’d make.

In a sense, coming up with a portfolio project is like choosing what to teach.

Everyone liked what Jack said and it gave the English teachers an idea. The social studies teachers, they said, took nothing for granted when it came to writing. They gave reading, discussing, and rehearsing their due. Maybe English teachers, they said, when they assigned personal experience writing, touched too lightly on the prewriting, assumed that memories are just waiting to be specified and shaped. They found this discovery useful and positive and exactly what they needed to help their students.

Science and math teachers also made important discoveries about what students had learned, how they learned, and how well they could describe their learnings or processes:

Dear Mary,

In science today, we did a lab about what a penny does in hydrochloric acid. Aren’t you glad you’re not in school anymore to do things like this? Our group got four pennies that were dated after 1983. We sanded them down on opposite sides, put them in the acid and let them sit overnight. I

continued on page 24

Editor’s Note

One of the biggest challenges to our profession today is to steer a sane course for writing evaluation and assessment, for with “bottom-line” significance and finality, measures of writing affect the long-term policies and politics of classroom, curriculum, legislature . . . the list is interwined and seemingly endless. This issue of The Quarterly focuses on writing assessment, and on the promise to education of the use of portfolios to examine student writing development and achievement. Sandra Murphy and Mary Ann Smith discuss portfolio projects in California that are having positive and far-reaching effects on students, teachers, and administrators, and, thus, also on curriculum. We add to this two articles on an extensive and successful portfolio project in Pennsylvania; from a researcher’s perspective, Roberta Camp discusses the broader context that supports a successful portfolio project: from a teacher’s perspective, Kathryn Howard discusses the day-by-day classroom implementation of such a project. Also in this issue is a report by Eileen Feller on the Redwood Writing Project’s Veterans Upward Bound Program, and book reviews by Marjorie Kaiser, Barbara Everson, and Bennett Rafoth.

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The mission and the challenge of The Quarterly is to speak to a wide, in some ways diverse, but I believe fundamentally unified audience, an audience of teachers and researchers in a field unique for being so critically connected to the entire human endeavor of knowledge-making and communication. It has been my joy during the past three years to try to help The Quarterly meet that challenge. With the completion of this issue, I put down the editor’s pen to pass it into the able hands of my co-editor, Miriam Ylvisaker, and to our new associate editor, Carol Heller. I want, now, to express appreciation to what space permits to be only a partial list of supportive and wonderfully exacting colleagues, without whom this publication could not work: to you, our steadfast and growing readership, in many ways the definition and the backbone of our profession; to Jim Gray, director of the National Writing Project; Sarah Warshauer Freedman, director of the Center for the Study of Writing; NWP and CSW directors and advisors across the country and beyond; Quarterly authors both solicited and unsolicited; co-editor and valued cohort Miriam Ylvisaker; mainstay and right hand Andy Bouman; and, not least, Mary Appleton. Many thanks to everyone . . . and happy reading.

—M.S.
Talking about Portfolios

continued from page 3

thought the entire penny would eventually dissappear, but I was wrong like usual in labs.

When we got them there were bubbles on the top. I then poured the acid in a beaker with more acid. I then dropped it in some water and moved it around with a sponge. I was a little afraid to take it out with my fingers, but I did anyways. Brave huh? As well as I know it could have eaten my fingers and then I wouldn’t have to write anymore. No more essays. Haha. Well, then I put it in another bowl that had a solution of water and baking soda to neutralize it and dried it off.

The sides were delicate and crunchy like rice paper. The middle was still hard though. I peeled the copper sides off and the inside was black and looked like caked on ash. I never really knew what pennies were made of until we did this experiment on Wednesday. It also goes to show how cheap pennies are. Maybe you should try it on your own currency to see if it is as cheap as ours.

Love,
Psyché Rage (Nora)

Many students had trouble doing what Nora did—writing with specificity and voice. Nora recreated her lab experience visually and metaphorically to reach her conclusion that pennies really are, because of what they are made of, small change. Other students, especially those who wrote for no one in particular—which meant they wrote to the teacher—had more cursory explanations of their learning. So one item on this year’s agenda is to investigate the importance of audience in writing-to-learn. Bret Harte teachers, then, have made portfolios an assessment-to-learn.

Bret Harte students are learning too. They introduced their portfolios with letters explaining why they selected each piece and how they viewed themselves as writers. In their roles as self-evaluators, they thought about their own writing processes. ESL ninth grader, Gwen, for example, reflects on what she has learned about the conditions that help her to write well:

Dear Readers,

I have learned a lot about writing from my English class this year, and I really believe that my writings has improved.

The most helpful lesson I learned was the writing process. Before, I would start writing when the assignment was given, and start on the first idea that pop in my mind, without giving myself a second choice. Now, I learned to take my time and brainstorm and plan my writing.

Although the writing process has helped me, the writings I do

Other Portfolio Projects

Across the nation there are other classroom and school portfolio projects, reflecting a diversity in portfolio design, that have been reported in publications. For example, at Stonybrook in New York State, teachers have decided to use portfolios in place of the proficiency exam. Under the reported plan, no student can receive a passing grade in the required 101 course unless that student’s portfolio has been judged acceptable by his teacher and another who doesn’t know him. Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff (1986) report that the portfolio program there “encourages good teaching and a sound writing process . . . revising, peer feedback and collaboration among students” (p. 337).

Chris Burnham (1986) describes a portfolio system used in freshman composition courses at New Mexico State University. Instructors use the portfolios in their classrooms to work with students on revision. At the end of the semester, students can decide, if they want a grade higher than “C,” to submit their portfolios to an outside review committee composed of other freshman writing teachers. One of the benefits, Burnham notes, is that “revising papers at the end of the course and submitting a portfolio allows students to show the instructor how much they ultimately learned, which is generally much more than the sum of their performances on individual assignments” (p. 129-130).

The Arts PROPEL Project in the Pittsburgh school system is yet another variation (see article by Roberta Camp in this Quarterly). In music, art, and writing, students create portfolios that are chronologically-sequenced collections of work to demonstrate the development of their abilities over time (“to pose and pursue worthwhile questions”) and to reflect on those abilities by writing about both individual and collected pieces. Denny Wolf (December 1987/January 1988) explains, “We have been able to observe students’ growth using projects, portfolios, and interviews. At the same time, we have witnessed teachers’ growth as readers and interpreters of qualitative, developmental information about their students” (p. 25).

In Vermont, classroom teachers, working with the State
in class will never be better, or more interesting than the ones I do at home. Writing on my spare time is to me without pressure of time due, or a bad grade. That was, I feel more comfortable, and my writing would just flow through. . . .

I feel that I would get better grades on my writings if I was writing about subjects I am interested in. That way, the assignment won’t be boring because it concerns me.

To end this letter I would like to say that I really enjoy writing, and maybe one day, I’ll have a career by it.

Sincerely yours,
Gwen

Mt. Diablo High School

Students at Mt. Diablo High School in Concord, California, also wrote introductory letters. Their English teachers responded with letters of their own, tucked inside each portfolio, that commented on the writer’s strengths and made suggestions for future work. But the conversation did not end with the portfolios. Students, inspired by the exchange of letters, wrote back again:

Thank you for your kind and helpful comments. You took the writings the way I intended. These papers all have a great deal of feeling in them. This makes them special to me. I don’t think you can put a grade on feelings so I’m glad we had this project. The project gave me a lot of opportunities to dig deep into myself and pull out old thoughts and feelings I never had an excuse to use before. This was helpful in my realizing who I am, what I am, and who and what I want to be.

. . . .

I was glad you understood what I was trying to say. And also realize I’m no good at putting my feelings down. You’re right, I do leave out a lot of information which is what my problem is. Now I know what to work on for next year.

. . . .

Finally I feel that I have found someone that understands the important parts of my writing. In my descriptive writing of the little girl you understand the feeling I was trying to get across to the reader. It’s exciting to know that I could do this and inspires me to put even more effort into my writing.

. . . .

. . . I am very proud of what was written in my portfolio. I’m not being conceited. I just didn’t know that people thought I could write OK. If anything, I thought I was an underachieving writer but now I realize that I am the same as everyone else and that makes my happy.

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Department of Education, are planning a large-scale portfolio assessment for all students in grades 4 and 11 in writing and mathematics. The proposed writing assessment will include a traditional writing sample along with a portfolio for each student, prepared with the student’s teacher, of three “best” papers, which can include work from social studies, science and other classes. Both parts of the assessment will be evaluated by trained teachers to provide what Vermont’s commissioner Richard P. Mills calls a “rich picture of how students are doing.” “This is not a gold game,” says Mills. “We can’t reduce performance to a single numerical score” (Education Week).

In Rhode Island, Educational Testing Service staff helped teachers to develop a portfolio program to assess the validity of the state’s third-grade writing test. Students wrote descriptions of themselves and classmates, commercials, letters to creatures from other planets, and letters evaluating these writing assignments. ETS staff concluded that “The portfolios . . . indicated that the state test captured some of the abilities tapped by a broader range of assignments but was not an excellent predictor of students’ performance on other kinds of assignments except at the bottom range of the scale” (“The Student Writer,” 1989, p. 13).

Plans at the University of Minnesota call for applicants to submit a high school portfolio, including samples of writing from several subject areas, as part of the admission requirements. In addition, student portfolios will be assessed in their major departments in their junior year (Anson, Bridwell-Bowles, & Brown, 1988). As of this date, the project is temporarily on hold pending funding.

In several other universities, according to David Burnett (1985), portfolio assessment has become a standard mechanism for evaluating prior learning for experienced students at schools where college credit is given for out-of-school learning. His informal survey of portfolio narratives receiving faculty approval for credit hours/course units at Sinclair Community College, Clark University, the University of Alabama, and Indiana University, suggests that a broad range of outcomes, including facts, theories, and interpretations, as well as stages of personal development, have been recognized as creditable by faculty.
Talking about Portfolios

continued from previous page

In contrast to the Bret Harte project design, Mt. Diablo teachers plan to follow this particular ninth grade class for four years, reading and scoring their portfolios from their English classes each spring. Their purposes are to motivate students as writers and to learn which teaching practices are most helpful.

Jefferson High School

English teachers at Jefferson High School in the South San Francisco area hadn’t planned to talk specifically about teaching practices but that’s what they did from the minute they began planning their portfolio project. Their decision to use portfolios to assess their four-year curriculum as well as student growth over time led naturally to questions and comments about the teaching of writing:

“Did you have the students cluster here?”

“Look at how this student was dealing with audience.”

“Maybe it’s because of the way this assignment is framed, you don’t get those little plot summaries or that awful formula writing.”

“We need to teach rather than just assign. If you teach and respond, the writing improves.”

Conclusions

The experience of working with teachers and students at Jefferson, Mt. Diablo and Bret Harte has taught us several things:

• Portfolio projects are a series of decisions. As such, they can serve the needs of individual teachers, of departments and schools, and of students. Should the day come when they are neatly packaged and sold, they will lose the potential they have for helping teachers teach and helping students learn.

• Portfolios are not a panacea. Nor are they the “good news,” “the cutting edge,” or the “state of the art.” They’ve been around for a long time in one form or another and because they can take many forms, they are as vulnerable to misuse and to bandwagons as anything else in education.

• Portfolios are messy. Thankfully. They demand context and collaboration and commitment to letting those who teach and learn be responsible for what they do.

• Portfolios have their greatest impact when they become part of the regular operation of the classroom. This can take time. They offer the most potential when they are embedded in instruction and learning, when they provide opportunities for students and teachers to learn from the assessment process itself.

• The benefits of portfolios lie as much in the discussions they generate among teachers—and between teachers and students—as in the wealth of information they provide.

• Portfolio projects, like teacher research, offer teachers the chance to collect and interpret data for reforming schools.

• When portfolios are embedded in the context of teaching and learning, they can both support and document successful curriculum and teaching practices. Portfolios can also reflect and encourage teaching and curriculum that are dynamic rather than static, that can be adjusted to different student populations, to student needs at different points in time.

We’ll let the students have the last word. Here are a few of our favorite lines from their letters:

Dear Reader:

...This folder contains some of the very finest works of literature.

...Perhaps I should continue to improve my writing. However, it is not my hope to become a writer; I see no future in it... .

...Don’t criticize too much because as one of my mottos say, “There’s too many damn critics in this world!”

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Talking about Portfolios

continued from previous page


* Sandra Murphy is an associate professor of education at San Francisco State University and an associate director of the Bay Area Writing Project. Mary Ann Smith is director of the Bay Area Writing Project, University of California, Berkeley.