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Making the Writing Portfolio Real

Arts PROPEL is a collaborative effort among Harvard Project Zero, a research adjunct of Harvard’s Graduate School of Education; the Educational Testing Service; and teachers in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Its purpose is to explore alternative methods of assessing student achievement in the arts. In this context, classroom teachers, researchers, and supervisors comprise an “imaginative writing team,” and they meet regularly to generate ideas for innovative ways to assess student writing. Their ideas are implemented in the classrooms of the participating teachers, and the results of this practical implementation are discussed, modified, and refined as the research continues. The goal of the participating groups is to incorporate new strategies of evaluating student writing, by teachers as well as by the students themselves, into district-wide curricula.

Two years ago I was invited to participate on the PROPEL writing team in Pittsburgh. I quickly became committed to the PROPEL notion of the writing portfolio in the classroom and determined to put it into practice in order to test its effectiveness as a learning and assessment tool and to provide additional data for the researchers from Harvard and ETS. The following reflections chronicle my use of the writing portfolio with eighth graders.

The students who participated with me in the portfolio process were eighth graders in middle school. Two quite distinct groups had the opportunity to experience the process, the second year’s class profiting greatly from the pioneering efforts of the first. Looking back over these two years, I can identify a series of phases which my students passed through on their way to creating portfolios and which I offer here as useful indicators of the progress of the portfolio experience.

**Phase I: Modeling and Oral Reflection**

For my eighth grade students, thinking of themselves as writers and thinking of writing as a continuing process were at first abstract and foreign concepts. Barriers began to come down, however, as students learned to share their written pieces aloud—with a partner, a small group, or the entire class. Sharing included opportunities for reflection as I encouraged my students to ask each other questions such as “What did you like about the piece?” “What were you thinking about when you wrote that particular sentence or paragraph?” “What in the piece would you like to know more about?”

I learned to model these questions often, both the phrasing and intonation, because the whole notion of talking to one another about their writing was, for my students, in some respects new and threatening, challenging them in unfamiliar ways to accept responsibility and ownership for their writing. Modeling response helped to establish a classroom climate in which students could freely express their feelings about their own writing and that of others because such feelings were positively channeled.

In this atmosphere, students’ responses moved in time from the superficial to the beneficial. One student, Dana, was an especially good peer model because she was always quick to praise and never failed to listen attentively. Her tone was always warm and receptive. Since she was both seriously interested in writing as well as popular among her classmates,
she was a wonderful catalyst in initiating writing discussion. Yet her comments reflected the changing and deepening focus of all the students’ reflection on their writing. In the beginning, Dana’s response to a piece of writing was often, “That was really good,” or “I like how you wrote that.” By October, however, her comments began to reveal some reflection: “What would have happened if you arranged your poem in a different order than a, b, and c?” Dana’s September comments helped to encourage other writers to share, but her later comments challenged students to look at their papers in different ways. And while she had begun to suggest options, they were always given in the warm tone that implied she was interested. Through the example of students like Dana, others began to share also—to share reflections that helped the students’ writing to improve by opening other avenues for them to explore in the completion of a piece.

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The immediate benefit of this questioning and oral reflection was that students assumed more responsibility for their work. No longer did they “write it and forget about it,” as one young man was frequently heard to observe. Greg, the “I can get it right on the first draft” king, knew that Dana would not be satisfied.

As the first semester passed, questions became increasingly relevant to the writing process as well as to the written product. When students were asked to explain their choices, they were in essence being asked to confront their writing processes. As they began to answer questions such as “What was I trying to do when I wrote this paragraph?” or “What was I really trying to say in this essay?” they had a model for dealing explicitly with those issues while they were drafting instead of only during revisions. Steve, for example, became really involved in writing a list poem similar to Billy Joel’s “We Didn’t Start the Fire.” He came to me with a list that was just that, with no patterns, no grouping, no sense of direction. He knew he needed help. He was only in the drafting stage at this point, but he was grappling with questions central to the writing of poetry. With his permission I xeroxed copies of his list for his classmates, and they suggested possible patterns, groupings, and directions for him to explore. Everyone participated in Steve’s writing process because he was willing to accept their participation as fellow writers. Shortly thereafter, Steve wrote a second list poem in which he used the insights he had gained from his classmates to complete a well-crafted piece. I don’t think he even noticed that I had removed myself from the loop.

Phase II: The First Written Reflection

Once a climate had been established, a written reflection by the student writers was the next logical step. If the students could talk cogently about their writing, they could also try to write about it. The written reflection came at the end of the first semester and was a clear extension of the issues of peer assessment and self assessment that they had been grappling with in Phase I. For this self assessment, I asked students only to reflect upon themselves as writers, not to evaluate their products. In addition, I used the same form for the written reflection that I had been using since September to evaluate their work so that the format was not new or unfamiliar to them. Also, when I asked them to use my form, I wished to suggest to them that they were ready to make a “professional” self assessment.

I asked students to address only two issues:

1. Discuss one thing that is done well in your writing;

2. Discuss one thing that needs to be improved in your writing.

(Source: Pittsburgh Guide to M.A.P. Grammar and Composition)

As students shared their reflections, I was concerned because their responses focused on superficials, often form-oriented instead of content-oriented. They had been accustomed to the notion that writing was “grammar and spelling”: “I need to work on my spelling,” said one; “I need to improve my handwriting,” said another. Some students seemed afraid to evaluate their writing in their own words. They chose to repeat comments which I had previously written on these forms about their work. Patricia even asked me what I thought she should write. Rocky, a good sport but a very reluctant writer, thought he should improve “everything” about his writing but could not yet be specific. Yet a pattern of reflection was beginning to emerge: Jennifer wrote, “I like what I say but not how I say it”; David wrote, “I’m looking for other ways to organize my thoughts.” We had built a foundation.

Phase III: The Portfolio Begins

By the end of February, students had accumulated both a sufficient body of work and sufficient knowledge of the process to reflect critically on their writing and make some discriminating choices about it.

At this time we created the first actual portfolios. Since students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools regularly keep a

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writing folder of all their work in a given school year, I asked the students in my class to reread everything in their writing folders and to choose a piece of writing that was “important” to them. I defined important only as “having special meaning” and would not elaborate further because I did not want to influence their choices. In addition, I did not want students to make a qualitative choice based on my comments about their work. Frankly, I was curious to see which of their pieces was important to them and why. In this way I could learn more about them as writers, but they could take a further step toward writing independence. I specified that if students had trouble deciding between two pieces they could ask a classmate for advice. I would take no part in the selection process.

When students selected their first portfolio piece, I asked them to respond in writing to the following questions, which became the basis for the Second Written Reflection.

1. Why did you select this particular piece of work? (Why does this piece stand apart from your other works as important to you?)

2. What do you see as the special strengths of this work?

3. What was particularly important to you during the process of writing this piece?

4. What have you learned about writing from your work on this piece?

5. Is there a particular skill or area of interest you would like to try out in future pieces of writing that stems from your work on this piece?

6. If you could go on working on this piece, what would you do?

7. What kind of writing would you like to do in the future?

(Adapted from Roberta Camp, *Student Questionnaire—Imaginative Writing* [Draft, September 16, 1987])

During the students’ work in Phase III, several encouraging developments emerged.

First, students were continuing to relax with the notion of thinking, talking, and writing about their work. Amy, for example, chose a piece of expository writing on William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. In response to the question, “Why did you select this particular piece of work?” she wrote, “I chose this because it’s very different. My statements are very different from other people’s that I read. I also noticed some things in the book that I used in my thesis that other people did not recognize.” In response to the question, “If you could go on working on this piece, what would you do?” she wrote, “If I could continue with my piece I would read the book over again and look for hints like the one I found at the end of Chapter 5 when Ralph says ‘if only they could send us something grown-up.’ Then in the next chapter the dead parachuter drops from the sky.” Amy’s reflections showed me that she had achieved both a comfort level and a certain pride in her writing. Further, she was setting goals for herself both in her writing and her reading. Finally, she had established a bond with Golding as a fellow writer.

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Second, students were quick to ask each other for help and advice in a very serious, on-task way. The atmosphere in the class was clearly cooperative rather than competitive.

Third, students began to speak in “portfolio language”; “piece of work,” “process,” and “reflect” became part of their vocabulary when speaking of their writing. This was important because it allowed the class to assume a writing lab environment and set a tone wherein students could speak seriously about their work to one another. In addition, once the students had a common vocabulary, we could communicate about their experiences as writers on more common ground.

Fourth, students began to articulate the concept that the writing process and the written product were inseparable. That is, their questions to each other and to me were process-oriented. For example, “How can I rearrange the order of the lines in my poem to create a clearer picture?” was a question posed by Justin, a young writer whose most serious earlier effort at thinking about lines of poetry seemed to be, “How many lines does it have to be?”

Finally, while many students chose an “A” paper for this first portfolio piece, a few began to depend less on my evaluation of their work and more on their own, remembering the risk taken or the amount of effort spent on a particular piece. For some students, however, teacher dependency continued to be a stumbling block throughout the year. I note here that this
question of teacher dependency was an on-going issue. I have tried such techniques as not putting grades on the paper, using points rather than letter grades, and removing grade forms before students put their work into their folders or portfolios. All were relatively effective, depending on the personality and competitiveness of the class. As writer independence grew, however, most students came to accept that the teacher’s evaluation was only one part of a set of criteria on which they assessed their writing.

**Phase IV—Portfolio Update**

Thus encouraged, enriched by many excellent suggestions for future writing assignments from the Phase III questionnaire, each student continued to build a body of written work. At the end of March we completed our first portfolio update. It was here that I introduced the challenge of selecting both a satisfying and an unsatisfying piece of work. The students at first did not like the idea of including an unsatisfying piece in their “special” portfolio. Much discussion and reassurance were necessary before the idea took hold that both successes and “failures” demonstrate writing growth and development.

Once students accepted the concept, however, an interesting phenomenon occurred. Students had progressed to the point where works previously selected as “satisfying” were now chosen as “unsatisfying” because they were “boring,” “too gimmicky,” or because “the ideas were overused.” Students at this point expressed a desire to include works done on their own and from other classes as part of their writing folder if not their portfolio. In addition, I sensed that students were breaking through old patterns and evaluating their work on the basis of content rather than form. Questions that reflected the notion of writing as “spelling and grammar” were replaced by “How well did I express my ideas?” and “Did I say what I wanted to say?”

All of these changes indicated to me that the students had begun to engage with their portfolios. It had taken a long time, but students now seemed to view their folders and portfolios as extensions of themselves. Students seemed to be proud of their portfolios, yet comfortable with the idea that the portfolio included an unsatisfying piece of work—as long as they had so categorized it. They were now confident enough to make a qualitative judgment about their own work, and they could live with their own analyses. They seemed to understand writing as a dynamic process which they could control. They were ready for the next step, the updating of their portfolios.

Specific directions for this update—The Third Written Reflection—were:

1. Read through your writing folder carefully.
2. Choose two pieces of writing:
   - one which doesn’t satisfy you;
   - one which does satisfy you.
3. Think about the differences between the two pieces of writing.
4. Write down some of your ideas about your two pieces of writing:
   - Things I notice about the unsatisfying piece;
   - Things I notice about the satisfying piece.
5. You are free to keep or remove the piece of your writing which is already in your portfolio.

(Adapted from Arts PROPEL)

I must note here that most students kept the original portfolio piece and reflected on the things that made it a satisfying piece of work for them. Amber, however, perhaps my most gifted writer, moved her “most important” work of Phase III into the “unsatisfying” category in Phase IV, reasoning that she had rethought her standards for evaluation. She had made a perceptive decision about a quality of wordiness in her writing of which she had been previously unaware. This breakthrough was more important to her development as a writer than anything I could have suggested to her. She had discovered it herself and it became part of her personal criteria for effective writing.

Again, students made their choices independently or with classmates. I sensed that they had become resigned to or grateful for the fact that I would not participate in the selection process.

**Phase V: Finalizing the Portfolio**

As the school year concluded, we were ready to create our final version of the portfolios. At this point, apparently quite comfortable with the process, the students themselves requested the opportunity to revise their portfolios to include pieces written after Phase IV. The specific directions for this phase were:

1. Reread the two selections in your portfolios.
2. Reread your reflections on those pieces.
3. Reread whatever new work is now in your writing folder since the last selection process.
4. Decide whether you wish to replace either your satisfying work, your unsatisfying work, or both.
5. If you replace a piece, be sure to complete the written

continued on page 27
reflection in which you indicate the things you notice about the piece (as detailed in Phase IV).

6. In paragraph form, reflect on how you have grown and/or changed as a writer during the school year. Conclude with a paragraph evaluating your strengths and weaknesses as a writer as you prepare to enter ninth grade.

This Fourth Written Reflection convinced me that a commitment to writing portfolios can be an essential tool in the development of student writers. The key, I think, is to commit to the portfolio process, rather than to the portfolio as just another file, a repository for writing. When portfolio, collection, selection, and reflection are used in concert, a very strong and positive message about writing and writing development is sent to students. Their reflections, in turn, send an equally strong and equally positive message back to the teacher. When Vicki wrote, “I’ve learned to edit my own work and to go over my own work and figure out what’s wrong with it instead of to always run to the teacher and ask her to find out what’s wrong with it for me,” when Erin wrote, “I think I’ve learned to take my writing seriously as I write it,” when Jessica wrote, “I’ve learned to set really high expectations for myself,” I knew that my students had become writers.

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