

2 Teachers' Stories: Notes toward a Portfolio Pedagogy

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This collection of essays on portfolio assessment began for several reasons. In part, it began as an effort to tease out and then articulate all those ways or reasons that explain how and why portfolios have invigorated our classrooms. And in part it began so that we could share with others what we have learned so far, in the hope that they too can learn with us as we tell our stories. But, like other teachers and writers before them, the authors who contributed to this collection did so for yet another, rather simple reason—not so much to write essays extolling the virtues of portfolios, but rather to tell a story, our own story. As English teachers, we like to tell stories, stories about our successes and our failures, stories about what we have learned already and about what we hope to learn tomorrow, and in this case particularly, stories about how we learned with our students, about how they became better, more insightful writers and we became better teachers. We value our stories, just as we value the students and teachers they remember. In their details, in the truths they embody, our stories seem to validate our experiences, to somehow make them real and to make them signify.

The stories told in this collection have a common subject, of course—portfolios—but the variations on that subject are rich and colorful. As described here, portfolios are not uniform or standardized, but diverse. They are defined variously as cultural artifacts, as collection devices, as instruments of process, as assessment tools, as means of education reform, as resources for teachers, as pictures of and guides for curriculum. In talking about portfolios, the authors also talk about nearly everything having to do with school—with new ways of teaching, new ways of seeing; with teachers changing their classes and their teaching; with students contributing to their own writing assessment. Likewise, teachers tell

about different models for portfolio projects, about ways to start simple and build to something new, about new kinds of assignments and responses to writings, about understanding the kinds of reflection and behaviors that students will need to learn in order to practice portfolio assessment, about new kinds of collaboration not only among students, but also between students and teachers. They tell about authority and responsibility, making clear the threads binding them and us together.

Variations like these are made possible in part because of the diverse backgrounds of the contributors themselves. All have been or currently are teachers, most at middle and secondary schools; many have administrative experience; two are evaluation researchers; several are connected with the National Writing Project; and several are involved in teacher education. The result is that the chapters that follow include competing as well as complementary perspectives.

Although each chapter can be read independently, the arrangement of the chapters suggests the emergence of a portfolio pedagogy, taking place in classrooms where teachers and students work together on processes and products, where learning through and with writing may be the primary product. Collectively, the chapters reflect a movement from the self-initiated use of portfolios, as narrated in Sue Ellen Gold's chapter, and from the individual struggling to make sense out of a general "assignment" to introduce portfolios, as described by James Newkirk, toward the use of portfolios taken up by teachers working together in community. Catherine D'Aoust's teachers are still working individually, but support each other in a university seminar on "Teachers as Researchers." Sandra Murphy and Mary Ann Smith describe a middle school faculty cooperating with outside researchers to learn how to derive insights from a shared portfolio project—insights about students and about how portfolio projects work.

Roberta Camp's portfolio project grew out of cooperation between theorists, educational testers, administrators, and teachers of the performing arts, for whom portfolios took on a special function as instruments for student growth, allowing assessment of the learning processes as well as the products. In a sense, this piece is pivotal because it reflects the most intimate effects of a portfolio class, while representing a coherent, programmatic use of portfolios to shape pedagogy and assess learning.

David Kneeshaw discusses portfolios from an even larger perspective in his description of the Ontario "Writing Folder" project, intended to allow evaluation and record-keeping as a student moves across grade levels, but designed as well to encourage much of the same

sense of discovery by teachers and students that characterizes the individual accounts. Building continuity across grades and schools, these folders, with their general assignment guidelines and instructive observations about writing processes, do not have the effect of standardizing curriculum, but rather allow teachers to shape students' writing tasks each year by encouraging growth in new areas.

Irwin Weiser tells the last story, of a considered decision to introduce portfolios into the basic writing program at Purdue University, primarily as a way to defer summative grading. Like the other authors, he reports unexpected rewards as teachers accommodate the deferred grades by learning to make more precise and helpful responses on essays. These stories are supported as well by Sheila Ewing's annotated bibliography (see Appendix), which lists resources that teachers and administrators will find useful.

This volume concludes, in Chapter 10, with some assertions about the characteristics of portfolios as artifacts within the American culture. Taken together, characteristics such as "demonstration of talent" and "range of content" provide a model that teachers may draw on and modify and redefine when they design their own projects for the classroom. The projects described here changed over time as well, through student reaction and suggestion, teacher collaboration, and the practice afforded in trial and error. Still, when we reflect on these individual projects, various as they are, we see traits that they share, a set of characteristics common to them all, qualities such as shared authority, qualitative and thoughtful response, and a commitment to development of processes over time. Collectively, then, a set of characteristics seems to be emerging, defining features of what we might call a portfolio pedagogy. In this chapter, by way of introduction and on the basis of the readings that follow, I will tentatively describe this pedagogy. Then, in the final chapter, I will broaden the context, examining portfolios in the larger culture and offering some rudimentary analysis of how and why they work in the writing class, listing key characteristics that can be extracted from the intervening chapters.

A Portfolio Classroom

A portfolio classroom is one informed by models. Initially, teachers tend to work from general models found within the culture at large, those in fine arts, for instance. In designing their classroom portfolio projects, then, teachers have taken the general models and modified them. Even after they had developed classroom portfolio models,

however, teachers here realized that the new models were in process, in response to student input, to changing circumstances, to new insights.

Now, various models of classroom portfolios exist, from the model of portfolios driven by reflection, described by Camp, to the peer response-oriented model developed by Gold. These models exhibit different relationships to the overall curriculum. Sometimes they are an integral part, as in the case of Basic Writers at Purdue and Newkirk's eighth graders; other times the portfolios play an important but not a dominating role in the class, as in some of the situations described by Murphy and Smith. Sometimes, as in the case of the ESL teacher described by D'Aoust, portfolios are not used for assessment in any institutional sense at all. And still other times, the portfolio is not only a classroom entity, but also a systemwide vehicle for teaching and curricular improvement, as is the case in Ontario. In brief, the models for portfolio assessment and practice all respond to the needs of a particular context, and they themselves are in process.

Because they are created and used in context, these classroom portfolio projects are highly individualized, intended to serve the learning needs of the students in a particular classroom who are working with a particular teacher. The projects presented here tend to be individualized in yet another way. Because they are a collection of writings, portfolios have a pattern and coherence that express or profile each individual writer, even when the contents are specified and the assignments standardized. In other words, by their very nature portfolios make possible the developmental charting of individuals, as well as a rich portrait of the writer composing for several occasions—either over a single school term (Gold, for example) or over the course of a child's schooling (Kneeshaw, for example).

A portfolio pedagogy is sensitive to process, and we see this in several ways. First, without neglecting the product that a writer creates, a portfolio pedagogy, as Camp illustrates, seeks to include and to validate processes used to create it. Accordingly, within a portfolio classroom it is commonplace to ask students to include evidence of various processes that contribute to a single work: note-taking, brainstorming, looping, drafting, redrafting in response to review, for instance. This evidence is valued for what it says about ways that the writer approaches the task and ways that the writer is developing cognitively, as well as for the part it plays in the composing of any one specific piece.

Second, of special importance in a portfolio pedagogy are two processes, *reflections* and *inquiry*. As D'Aoust suggests, one

distinction between a storage folder and a portfolio is *reflection*, the review and consideration and narration and analysis and exploration of what learning is occurring in writing. As noted earlier, sometimes that reflection is the driving force in the portfolio program, as in Arts PROPEL portfolios; in others it plays a less central role. What seems important is that, within a portfolio pedagogy, reflection apparently always plays a role of some sort and is directed toward a body of work over time—made possible in part by the portfolio.

What also seems important in the reflection is the interplay between intuition and cognition. As Camp asserts, it is through reflection that students have the opportunity to play out intuitions, to consider their impact, to assess their contribution to any piece, to one kind of writing especially, and to composing generally. It may be, then, that one of the chief benefits of reflection is its role in bringing intuition both into focus and into the composing classroom.

Another process that is prized in portfolio pedagogy is *inquiry*, an exploring into writing and thinking that students and teachers undertake together. A commitment to inquiry means that no one party

to the exploration knows the answers definitively or ideally, that all parties work together to negotiate meaning, and that making meaning is the enterprise shared by all. Process in itself, then, and the processes of reflection and inquiry in particular are crucial components in a portfolio classroom.

Both inquiry and reflection contribute to learning, and the learning in a portfolio pedagogy requires that everyone participate. Students in this classroom are required to be active learners, they must make choices that will affect and direct their learning, and they will learn more or less in part according to the choices they make. They are participants in the classroom, not just to help the teacher help them—though that too is important—but also to help themselves. Put differently, they are responsible for their own learning. And teachers in a portfolio pedagogy are responsible for helping students learn how to identify goals as well as to achieve them. Furthermore, in this pedagogy, teachers are also learners. They learn with their students how we all become (better) writers, how we help each other in that quest, and how we can create an environment that supports that learning.

Learning in a portfolio pedagogy is also understood to be timeintensive. It does not just happen in a day, and it does not even necessarily happen when we anticipate and prepare for it. So the gift

of time, spent wisely, is central to the pedagogy. Time permits the sustained activity characteristic of portfolios, the time to compare

composings, to review past goals, to match objectives with performance. Time permits the sustained dialogue within a peer group, the collaboration between student-writer and teacher-reader over the course of a term or a year, the multiple readings that any portfolio might have. Simply put, the gift of time allows students to learn to become writers, rather than to learn to write papers.

In a portfolio pedagogy, the audiences are many—the writer himself or herself, the writer's peers, the teacher. Sometimes, as in the case of Gold's model of portfolios, the teacher does not even join the audience until very late in the process. So the concept of audience takes on a new and a real meaning, both for the writer of discourse and for its readers. In some ways, this new audience is a threatening discovery because, if taken seriously, it changes the relationship among teachers and learners. At least in the old writing classroom, when the teacher is the examiner (Britton et al. 1975), there is a right answer, if only the writer can guess it. But as Murphy and Smith point out, in a portfolio pedagogy Britton's teacher-as-examiner no longer applies. Teachers are one among other members of the audience. Admittedly, they can be the preferred members of the audience—they do give out the grades, after all. But frequently, as Newkirk argues, even grading is a shared enterprise, another form of making meaning. A portfolio pedagogy can also be somewhat threatening in the kinds of disclosure that it relies upon. Simply put, this pedagogy claims that, when teachers and students identify efforts as *both* successes and failures, writers improve. Most of us do not mind pointing to our successes, but we are not always so comfortable in acknowledging our failures, failures that perhaps no one else would even have spotted had we not identified them ourselves. This pedagogy thus assumes that writers will experience both success and failure, that both are part of being a writer, and that discussion of both is crucial for development.

As almost all the authors here have noted, these assumptions, and the teacher-student relationships they invoke, are not what students are used to, are not what teachers are used to, and are likely to make students and teachers feel fairly vulnerable, at least at first. Should students accept us at our word and admit that they did not start working until ten o'clock the night before (and weaken forever their chances of apple polishing)? Will we really not take advantage of their pointing out to us their less successful efforts? Questions like these are natural within a portfolio classroom. So too is the need for teachers and students to practice the art of being honest but not hurtful, as Camp expressed it, in setting goals, in working together, in assessing progress.

Teachers too may hear a comment or two that could bruise, and like Gold, when they ask for honesty, they respect it. For it is through honesty and through discussion that meaning is shaped.

And last but certainly not least, a portfolio pedagogy defines "authentic assessment" (Wiggins 1989) in new ways. Most obvious, perhaps, is the shift from assessment of single standardized pieces to assessment of multiple, often unlike pieces of writing. These data are, in a word, messy, and they do not make evaluation any easier. According to portfolio proponents, however, they do make it valid, and they do connect assessment to learning. As writers respond to different tasks under different conditions and for different occasions, their writings (like writings we find in the "real" world) no longer look alike. There is not necessarily any one scoring guide or rubric to guide the reader seeking to compare the differing pieces of a single author, the portfolios of a single class, or the sets of portfolios belonging to a school system. But comparing students one to the next has not been a primary objective of the authors here. Rather, they have been interested in learning with the students how they develop and perform as writers.

Less obvious, but more compelling perhaps, are other changes in the ways that assessment is defined within a portfolio pedagogy. Assessment is no longer seen as a process where one party submits his or her work to another with no influence on how the work is performed or interpreted. Rather, in a portfolio pedagogy, assessment is seen as a process in which all the parties are *bona fide* participants, and in which the person whose performance is being assessed is more than an object of someone else's perusal. Students are to help define the rhetorical tasks, whether those tasks be single writing tasks or a yearlong developmental task. These tasks, then, provide part of the context in which the student's work is to be assessed. In addition, the student is often invited to narrate or to gloss the contents of the portfolio, to show how these pieces exhibit development or insight or even mistakes the writer would no longer make. In other words, this commentary provides another context in which to read the work, and its intent is to help the reader interpret the writing and the progress it represents in a way compatible with the writer's aims. To put it in Kneeshaw's terms, assessment within a portfolio pedagogy, as in other forms of assessment, operates on a kind of bias, and in this case it is "biased for best."

A portfolio pedagogy supports an open classroom and relies upon a genuinely academic environment, a place where everyone has a part to play. It is a place where all writers can succeed, and where success is directed in part by the student. It is a place where process is

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emphasized, where learning is always a goal for teacher and student alike. And as the following chapters demonstrate, it is a place still in the process of being shaped.

References

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- Wiggins, G. 1989. "A True Test: Toward More Authentic and Equitable Assessment." *Phi Delta Kappan* 70(9):703-4.