Thinking Together about Portfolios

A group of middle school and secondary school teachers are talking with one another and with supervisors and researchers about portfolios and about portfolio-related techniques which they have been trying out in their classrooms. They have come from a variety of schools in the district to this meeting, as they have to a series of similar meetings throughout the school year.

It is now May. Many of the teachers have been encouraging their students to keep folders of their writing throughout the school year. The purpose of this meeting is to develop, for the beginning of the next school year, a tentative plan for setting up a more formal structure for portfolios in some of the teachers’ classrooms. The focus for this part of the meeting is on what the teachers would like portfolios to do for them and for their students.

Kathy: When I think about portfolios, I think about what they can do for my eighth graders. Like most middle school students, I guess, they are trying to get command of their writing. They need to see how they can be in control. When they look at writing only one piece at a time, they can’t really take ownership of it. But if all of their work is collected in one place, they can see all the pieces, can see the continuity, and can begin to see themselves in control.

Arla: But the students in my classes, even in twelfth grade, need to get used to looking at their writing piece by piece first. And then they have to accumulate a fairly large body of work before they can deal with fine points like seeing the changes in their writing.

Dan M: Still, I think the very first writing that students do should go into a portfolio.

Dan W: So do I. It’s important to start in September, so kids see each piece as the beginning of a process of looking at themselves as writers.

Up to this point, the teachers have been using the terms “folder” and “portfolio” more or less synonymously. But as they talk and think about what they want their students to gain from the experience of creating portfolios, they begin to make distinctions between the two terms. Eventually they decide that the writing folder will hold all of a student’s writing, from which the student will select a relatively small number of writings to go into the portfolio.

Diane: Don’t forget that there’s more involved than just putting work in a manila folder. Creating a portfolio should involve kids in sharing and publishing their work. Kids need to know their work will be seen by others.

Mary: I’d like to see students make their own decisions about pieces to go into their portfolios. When a student decides which pieces to select, he’s thinking about how to show what kind of writer he is. The portfolio then becomes more to the student than just a storage place for his writing, as the writing folder sometimes is now.

Dan W: But not just “best” pieces. It’s important, for us and for them, to see what they struggle with. When they struggle with a piece of writing, they often don’t feel good about it—either at the time or later on—so they might not want to select it. But I want to see them include some evidence of the struggle.

Jean: You know, when I gave my students their writing folders from last year, they were really curious about the writing they had done. I think young people often don’t realize that they’ve had experience with writing that’s valuable, that they can learn from their experiences—even the mistakes.

The teachers involved in this conversation are part of a project exploring the use of portfolios in English and Lan-
language Arts classrooms in grades six to twelve in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. (1) As they talk, they touch on a number of subjects and negotiate their way through a number of difficult issues. But in the course of their discussion they come to the conclusion that the most important purpose of portfolios, at least for their classrooms, is to enhance student learning. Further, they begin to identify—with the support of supervisors and researchers—the kinds of learning they especially want students to gain from the portfolio experience.

In the last couple of decades, we have seen an enormous shift in the ways we look at teaching and learning in writing.

The efforts of these teachers are part of a larger picture in which teachers, supervisors, and researchers in classrooms, districts, and state departments of education across the country are exploring the use of portfolios. Each group in this national—and even international—picture is attempting to define the purposes and characteristics of portfolios that will serve a very particular situation. Together, the efforts of all of these groups will eventually enrich our shared understanding of portfolio approaches to the teaching and learning of writing, as well as to the assessment of writing.

As one of the researchers involved in the Pittsburgh project, and as an observer and synthesizer of the ideas about portfolios generated by teachers, supervisors, and fellow researchers in Pittsburgh and elsewhere, I would like to suggest we step back for a moment from the considerable activity surrounding the development of portfolios. I would like us to think again about why we’ve become interested in portfolios in the first place, and to suggest that we estimate—or reestimate—the success of our current and future portfolio projects in terms of those initial considerations.

Context and Background: Why Portfolios?

It is probably safe to say that the initial impetus for portfolios in English and Language Arts classrooms came from an attempt to find approaches to assessment consistent with a number of changes apparent in the teaching of writing and in the research on writing. In the last couple of decades, we have seen an enormous shift in the ways we look at teaching and learning in writing. We see much greater emphasis on variety in the audiences and purposes for writing, on the processes that students use in generating pieces of writing, and on the value of students’ awareness of the processes and strategies they use in writing. (2) This shift in emphasis has created a mismatch between forward-looking instruction and existing approaches to the assessment of writing.

Fortunately, certain trends in educational measurement began to appear at about the time that we became aware of the mismatch between informed instruction in writing and traditional models for writing assessment. We began to see the beginnings of a shift in thinking about assessment from curriculum-independent to curriculum-integrated approaches. We have become aware, both inside and outside the field of measurement, of the need for multiple forms of assessment suited to multiple contexts. We have become especially aware of the need for assessment more closely integrated with and immediately supportive of instruction and learning. (3)

These new ways of thinking about assessment have been supported and in some instances stimulated by changes in the way we look at the participants in the educational process. With increased emphasis on teacher professionalism, we see the beginnings of a trend toward greater involvement of teachers in the design and implementation of curriculum and assessment. This change in the role of teachers is often matched by a corresponding change in the role of students, who are increasingly likely to be seen as active rather than passive learners. In this view, students are more than recipients of knowledge passed on to them by their teachers. They are individuals capable of teacher support of assuming gradually increased responsibility for their learning. (4)

Taken together, these changes suggest that in one way or another our traditional approaches to writing assessment are insufficient. At the same time, they indicate a climate that is conducive to the development of portfolios.

In summary, then, we can identify at least four changes in research and practice that have led us to look for new approaches to writing assessment in general and to look at portfolios in particular:

1. a major shift in research and teaching toward emphasis on varieties of writing, processes for writing, and student awareness of processes and strategies involved in writing;
2. a shift in assessment from curriculum-independent to curriculum-integrated approaches;
3. greater involvement of teachers in the design and implementation of curriculum and assessment; and
4. a view of students as active rather than passive learners.

Moving Toward a Definition of Portfolios

As we begin to define portfolios, within our individual projects and as a community, what features do we want to say

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are essential to portfolios if our students and our schools are to get the full benefit of a portfolio approach? How can we make sure that the considerations that led us to portfolios are reflected in portfolio programs that serve students and teachers in our very particular situations and institutions? In other words, what is it that makes portfolios worth the considerable effort that goes into designing them and that will be required of the students and teachers using them?

The conversations of teachers like those in Pittsburgh can help us answer these questions because they suggest ways of translating into portfolio design our changed views of writing, of assessment, and of teachers’ and students’ roles. In the discussion cited earlier, for example, we see the beginnings of a definition of portfolios that is rich, that promotes and enhances learning and the teaching of writing. As teachers in Pittsburgh and elsewhere think about what they want from portfolios in their classrooms, their conversations suggest the features they consider essential:

- multiple samples of classroom writing, preferably collected over a sustained period of time;
- evidence of the processes and strategies that students use in creating at least some of those pieces of writing;
- evidence of the extent to which students are aware of the processes and strategies they use in writing and of their development as writers.

As they talk and experiment with portfolios, these teachers—like others in their situation—are also developing a sense of how the processes necessary to creating and using portfolios can affect the portfolios’ value for both students and teachers. In the ways these teachers talk about portfolios and the ways they interact and negotiate with one another, they suggest—sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly—the importance of certain processes associated with portfolios:

- the need for students to learn from the experience of creating portfolios, from the very occasions through which they generate portfolios;
- the importance of teachers’ negotiating and arriving at a shared view of the ways in which portfolios will be designed, implemented, and evaluated;
- the need to integrate the process of creating portfolios, as well as the information derived from them, with instruction and curriculum as they occur in individual classrooms.

Suppose we take the conversation at the beginning of this article and its implications as illustrative of what the discussion of experienced teachers can tell us about portfolios and portfolio processes. What do we need to know about the environment that surrounds and supports these teachers? What is it, other than their own intelligence and experience, that brings the teachers to the kinds of insight that we see evident here?

The Environment for Portfolios

Introducing portfolios into a classroom or school can in itself become a first step toward creating an environment that supports writing instruction and learning of the kinds described here, especially if the first experiences with portfolios are used to inform instruction and curriculum and to guide subsequent refinements of the portfolio approach. A portfolio program, that is, with sufficient attention and support can create the climate in the classroom that portfolios need if they are to survive and be effective.

The idea is to create an approach to generating portfolios of academic and imaginative writing that is useful to students’ learning and directly informative to teachers’ decisions about instruction.

However, it is probably easier to develop and sustain portfolios in circumstances in which teachers and students are predisposed toward views and practices that lead them more or less naturally to portfolios. To a large extent, portfolios have developed as they have in Pittsburgh because teachers and students were ready for them, in part for reasons associated with the climate in English and Language Arts classrooms in the school district, and in part because of a project focusing on instruction and assessment in the arts.

Let’s start by looking at the project. Portfolio explorations are taking place in Pittsburgh within the context of Arts PROPEL, a project funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and aimed at the development of assessment closely integrated with instruction in the arts. The project involves three areas of the middle school and secondary school curriculum: visual arts, music, and imaginative writing. It is built on a three-way collaboration among teachers and supervisors in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, researchers from Harvard Project Zero—a group long concerned with children’s cognitive and artistic development, and researchers from Educational Testing Service interested in creating forms of assessment integrated with instruction and learning.

When teachers, supervisors, and researchers first began to
meet in Pittsburgh three and a half years ago, portfolios were already part of our thinking. Our first endeavors, however, were directed toward developing classroom activities that would prepare the way for portfolios, especially portfolios that would include imaginative writing.

These activities gradually took the form of classroom projects developed in close collaboration with teachers and aimed at creating a place for imaginative writing—particularly the writing of poetry and drama—in the English and Language Arts curriculum, as well as creating a suitable context for portfolios. In the classroom projects, assessment is combined with instruction in imaginative writing; students use their experience as creative writers to understand the techniques at work in a variety of genres and to develop criteria for evaluating their success in using the techniques in their own writing.

The experience of developing the classroom projects gave us a shared history of genuine collaboration in which teachers, supervisors, and researchers could discover what each had to contribute—a factor not to be underestimated in the development of portfolios. Moreover, the projects as they evolved incorporated several characteristics that have helped create a classroom climate conducive to portfolios:

1. The focus in the projects is on the choices open to the artist and on students' choices in their own work, an approach that reduces emphasis on "correctness" or "right answers," that encourages discovery and taking risks, and that fosters students' ownership of their writing.

2. The projects create a long-term view of classroom work, taking several days to as much as two weeks, so they create expectations for learning based on sustained interest and effort.

3. The projects involve students in looking back at the work they have created and the processes they have used, as well as in helping one another to look at their work.

4. The projects suggest a workshop-like atmosphere in which students become more active learners and teachers structure activities and interactions that help students progress in their learning.

Among the most profound changes resulting from the Arts PROPEL projects are those that have come about as a result of students' looking back at their work. Students have gradually come to understand the value of keeping their writing as a record of the choices they have made and of possibilities they might pursue. They have come to expect that they will reflect on the writing they do and that their reflections will inform their decisions. They are increasingly disposed to see the value of revision. They are gradually assuming greater responsibility for the decisions they make in their writing and for evaluating the results of their decisions.

Long before Arts PROPEL came to Pittsburgh, however, teachers and supervisors already had begun to cultivate views of writing and teaching compatible with portfolios. A sizable number of teachers in the district were acquainted with research that emphasized writing for multiple purposes and audiences, and the value of students becoming aware of the processes and strategies they can use in writing. In addition, the teachers enjoyed the kind of support and respect from their supervisors that encouraged them to see themselves as professionals engaged in a joint effort to improve the quality of students' education.

Furthermore, teachers in English and Language Arts classrooms were already collecting folders of student writing. The procedures for collection and the contents for the writing folders varied from teacher to teacher. But since the folders were used primarily for conversations about student writing between teacher and supervisor, there was little need to make them consistent across classrooms.

The task for Arts PROPEL portfolio explorations has been to build on teachers' and students' experience with writing folders and with the classroom projects in imaginative writing. The idea is to create an approach to generating portfolios of academic and imaginative writing that is useful to students' learning and directly informative to teachers' decisions about instruction. A more long-term goal is to make portfolios consistent enough across classrooms to facilitate conversations and comparisons among teachers about the qualities evident in students' writing and their awareness of writing processes and strategies. Through these conversations and comparisons, we hope that teachers from classrooms across the district will develop a shared view of writing instruction and curriculum, and a shared basis for their evaluations of student writing.

What are the factors, then, that have created an environment for writing portfolios in Pittsburgh? In the overall climate of English and Language Arts classrooms in the district, we can observe a view of writing that emphasizes multiple purposes and audiences for writing and students' awareness of processes and strategies for writing; we also see a practice of keeping folders of student writing, as well as strong institutional support for writing teachers. In the climate surrounding Arts PROPEL classroom projects in imaginative writing, we see a history of genuine collaboration, emphasis in the projects themselves on learning and discovery rather than correctness, encouragement for students' looking back at their work and taking ownership over their writing, encouragement for a long-term view of teaching and learning and for a workshop-like atmosphere in the classroom.

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Developing a Model for Portfolios

For at least two years, a small group of teachers in Arts PROPEL have been trying out various activities and guidelines designed to help students toward the creation of portfolios. This strand of teacher experimentation has been supplemented with researchers’ interviews of individual students to discover how students look at their work, what they value in writing, and what options and alternatives they see for revisions or for future writing.

The findings of teachers and researchers have been brought into discussions with a larger team of teachers, supervisors, and researchers. At these discussions among the larger group—of which the occasion cited earlier was one—teachers also look at student portfolios which they have selected from their classrooms, indicating what they find informative in each portfolio and what more they would like to see provided to round out the picture of the student that the portfolio conveys.

We can get a sense of how portfolio thinking evolves in these discussions and in the project if we look again at teacher conversation, picking up where we left off earlier. Here as in the previously cited portion of the discussion, the teachers have been encouraged to draw on their years of experience with the teaching of writing and on their recent experiments with portfolio-related techniques. They have already begun to identify the kinds of learning they want students to derive from portfolios, and to think about how the desire for this learning might be translated into the features of the portfolios. They have also decided that they would like students themselves to select the pieces of writing from their folders that will go into the portfolios. But they are still grappling with the difficult problem of encouraging students to include pieces of writing that do not in themselves show students to best advantage—pieces that show how students have struggled with writing and learned from their struggles.

Kathy: My students will put in a piece that they’re not pleased with, if they get a chance to comment on it. They feel they have control over the piece if they can say why they’re not satisfied with it.

Jerry: If we want more than “best” pieces, maybe we need to ask that all the pieces in a portfolio be accompanied by students’ reflections on them. If students can indicate what they see in the pieces, they can feel they have some control over how the pieces will be seen by others. And looking back at their writing—successful and unsuccessful—helps students to see it as a related, continuous process. Maybe reflection is what’s most important in the portfolio.

Dan W: But each piece of writing is important, too. I think each piece should have written reflection attached—maybe just a couple of comments—and go into a folder. Then the kid could select later the pieces that go into the portfolio.

Jerry: That’s good. Through the reflections, then, kids could be doing assessment all the time, thinking about and evaluating their own work. Sometimes it would be assessment of an individual piece. Sometimes it would be of a body of work in the folder or of pieces in the portfolio.

Kathy: What’s most critical—whether we’re talking about folders or portfolios—is that the students read and use and learn from what’s in them.

Jerry: I think we all agree. What’s important on a day-to-day basis is kids’ use of folders and eventually portfolios, and what they do with them, including how they talk about them. The experience of making portfolios becomes the basis for students’ learning about their writing and about themselves as writers.

The teachers start with what they want students to learn. They want students to become aware of the ways in which they have developed as writers, not only in their “best” pieces but also in the ones that they do not regard as entirely successful. That means teachers want students to take some risks in their selections for the portfolio and are aware that, even with teacher support, students might not be willing to take such risks unless they are provided with an appropriate context and rationale.

The attempt to resolve this dilemma leads the teachers to think about the portfolio’s content and then to a process they think students might profitably use to generate them. An important part of that process involves students in looking back at their work; the result of that looking back, the written reflection, becomes a basis for students’ learning and their assuming control over the contents of the portfolio and eventually over the course of their learning. And since students’ own evaluations of their work are essential to learning, they become part of the process of generating portfolios.

The line of reasoning just described follows quite naturally in the teachers’ conversation from their attempts to solve the problem of having students include “more than ‘best’ pieces.” It also has far-reaching implications for our views of assess-
"Maybe reflection is what’s most important in portfolios."

As students engage in these reflective activities, they make explicit much that is ordinarily hidden from student writers and their teachers. Portfolio reflections make visible certain aspects of students’ perceptions and purposes that are not accessible from their written products alone:

1. What the student believes she has done well in a piece of writing:

   The special strength of my thesis [paper] is the way I related the question [the topic for the paper] and the answer to the book. For example in my first paragraph I refer back to ch. 5. That is where I found my main example of my statement. (8th grader, Amy)

2. What the student values in writing:

   It was wild the way I put Beowulf into modern times. (12th grader, Mileak)

   [I selected] the dialogue I wrote about Karen & Stan. The reason I picked this one was because this could be a very real situation. I also liked this dialogue because if it was a real situation this is probably very close to what the conversation would be like. (9th grader, Erin)

3. The student’s own goals and interests—his “agenda”—as a learner and developing writer:

   Today I [read] my old work and didn’t like it. I decided to rewrite my camping in the woods story. (7th grader, Michael)

4. The student’s strategies and processes for writing and his or her awareness of them:

   I think of what things I need in the story and then write a jot list. (12th grader, Mileak)

   I really thought out and planned my composition. (12th grader, Amber)

5. What the student understands that she is learning about writing:

   In the last several weeks I believe I have become a better writer. In the beginning I worried about the plot and the ending, and now I believe I have learned there really is no need for an ending. I also now don’t worry so much about the plot itself but about the character, my image of the character.

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and the setting. Things I really had worried about second or third and not first. (8th grader, Arin)

Reflection, then, yields information that both student and teacher use to track and direct the course of learning. With the information made available through the writing folder and the portfolios, teachers are equipped to be mentors, facilitators, and co-discoverers in their students’ development.

One final example may help to illustrate the power of reflection and simultaneously to address a concern about verbal ability as a prerequisite to engaging in this kind of activity. The following is a piece of reflection from a ninth-grade student working on a series of dialogues:

I feel like my writing formed two hills, like this.

I was writing good, to my standards, then it started lacking what I thought made it good. Then I started climbing again, this time greater than my first one. Finally, my last dialogue was terrible.

This student’s observations about his work are insightful; he sees the kinds of peaks and valleys in performance that we have only recently come to expect in student writers’ development. He is also aware of what he is doing and what he values. Although he is not a fluent writer, he has standards of his own for judging his success. He is creating a basis from which he can enter into productive dialogue with his teacher and classmates about the qualities he sees in his writing.

This is the kind of insight that we hope Arts PROPEL portfolios will promote among students and their teachers. What we have seen so far leads us to believe that when students look back at their work and their strategies for creating it, when they describe what they see and what they value, they engage in a process of learning and a form of assessment that are at the heart of portfolios. Through their portfolio reflections, students also provide information about their perceptions and their learning that teachers can put to direct use in shaping both individual and group instruction.

The assessment involved in these portfolios has great potential to affect student learning because it addresses directly students’ awareness of what they have done and what they can do. The challenge for portfolios—in Pittsburgh and elsewhere—is to promote and nurture this kind of learning while serving and redefining the purposes of assessment.

Notes

1. The participants in the meeting, which took place in May 1989, included thirteen Pittsburgh Public School teachers (Marilyn Caldwell, William Cooper, Mary Cullingham Wyse, Jerome Halpern, Rose Haverlack, Kathryn Howard, Diane Hughes, Denyse Littles, Jean Kabbert, Daniel Macel, Arla Muha, Carolyn Olasewere, and Daniel Wyse); four supervisors (JoAnne Eresh, JoAnn Doran, Alice Turner, and Sylvia Wade); three researchers from Harvard Project Zero (Steve Seidel, Reincke Zessoules, and Dennie Wolf) and one researcher from Educational Testing Service (Roberta Camp). Many in this group had been working together in the project for nearly three full school years at the time of the meeting.


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