

Trends

Reading

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Setting Directions for Language Arts Portfolios

Portfolios are now being tested and tried as a form of product assessment for determining students' reading and writing development. For example, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has included in its plans the pilot testing of portfolios to assess students' reading and writing abilities. And some colleges and universities are asking students to submit portfolios of their writing as part of their entrance review requirements.

Before portfolios become a viable alternative to multiple-choice tests, we should consider the purposes of keeping portfolios. Portfolios have been part of the instructional program for decades. They encourage students and teachers to discuss the collected samples of students' writing. Some teachers include students' reading logs and their notes and reactions to what they have read. Portfolios such as these provide occasions for a teacher and a student to examine and critique the student's reading and writing skills and interests.

But this informal use of portfolios in classroom instruction seems contrary to their use for assessment. Are we now to use portfolios containing only *samples* of the semester's work to arrive at some judgment as to how well this student is performing? Portfolios could become collections of materials that students and teachers have re-worked until they are no longer representative of the student's ability—or worse yet, not even predominantly the student's effort. Then educators may not be able to convince the board of education and a skeptical public that these collections are valid student products.

To get around the matter of validity and independence, some proponents of portfolios advocate that items selected for inclusion be labeled with the date they were written or read, the

conditions under which each sample was written, and some note from the student as to his or her reaction to the work sample. Such a process would necessitate more paperwork and would interfere with the use of portfolios as a natural part of instruction. The portfolio could become nothing more than a folder in a teacher's file cabinet in which special work samples are collected.

Perhaps advocates of the use of portfolios for assessment believe there should be two portfolios: one, which the students keep as part of their daily work, a sort of holding bin from which the special evaluation samples are to be selected and placed in a second portfolio. If so, then all the work samples in the holding bin should be labeled so that the ones selected for the evaluation folder would include labels. Such an approach sounds very confusing and complicated.

Portfolios have appeal as authentic assessments of students' literacy development. However, if we try to make them serve as product assessment tools, we may lose their usefulness for

improving students' daily work. The greatest value of portfolios in classrooms is that they allow students to discuss their reading and writing with teachers—and through such discussions to become reflective about their own learning.

As we move toward the use of integrated language arts portfolios in classrooms, we must determine which purposes they serve best. Present practice suggests portfolios can effectively:

- provide students the means to reflect on their own reading and writing by ensuring access to a wide range of their own reading and writing activities;
- supply teachers with a range of reading and writing activities so they can plan reliable and thoughtful instruction;
- allow opportunities for students and teachers to discuss literacy activities;
- support more valid, reliable assessment of a student's literacy development through the use of a range of performance activities in both reading and writing.

If portfolios can accomplish these goals, they will be seen, first, as an important aid to informal ongoing classroom assessment—with a strong emphasis on encouraging students to think about their own reading and writing. Second, they will be seen as a supplement to standardized tests, not a replacement for them. However, if the emphasis is placed on portfolios as the sine qua non of achievement, the portfolio process will confront all of the confidentiality/security/reliability problems of traditional assessments—and they will lose their value as informal assessments. Portfolios are too important to allow that to happen. □

Before portfolios become a viable alternative to multiple-choice tests, we should consider the purposes of keeping portfolios.

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