

How Portfolios Motivate Reluctant Writers

An Oregon elementary teacher finds that personal and classroom portfolios make her 4th grade students want to write.

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Brian doesn't like to write. Brian doesn't write. When Brian *does* write, it's under duress, and he doesn't share his writing. Brian has problems with handwriting, with spelling, and shows no motivation for change.

I've taught children like Brian for six years.¹ They are average to bright students whose deficit in written language requires a pullout program. They are behind their age-mates with little hope of catching up. Last year, writing served no function for these children other than to document their failure. This year, their writing has purpose. The students have found their voices as writers. What happened?

The First Portfolio

Last year, I began working with a technique called *portfolio assessment*. As a whole language enthusiast, I sought approaches that were holistic, student-centered, and authentic. I was particularly interested in portfolio assessment because it encourages self-assessment (Paulson et al. 1991, Tierney et al. 1991). I read as much as I could find and enrolled in a class offered through the local education service district.

I had already begun to teach my students to score their writing using the analytical writing assessment

system (AWA) used statewide here in Oregon. (See Spandel and Stiggins 1990 for examples of this approach.) While teaching them *analytical* assessment may sound inconsistent with my holistic philosophy, I felt that my students could become better, more confident writers if they were familiar with how others would judge their writing. On test day in the past, they had been victims. I wanted to help take the mystery out of testing and allow them to take control.

The assignment in my education class was to create a portfolio about me. This was appealing because I don't like to subject my students to

something I haven't tried first. I decided to create a portfolio that would demonstrate the accomplishments of my students as a group. (See Bird 1990 for a discussion of teacher portfolios.) I organized my portfolio, using the Cognitive Model for Assessing Portfolios (CMAP, Paulson and Paulson 1991). The model involves stating a rationale for the portfolio, identifying specific goals, setting standards, selecting contents, and evaluating the results.

An important portfolio concept is that of the *stakeholder*, anyone who has an interest in or is made vulnerable by what is in a portfolio (Paulson and Paulson 1991). The primary stakeholder is the portfolio's owner; a secondary stakeholder is anyone else with a direct interest in the portfolio. As the primary stakeholder in my portfolio, I decided it was to be a collection of writing samples that documented my students' development, but, more important, a way to assess both my students as writers and myself as a teacher.

The Teacher Becomes a Student

While I work with many special education students, one group of six 4th grade students in a writing pullout program seemed perfect for a composite portfolio. I told them that assembling a portfolio was part of a class I was taking, and I asked for their help. All six volunteered to share their writings!

I told them I wanted samples of their writing that would show how much they had learned during the year. (This process is similar to *coinvestigation*, a technique developed by Scar-

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damalia and Bereiter 1983 to encourage students to engage in self-reflection.) They understood that I was also a student completing an assignment and became enthusiastic contributors to my project. In the past, their writing had been ignored or the occasion for negative feedback. Now, for the first time, someone could actually benefit from something they had written.

I let my students, who were now secondary stakeholders in the process, select the material to include in my portfolio. This may appear to be a risky move, but I had three goals. I wanted them to include pieces that they felt good about, to gain ownership in the portfolio process, and to learn to evaluate their own work.

Suddenly we were working together. I had become their collaborator instead of their teacher. From October to December, my students selected samples of their writing. We discussed their selections and recorded their reasoning on 3x5 cards, which also went into my portfolio. As time passed, we began to review the

contents, looking for growth in how they expressed themselves. Was the writing getting clearer? Were the stories getting longer? Were the AWA scores higher?

The Students Ask to Keep Portfolios

Then a very interesting thing happened: the students began pressuring me to let them create their own writing portfolios. How could I refuse?

There are countless ways for students to organize portfolios. The format doesn't matter as long as students use the process for self-reflection and evaluation and take an active role in selecting material and maintaining their portfolios. Of course, their selections must also meet curricular and instructional priorities.

When my students began creating their own portfolios, they became the primary stakeholders, and I became a secondary stakeholder. Their portfolios were a means through which I could provide feedback, monitor their progress, and report to parents. I held

individual conferences with students to help them write rationales, personal goals, and standards for their portfolios. Although all my students stated similar rationales for their portfolios, "to improve my writing," individual variation appeared when they described specific goals; for example:

I want to make my stories longer and more fluent. I want my AWA scores to go up.

I want my punctuation to improve.

I want to improve my imagination.

The works that the students selected also showed variety, but within an overall structure. All chose to include rough and final drafts of writing projects, an approach they had obviously modeled from my portfolio. Students who selected skill-oriented goals often included writing checklists and punctuation guides. Others, who wanted to improve for different reasons, wrote self-reflective statements on those goals.

Portfolio assessment soon became a major undertaking in the classroom.



Since finding their writers' voices through portfolios, Darlene Frazier's 4th graders have been enthusiastic about putting their thoughts on paper. Here she and some students take a break from writing.

Instruction and assessment came together into a single activity. Students evaluated their progress each time they looked at previous rough drafts, held conferences with me, or participated in peer review. Gradually, they developed the habits of reflecting on their learning and tracking their progress.

Students' Confidence Grows

At the beginning of the year, I recorded the students' comments (they weren't ready to write them down yet) about papers they had written. At the end of the year, I asked them to write a letter to explain to an outsider what their portfolios conveyed about their learning.

In October, a student said: "I think my story has a good start. I need to add more ideas." In May, she was not only more articulate, but also persuasive, "I think I improved in my cursive writing and my AWA scores. If you do not believe me, look in my portfolio. It has proof. Just read my first story and my last."

A student who said, "I think my

ideas weren't too good. I need to expand my words and put more expression into it. I think I wrote pretty large sentences though" revised his opinion at the end of the year:

In the beginning of the year I got 2.8 in my AWA scores. Now I usually get a score of 3.5. My punctuation has improved. At the beginning of the year I did not put periods at the end of the sentences in my rough drafts. Now my rough drafts have the periods and capital letters where they should be. Spelling is still very hard for me, but I think I am slowly getting better at it.

As the year progressed, confidence grew, and the students began to find their voices as writers. Clearly, these students were learning that they could benefit from something they had written. One student summed up his presentation of his portfolio with these words:

I think I have good handwriting, and I write good stories! I also get good grades in this class, but let's

talk A+. Well, I think I did good, and if you don't believe me, read my story "Who's There?"

The Value of Portfolios

The greatest asset of portfolios, I've found, is in self-evaluation. Portfolio assessment offers students a way to take charge of their learning; it also encourages ownership, pride, and high self-esteem.

My experience may offer an additional insight into using portfolios for program assessment. Many educators are concerned that using portfolios for external assessment may destroy their usefulness as teaching tools. Imposing outside demands *can* limit the personal freedom that students need to grow and to develop a sense of ownership. On the other hand, portfolios are a rich source of authentic information that we need in order to assess what is really happening in writing programs.

The two-tiered approach to assessment described here suggests that it may be possible to preserve both. For their personal portfolios, students set individual goals, select the pieces, and reflect on their work. They are free to use their portfolios to understand themselves as writers.

At the same time, I ask them to help me assemble a class portfolio, a

For our class portfolio, students help me assemble works that reflect their achievements on district goals.

composite of works that reflect their achievements on the district's goals. This not only removes a threat to students' ownership of their individual portfolios, but it gives them a more neutral forum through which to grapple with the challenges posed by external standards. This composite portfolio contains the information I use for program assessment.

Remember Brian, the prototype recalcitrant writer? Over the year, Brian began to write and to share his writing with others. His portfolio began to document success rather than failure. His voice, which had always been so forceful on the playground, had begun to come through in his writing as well. □

¹Although we worked together to conceptualize and write this article, we

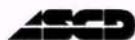
wrote in the first person singular because our story is best told in the voice of the teacher who taught the class, Darlene M. Frazier.

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