

Finding the Value in Evaluation: Self-Assessment in a Middle School Classroom

Portfolios allow teachers to get to know their students—as readers, writers, thinkers, and as human beings.

... We must constantly remind ourselves that the ultimate purpose of evaluation is to enable students to evaluate themselves.

—Arthur L. Costa (1989)

Sarah was adamant. "They don't know me as a person and a writer. They don't know how I've improved." I watched as Sarah read the one mark on her writing sample—a "7." On a test mandated by our school district, Sarah had received a 7 out of 8, certainly a good score. But it didn't matter. "What does this tell me?" she continued. "I'm one less than an eight and one more than a six. So what?"

Sarah was right. The writing sample didn't show who she was as a person or a writer. And the response she received didn't help her. No one who had read her piece knew where she'd been, so how could any one tell how much she had grown? How sad, I thought, especially when all the evidence was right here in the classroom.

A Wealth of Information

The evidence was in Sarah's portfolio. In my classroom, portfolios have become each student's story of who they are as readers and writers, rich with the evidence of what they are able to do and how they are able to do it. Each portfolio is a collection of each student's best work.

I impose the *external* criteria for the portfolios—each student's two best pieces chosen during a six-week period from his or her working folder, trimester self-evaluations of process and product, and, at year's end, a reading/writing project. The students determine the *internal* criteria—which pieces, for their own reasons. I invite them to work on reading and writing from other disciplines and to include them in their portfolios, if they think the efforts are some of their best. Here are some examples. Joel's portfolio has a piece entitled "The King and His Achievements," a paper he

wrote for social studies but worked on in a remedial reading class and in English. Sara and Jennifer each included a children's book they wrote collaboratively about a little boy investigating tidal pools along the coast of Maine. It was written for science, based on their field trips, as part of their study of marine biology. In English class Jen wrote, while Sara, studying the work of Trina Schart Hyman and Jan Brett, drew the illustrations.

Teacher as Learner

My classroom was not always like this. It has evolved slowly. I used to make all the decisions about what the students read and wrote and what they learned from that reading and writing. Then I would test them on all the information.

But times have changed. I've been turning the responsibility for learning over to them—they choose what they write, what they read, and what they

Photographs by James Whitney

Two students at Oyster River Middle School in Durham, New Hampshire, discuss how to arrange their writing from most to least effective in their portfolios.



need to work on in order to get better at both. I invite them to try different genres of writing, and I share a variety of literature that I love with them. They used to keep writing folders and were judged on all their writing. Now they select the best pieces to revise and rework. The portfolio of best pieces is separate from the working folder.

My students, however, aren't the only ones who keep portfolios. I also keep a portfolio. My reasoning is that if I don't value what I ask my students to do, then they probably won't value it either. What's in my portfolio? An education article entitled "Seeking Diversity," a poem, a personal narrative about my mother's sewing, and a letter written to the governor nominating our parent group for a state award for support of our Arts in Education program. I begin my writing and reading with the students. I share my drafts in progress. If I'm going to trust and

value my students as learners, I have to trust my own possibilities as a learner.

Evaluation, the Last Holdout

For years I was the final decision maker about how well each student did. But then I began to wonder what would happen if I considered my students the best evaluators of their own writing and reading, both in progress and as a final product. I decided to find out. I not only let them choose their own topics, but I let them choose the pieces that were going best. So that they would have a selection to choose from, I asked them to write at least five rough draft pages a week. Further, I not only let them choose their own books, but I let them select the ones they wanted to respond or react to.

Over time, I began to see more diversity and depth to their writing, their reading, and their responses to literature. I discovered that the students knew themselves as learners

I impose the external criteria for the portfolios, and my students determine the internal criteria.



As students learn to critique their works, their abilities as writers and readers often deepen in the process.

better than anyone else. They set goals for themselves and judged how well they had reached those goals. They thoughtfully and honestly evaluated their own learning with far more detail and introspection than I thought possible. Ultimately, they showed me who they were as readers, writers, thinkers, and human beings.

As teachers/learners, we have to believe in the possibilities of our students by trusting them to show us what they know and valuing what they are able to do with that knowledge. The process of turning learning back to the students, from choice of topic or book all the way through to the evaluation of their own processes/products, produces students like Nahanni. I chose Nahanni, not because she had the best portfolio, not because she was the most articulate, but because she was a little better able to reflect on what she did. Through Nahanni's portfolio I want to show the possibilities in diversity, depth, growth, and self-evaluation. This kind of evidence shows the value in evaluation.

One Student's Story

Nahanni's portfolio is typical of the diversity and depth of writing I am now seeing in my students. She has 10 final drafts: 3 poems, a personal narrative, a character sketch, a letter, a pen and ink drawing, a play, an essay, and a picture of her final project for the year, an acrylic collage representing her interpretation of the book *Night* by

Elie Wiesel. Everything that contributed to the final draft—lists, rough drafts, sketches of ideas—is attached to the final draft of each piece. Nahanni's evaluations of herself as a writer and reader are also in the portfolio, just as they are for all my students.

Nahanni ranked the following poem as her best piece for the year.

Looking across rows of music stands
I see an ordinary face—
a quarter note on a sheet of paper.
I know the face has laughed and
cheered,
and laughed some more,
and cried.

Violins raise, bows sway, and the ordinary
quarter note frowns and comes alive.

The lone quarter note is gently carried off
the page and lightly danced onto the air.
Hidden behind Beethoven's Fourth, one
little

second plays along.
A royal theme, issued from the staff,
fades, then crescendos to a wail.
My loving ear fills up with sounds
of staccato arpeggios, an Allegro,
and a triste.

And so, to my dear little—quote—
unimportant second,
I give my ballad of soft support.
Bring your laughter and your cheers,
your sorrows, and your fears,
We'll laugh together, heal the pains,
use up some tears.
We'll share in both.

Nahanni reflected on her poem and why she chose it:

My best piece is my best . . . because it meant the most to me. I used music to portray a friendship. I think there are layers of understanding, and to enjoy the

poem you don't need to understand all the layers.

The piece that is the least effective means nothing to me. It was an assignment. That's why the pieces that are my best are so important. I chose topics that were important to me.

Now I know that in order to write something well, you have to care about it. The first important thing is that you like a piece of writing, then you worry if anyone else likes it . . . I've learned to add detail to get something across. I've learned to care about my writing and write in order to resolve things, because even when I read a piece over, I always learn something.

I think writing is like visiting places; you see different things each time. You read a piece of writing and you think you read it and saw it, but then you go back and read it again and see new things . . .

Writing isn't just a school subject. It's part of how we think. I write because I need to figure out what I'm thinking.

Nahanni's final version of the poem, though, is a far cry from her first draft, which looked like this:

Letter to my best friend—You are my very best friend and I think you know I don't mean that in what you'd call a "superficial" way . . . It feels like we are always one person. I want you to know how much I care about you. Never forget me, I will NEVER forget you. The times with you will never leave me.

How did she get from this early draft to a quite different final version? For some insight, let's look at Nahanni's second draft, exactly as she wrote it:

Two worlds collided and they could never ever tear us apart.

Two hearts that can beat as one, there aren't a single thing we can't overcome. We're indestructible.

The light of a billion stars pales
As we comfort each other . . .
. . . the universe and a billion stars—and you and me.

Crowded there with others or alone.
At times it seems—we will always be together

So bring your laughter and your cheers
your sorrows, and your fears.
We'll heal the pains, use up some tears,
we'll share in both.
poem or letter? [She asks herself.]

Nahanni explained that her first breakthrough on this piece came when she answered my question, "Where did you first think of writing this to your friend?" She said she looked up across rows of music stands and saw her friend—this ordinary

face. I asked, "What's an ordinary face look like?"

She continued. "Like . . . like . . . a quarter note on a sheet of paper. . . just an ordinary note." And Nahanni was off. She made lists of musical terms. Played with them in phrases. Literally cut the phrases apart and made two piles—the ones that related best to what she was trying to say about friendship and the ones that didn't feel right to her. She read drafts in progress to her peers and to me for responses to what was working, to hear the questions we had, and to get suggestions.

I prompted her to elaborate on the poem's development.

In my first draft I didn't tie in much about music to my theme of a person—or face. I made a quarter note be the face. I use a piece of music to interpret what the face fears and what I feel about that face. I feel now that what I have to say is more important than trying to shape and twist the words into specific phrases and lines. This is one of my best pieces because I've worked so hard, making all the words say exactly what I want to mean.

At the beginning of the year, Nahanni had set three goals for herself: to try writing poems (which, as we have seen, she has done), to write longer pieces, and to send a piece off for consideration for publication. To meet her second goal, she wrote a prose piece entitled "Melted Wax." At first, she had steered away from writing long pieces because she was "afraid of losing peoples' focus, or maybe I'm afraid I'll lose my own focus." She discussed how the piece came together:

I was brainstorming all the positives and negatives in my life. . . . trying to think of a way to write down what I thought of Linda's death. One of the things that makes the piece good is the layers of depth that people can find. Most people can come up with the point of the candles . . . but if they don't, they can still enjoy it. I changed the lead all around. My first lead was dull and didn't say much. Now it starts with a quote and pulls people in better.

Nahanni also accomplished her third goal: to send a piece for publication. The poem she selected had gone through as many changes as her first poem.

My students choose what they write, what they read, and what they need to work on in order to get better at both.

I like this poem, but it doesn't have that much meaning to me. I sent it to *Meryl's Pen*, and that's what they told me. I knew they would. I think I'll make it how they'd like it since if it's changed, it's not a problem for me because I don't think it's perfect the way it is. It's not for me that I want to keep it that way. Like the poem I wrote for my friend, "Looking Across Rows of Music Stands." I wouldn't change that no matter what anybody thinks. It's for me—and my friend.

This year Nahanni started reading 30 books—and finished 29. Her favorites were: *The Little Prince* (de Saint Exupery), *One Child* (Hayden), *The Chocolate War* (Cormier), *Beyond the Chocolate War* (Cormier), *Night* (Wiesel), and *The Princess Bride* (Goldman). She has formed some definite opinions on the subject of reading:

In order to be a good reader, I think you must read a lot and think about what you are reading—how it relates to you, what the writer wants you to think versus what you really get out of it. The responses I got to my reactions to the books were written or asked in such a way that I feel my ideas are important, and that makes me think more.

I wanted to read faster . . . I don't think I accomplished this, except that now I read more than I did before. I don't think [reading faster] was a really important goal. I wanted to understand more, and I think I've done that.

Nahanni believes that if a book is really good, you can learn a lot about what the author thinks about life. In a good book, the meaning is made clear so that "I think I've discovered it on my own, not so it was told to me."

Nahanni doesn't think she consciously connects reading and writing,

but listen to what she consciously does:

I think I've been looking a lot more for metaphors and hidden meanings in my reading. This is a result of my change in writing—or vice-versa. I think that now I look for things that aren't so obvious. I've discovered that those things mean so much to me. The words that are unwritten teach much stronger than words on paper.

Self-Evaluation, Self-Discovery

I don't have to be the sole evaluator of Nahanni's writing and reading. She's far better at it than I am. And the better she knows her own process as a writer and reader, the better she becomes at both. But I *can* evaluate Nahanni's growth as a writer and reader if I have to. I have all the evidence in front of me in her drafts of writing from rough to final, in her responses and reactions to what she's reading, and in her self-evaluations of herself as a writer and reader. As teachers, we must listen first to the perceptions our students have of themselves—and address what they think they can and cannot do. From what Nahanni showed me, I wrote the following narrative about her growth as a learner:

Nahanni has become an independent learner who reads and writes for her purposes because she wants to become better at what she does. Her reading and writing show me she is engaged in the excitement of learning. She is a keen observer of life around her, often finding topics because she is always looking. She has an acute sense of detail, able to see, hear, smell, touch, and feel things that many of us miss, all with a sensitivity to the human factor. She is a caring, sensitive young woman who leaves an impact.

As a writer Nahanni knows how to find a topic, how to play with words until they say exactly what she means, how to seek help for revision, how to use a variety of resources, how to ask questions, and how to answer them. She is not afraid to take risks with new genres. She has tried poetry this year, while still attempting a variety of prose pieces. There is always a meaning to her writing—a reason to read it. She has a message for her reader, because the message is always for her, first.

Nahanni has an acute sense of audience. After receiving a rejection from one magazine I asked her if she wanted to revise the piece and resubmit it. "No," she said, "this wasn't for the magazine anyway." Another piece she will revise because it wasn't for her alone.

Her images are fresh and vivid. She searches for precise words. Her dedication is evident in her willingness to revise until pieces say exactly what she means, in the appropriate format. She grapples with big issues: friendship, control, love, prejudice, hate, fear, uniqueness.

She is a thoughtful reader who reads a variety of books for a variety of reasons: some to make her think, others just for fun. She knows how to take meaning to and meaning from a book. She relates her own life experiences to the experiences she draws from books. She comprehends, an-

alyzes, reflects, contrasts, compares, synthesizes, wonders, questions, and criticizes literature.

I believe her writing has changed her perceptions as a reader. At first she just wondered why authors did certain things, now she reflects on how she would have done it differently. Nahanni writes and reads to find out what she is thinking.

Adapting Portfolios for Large-Scale Use

Jay Simmons

Current large-scale methods of assessing writing ability operate with little real engagement by teachers or students. They also yield unnaturally low scores, especially for weaker students, fail to describe how writers of differing ability actually behave, and offer no instructional strategies tailored to specific achievement groups.

My research team in Durham, New Hampshire, has successfully pilot-tested an alternative to holistically-scored, timed writing samples that corrects these shortcomings without added cost. Our results indicate that self-selected portfolios of their best work are significantly better than timed tests in estimating students' writing abilities.

Our research team used portfolios to measure production, perception, and reflection (as suggested by Howard Gardner (Brandt 1988))¹ across a population of 27 randomly selected 5th graders. They chose their three best pieces finished during the school year and then wrote a timed-test sample, all of which we rated holistically.

For the portfolio assessment, we recorded such factors as paper length, mode of discourse, and range of modes included in the portfolio. Both students and raters listed strengths of the papers, so that we might see how well student reflections on the qualities of their papers matched those of adult raters.

When we compared the timed-test scores with the median score in the portfolio assessment, we found that timed tests significantly underestimated writing ability, especially of the weaker writers. Students who scored 2 or 3 on the timed test averaged 4.7 on the median portfolio piece, the same as those who scored 4 or 5 on the timed test!

Portfolio assessment identified writing habits associated with certain performance levels: those scoring highest produced longer, more varied portfolios. When students limited their range of modes of discourse, they relied on narrative, a form learned earlier in school. The lower the test score, the more the writer chose narrative exclusively for the portfolio.

Teachers can use the information that the portfolio assessment makes available about the behaviors and attitudes of writers of differing abilities to tailor their instruction. For example, those scoring lowest on the test seem to need vocabulary development and practice choosing shorter tasks when time is limited. The average writers in our 5th grade sample need to expand the range and depth of their writing choices, while emphasizing the overall flavor of the work. In narratives this may mean developing characters and motivating plot developments.

In 1989-90, Seacoast Educational Services of Somersworth, New Hampshire, a consortium of 12 school districts, will collect and analyze portfolios of 5th, 8th and 11th graders by randomly selecting a representative subset of the approximately 4,000 students in the population. Although both timed-test and writing folder pieces will be included, only one testing session will interrupt the instructional year.

Our field test scored just over 100 papers; the Seacoast project will handle more than 1,500. This will give the 12 districts more accurate and valid scores and more descriptive information about their students' writing. It will give their teachers statistical profiles of the writing behavior of the students and a more refined version of a naturalistic model for large-scale writing assessment through portfolios.

¹R. Brandt, (December 1987/January 1988), "On Assessment in the Arts: A Conversation with Howard Gardner," *Educational Leadership*, 45: 30-34.

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What Can Teachers Do?

Will the portfolio concept work in every classroom? Yes, but certain conditions must be present. First, students must be immersed in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Second, they need to be given time to do so in large blocks. Third, they must be given choices about what they are doing. And, fourth, they must receive positive response to their ideas.

Once these conditions exist, teachers can introduce the concept of portfolios: as places where students collect evidence of who they are as readers and writers. It's also a great idea to keep and share your own portfolio. The more I discover what I can do, the higher my expectations are of what kids can do. They seldom disappoint me. Second, so that your students have a quantity of writing and reading from which to make their selections, it's a good idea to ask them to produce, say, five rough draft pages of writing a week and to read for at least a half hour each night. Third, each trimester (other teachers might choose other time periods), ask your students to arrange their writing from most effective to least effective and to evaluate it by considering the following questions:

- What makes this your best piece?
- How did you go about writing it?
- What problems did you encounter?
- How did you solve them?
- What makes your most effective piece different from your least effective piece?
- What goals did you set for yourself?
- How well did you accomplish them?
- What are your goals for the next 12 weeks?

Finally, if you have to grade your students, base the grade on goals set

and achieved as evidenced in the portfolio of only their best work.

The Kind of Evaluation That Matters

Nahanni is not the exception in my class. She is becoming the norm. She is motivated and persistent, and she cares about learning. She reads and writes for real reasons. Through her portfolio, I know her as a reader, writer, thinker, and human being, not as a "5" or a "7." Through their portfolios, I know all my students. They, like Nahanni, are articulate learners because they continually *practice* discussing what they know and how they know it: with me, their peers, and with the community. They do so, for example, by sharing with other grade levels, teaching teachers at writing workshops, and publishing locally and nationally.

Learning to make meaning in writing and reading is not objective, as our evaluation systems would seem to indi-

Portfolios give teachers insights into their students' growth not possible through traditional assessment measures.

cate. We must become more flexible in our assessment of students' work. When kids are given choices in what they read and what they write, and time to think about what they are doing, their writing and reading get better. When we trust them to set goals and to evaluate their

learning in progress, we will begin to realize that they know much more than we allow them to tell us through our set curriculums and standardized tests. If our goals are to keep students reading and writing, to help them get better at both, and to help them become independent learners, then we must nurture self-evaluation of writing and reading in progress. This is the kind of evaluation that matters—because it is for Nahanni, for Joel, for Sarah. Who else is evaluation for? □

Reference

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