

Portfolio Assessment: Sampling Student Work

When students maintain portfolios of their work, they learn to assess their own progress as learners, and teachers gain new views of their accomplishments in teaching.

For the last two years, a consortium of administrators, teachers, and researchers in the Pittsburgh schools has been searching for alternatives to standardized assessment. In that work we have found that the world brims over with examples of the differences between testing as we know it in schools and the reflective self-evaluation that is inseparable from pursuing virtually any kind of worthwhile work.

Some examples? Last summer when the Dodgers were heating up, I heard a radio announcer tease pitcher Ore Hershisser about keeping a journal. Hershisser wasn't fazed. He simply said human memory is too faulty and he cares too much about what makes him crackerjack one day and just average the next not to keep track. Several days later, I visited a small gallery where they show artists' books and working drawings. Inside, the walls and cases were crammed with sketches by Ree Morton, a sculptor who began studying art in her thirties, surrounded by young children, drafting and writing on top of the washing machine. There on the gallery walls was evidence of another kind of evaluation: Morton would stalk an idea from inception to

final work, making version after version after version. Then, two days ago, I listened to Sonny Rollins reminiscing on a jazz show. He was remembering how, smack in the middle of gigs and tours, he decided to "step out to find a new sound." He left the world of clubs and concert halls to practice hours at a time where the acoustics would let him get inside the music—solo on the bridges of New York City.

Here is both promise and trouble. The promise lies in the demonstration of how demanding and thoughtful we

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can be about shaping work that matters to us. The trouble lies in recognizing how we ignore this capacity in schools. Never do we stop to ask how we could make our evaluative gate-keeping model the kind of self-observation and informed critique that separates ball tossers from fine pitchers, doodlers from artists, or instrumentalists from musicians. Yet virtually every student walks out of school into years of long-term projects: raising children, building a house, running a farm, writing a novel, or becoming a better lab technician. All of these projects require moment-to-moment monitoring, Monday morning quarterbacking, and countless judgments of errors and worth. Unfortunately, very little in the way we now structure assessment in schools names or encourages those lifelong skills.

Even in a time when increasing numbers of educators are working to diversify and humanize the way we evaluate student learning, much school-based assessment actually *prevents* students from becoming thoughtful respondents to, and judges of, their own work. The "surprise" nature of many test items, the emphasis on objective knowledge, the once-over and one-time nature of most

exams—all offer students lessons that are destructive to their capacity to thoughtfully judge their own work: (1) assessment comes from without, it is not a personal responsibility; (2) what matters is not the full range of your intuitions and knowledge but your performance on the slice of skills that appear on tests; (3) first-draft work is good enough; and (4) achievement matters to the exclusion of development.

Alternatives from the Arts and Humanities

These issues about evaluating student learning have recently been aggravated by debates about what counts as knowledge and learning in the arts and humanities. On the one hand, critics like Bennett, Finn, Hirsch, and Ravitch argue that the first obligation of humanities education is to provide students with a considerable factual knowledge of Western history and culture. On the other hand, a coalition of projects and people argue that students cannot learn and retain facts unless they learn how to *think* about

those facts. Therefore, from the earliest age, students must learn the processes characteristic of the humanities: how to question, investigate, think, and write. Certainly another of these processes is self-knowledge and reflection, what the artist Ben Shahn once referred to as the ability to be "the spontaneous imaginer and the inexorable critic all at once." But this capacity may be squeezed out of schooling if current critiques of education lead to a relentless push for coverage of facts.

Among these contending voices are the designers of the new Civilizations of the Americas course at Stanford University, the College Board's EQuality project, and the CHART (Collaborative for Humanities and Art) programs funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and designed to bring both critical and creative thinking to students normally disbarred from anything but functional education.

Included among the Rockefeller projects is PROPEL, the three-way consortium mentioned earlier. PROPEL

brings together the Pittsburgh Public Schools, Educational Testing Service, and Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in an effort to demonstrate that it is possible to assess the thinking processes characteristic of the arts and humanities in rigorous, but undistorted, ways. Central to this work are two aims. The first is to design ways of evaluating student learning that, while providing information to teachers and school systems, will also model personal responsibility in questioning and reflecting on one's own work. The second is to find ways of capturing growth over time so that students can become informed and thoughtful assessors of their own histories as learners.

To accomplish these aims, the teachers and researchers in PROPEL have asked experts—artists, musicians, and writers—how they sample and judge their own life work. Time and again, something like Orel Hershiser's diary, Ree Morton's stack of sketchbooks, or Rollins' sustained practicing surfaces. Whatever the medium, the

First Draft	Second Draft	Third Draft
<p>the geese strutted on the shore, in the dried out grass and the sun bleached straw as if it knew the reasons why the ducklings splashed in the water by the road, and why the truck was at first rambled its way along the highway stopped to gaze at the broken stillness broken only by the splash of water against more water and the repeated flap of the geese's webbed feet against the soft earth.</p>	<p>1/ the geese strutted on the shore, in the dried out grass and the sun bleached straw as if it knew the reasons why the ducklings splashed in the water by the road, and why the truck, was at first rambled its way along the highway stopped to gaze in appreciation with just remembered memories mixed of the broken stillness, broken only by the splash of water against more water, and the repeated flap of the geese's webbed feet against the soft ground, soft earth.</p>	<p>3/ The geese strutted on the shore, In the dried out grass and the sun bleached straw As if it knew The reasons why The ducklings splashed In the water by the road, And why the truck, That at first rambled its way Along the highway Stopped to gaze in appreciation with just remembered memories Mixed in the broken stillness, Broken only by the splash Of water against more water, and the repeated Flap of the geese's webbed feet against The soft earth.</p>

Fig. 1. Three Drafts of Student Poem

message is the same: thinkers and inventors often keep longitudinal collections of their ideas, drafts, and questions. They use these as a kind of storehouse of possibilities for later work, valuing them as a record of where they have been and reading them for a sharp sense of their own signatures and uncertainties. Building on these examples, PROPEL teachers and researchers have developed systems of portfolio assessment in the visual arts, music, and writing.

Portfolios

PROPEL portfolios have developed some distinguishing characteristics. To begin, students collect more than a diverse body of finished work. In fact, they gather what we have come to call *biographies of works*, a *range of works*, and *reflections*. A biography of a work reveals the geology of different moments that underlies the production of any major project. Among young musicians preparing for a concert, such a biography includes regular tape recordings of a particularly telling section of a piece. For a young writer it might include the notes, diagrams, drafts, and final version of a poem.

The range of works is deliberately diverse. A student artist might include collages, prints, photos or portraits, landscapes, and still lifes. The young writer might bring together pieces as diverse as journal entries, letters, poems, or essays from social studies classes.

Reflections are documents (or even audiotapes) that come from moments when teachers ask students to return to their collections of work, taking up the stance of an informed critic or autobiographer, noticing what is characteristic, what has changed with time, or what still remains to be done. At the end of any given semester or year, teachers offer students a still longer period of time to study their collections, selecting several works that best exemplify what has changed for the student in that time. These works, along with student and teacher commentaries, become a final portfolio that can be passed along as a continuing document from year to year.

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Why Bother?

Portfolios are messy. They demand intimate and often frighteningly subjective talk with students. Portfolios are work. Teachers who ask students to read their own progress in the "footprints" of their works have to coax and bicker with individuals who are used to being assessed. Halfway through the semester, at least a half dozen recalcitrants will lose every paper or sketch or tape they have ever owned. More important, teachers have to struggle to read and make sense of whole works and patterns of growth. Hence, hard questions arise: "Why bother? What comes out of portfolio-based assessment?" The immediate answer lies in integrity and the validity of the information we gain about how and what students learn. But that's far from all.

Student responsibility. In the fall of last year, Kathy Howard faced an ordinary class of 8th graders who had not written more than the answers to chapter questions and who had certainly never been asked to reflect on their progress as writers. In the ensuing months she began to insist that they write essays, journals, and poems. At intervals of several months, she asked her students to select two

pieces: one that didn't satisfy them and another that they liked. Her students studied these pieces and wrote down what they noticed about themselves as writers. Sometimes she left students on their own; at other times she discussed the various dimensions of their writing that they might consider. As students continued to write, they revisited their earlier choices, seeing whether old favorites held up in the light of their own evolving standards. After eight months, the climate around writing had changed dramatically: part of writing was now the responsibility to know where you were and what you thought. By early June, the classroom dialogue had acquired a sound that was tough yet meditative:

"I want you to look at what you chose last time as your most satisfying piece and your least satisfying piece. You don't have to change them, but I want to give you the chance to re-evaluate them. Something that once looked good to you may look different now, or you might see something new in a piece you once thought wasn't much.

"Feel free to confer with each other. Go ahead and ask someone else's opinion. But be sure you really give them a chance to read what you have written. Don't just wave a paper in front of their face and ask them."

A student calls: "If we have two satisfying pieces, is that okay?"

"Yes, just be sure you know what you see in each of them."

Kathy pauses beside another student who is shuffling papers. "Rocky, show me what you are using."

"Is this the right one?"

"I don't care which one you choose. I'm just here to listen to your ideas."

He smiles and takes a paper out and holds it up. Kathy reads over his shoulder. "Nice choice. Now why?" Rocky begins to read the paper out loud to her. Kathy jokes: "No, you need to tell me. Think out loud about your writing."

Rocky looks quizzical.

"I want to know why you chose what you did. See, if I chose, I would probably choose different things for *my* reasons."

This slice of life in the classroom illustrates how portfolios can promote a climate of reflection. Words like *think*, *choose*, and *risk* run throughout the conversation, which is punctuated

by pauses for reflection. The answer to a question is not to be found in the text, but in thinking back to earlier times, comparing pieces, and struggling to put your intuitions into words. Kathy hasn't abdicated her role as teacher, but she uses that role to insist that her students go back to their own work, requiring that they construct their own autobiographies as learners. Time and again, she brings the conversation back to what they notice, value, or worry over. She makes her students responsible for taking the lead in evaluating their work.

Enlarging the view of what's learned. Because portfolios contain a range of work—fiction, poems, essays, journal entries—students come to see what is under development quite differently. While all of them still include neatness and good grammar among the dimensions of change they notice, students also come to see themselves as authors who write differently for different audiences or who make distinctive choices about how they convey information. By way of example, consider what Jeff, an 8th grader, has to say when he reflects on a piece of fiction writing based on Poe's poem "The Raven":

I had a hard time being the Raven. I knew it right away. So I tried to be really creative, well, sort of crazy. Now I would put some more basic story into it, I would take some of the abstractness out, put some real experiences into it. I wouldn't have left the story so blank.

At the end of a semester or year, teachers offer students time to study their collections, selecting several works that best exemplify what has changed for the student in that time.

Later on, when he talks about his essays on books like *Animal Farm*, he relies on a different kind of criteria:

It's analyzing Napoleon's whole plan for how to get power. I showed each different step and how it came to a conclusion. I didn't use any creative writing. I liked being able to remember about all those things. I could really lay out such a giant story into a page and a half. [I like it when] you can really wrestle with ideas.

A place for process. Any writer's work unfolds over time, starting with incubation, changing into notes, undergoing revision, settling into its near-final form, and zigzagging between these different moments as well. In fact, knowing how to pursue the work of writing is as much a part of what is learned as is the sense for where a semicolon goes or how dialogue ought to sound.

At the very simplest level, many of the portfolio pieces are fat stacks of pages that tell the story of the piece's evolution. Such unusual data allow students as well as teachers to form new questions about writing development. Rather than just comparing final pieces, students can investigate how their own revising or editing skills changed over time. Since their pieces don't disappear, students can afford to let ideas incubate and to take enormous trouble over the small changes that distinguish a third draft from a handsomely crafted final work. Student Pat Stone provides a wonderful instance of this sort of care in her series of drafts for a poem about a goose standing in a field (fig. 1).

A developmental point of view. It is no accident that many of the anecdotes offered here take the form of narratives, full of words like *then*, *before*, and *later*. The use of portfolios engages students in constructing a story—a long-term account—of what and how they learn. As they page through their collections of writing in April or June, they are struck by what they have learned. But that in itself is a story. With time, experience, and conversation, students' ability to read their own portfolios with depth and understanding also develops. Early on, students appraise their own work using only standard and flat-footed criteria: neatness, length, or the grade written at the top. As little as six months later, they notice and care about a widened

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range of characteristics: how effective a story is, how unusual the words in a poem are, whether the ideas and arguments in an essay are sharp. Moreover, their judgment is variegated; they know a piece can open with fireworks and fizzle in closing. They can point out moments where their writing sails and where it "got away."

What emerges is not just insight about paragraphs or pieces. Talking to students at the end of the school year, one finds that they know their own histories as writers. As one young poet, Justin Brown, remarked:

When I look back, I see my poems were very basic in the beginning; they were all rhymed haiku because that was all I knew about. Then I experimented with going with the feelings or ideas . . . don't kill yourself going over the rhymes, go with what you feel. I did that for two months. Then I started compacting them, shortening them to make deeper meaning. I could see that it would make more of a point if I washed out the *the's* and *and's* and *if's*. Now I am working on something different—the morals. If one day my mom's car broke down, I might write that night about how a fish got caught, or the feeling of not being able to swim. I am not trying to write how I feel only, but metaphors . . .

Two Faces

This study has two faces. One is a wholly different way of assessing writing. Within the framework of this project, teachers have begun to talk about using portfolios to widen the range of what they consider development. They don't ignore mechanics and usage, but the talk heats up as they move on to asking one another how they can judge what a student knows about the writing process; how well a student understands the demands of writing

journals, poems, and essays; how many risks a young writer is taking.

At the same time, teachers are using these same portfolios to look at their own skills and development. At least once a year, a letter arrives in the mail asking teachers to select three to five folders that illustrate exceptional, moderate, or limited progress in writing. The letter alerts teachers that a supervisor will be coming to talk with them about writing. The conference is a time to describe how they are teaching a variety of types of writing, how they encourage students to engage in the several phases of the writing process, and how they comment on and critique student work. Several weeks later, the supervisor and the teacher grab a cup of coffee before school or in a "prep" period and then sit down to "do portfolios." These discussions may be a teacher's chance to talk about what portfolios contribute to student assessment, or the portfolios may serve to highlight places where a particular teacher struggles. But, in either case, during that half hour, teachers

take active responsibility for portraying *their* work; they examine many facets of teaching; they don't use tests or first-draft writing samples but evidence of the writing process and the back-and-forth between teacher and student. The result is not a score on a teachers' exam. Instead, it is a reflection on a sample of work. Like student portfolios, it offers a humane, useful, and generative portrait of development—one that a teacher, like a student, can learn from long after the isolated moment of assessment. □

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Portfolio is the quarterly newsletter of the PROPEL project. It prints writings by teachers and researchers and provides samples of student work and the different

forms of assessment being developed. Available from Project Zero at the address below.

Recommended Readings

- Brandt, R. (December 1987/January 1988). "On Assessment in the Arts: A Conversation with Howard Gardner." *Educational Leadership* 45, 4: 30-34.
- Wolf, D.P. (1986). "All the Pieces That Go into It: The Multiple Stances of Arts Education." In *Aesthetics in Education: The Missing Dimension*, edited by A. Hurwitz. Mattituck, Md.: Americon Press.
- Wolf, D.P. "Artistic Learning: What and Where Is It?" *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 22, 1: 144-155.
- Wolf, D.P. (December 1987/January 1988). "Opening Up Assessment." *Educational Leadership* 45, 4: 24-29.
- Zessoules, R. (1988). "A Better Balance." In *Beyond DBAE: The Case for Multiple Visions of Art Education*, edited by J. Burton, A. Lederman, and P. London. North Dartmouth, Mass.: Southeastern Massachusetts University.

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