

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

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