

Using the Computer as a Reading Portfolio

By assessing their reading skills, 5th graders are taking ownership of their learning.

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Standard measurements don't talk back nearly as well as kids do. With the help of a computer, we are assessing our 5th graders' reading progress by recording their voices as they read aloud, then saving the students' self-evaluations along with the recordings in a computer portfolio.

Bellerive Elementary, in suburban St. Louis, has been using a literature-based, process language approach for five years. Daily Writing and Reading Workshops in K-6 classes incorporate elements of both whole language and Donald Graves' process methods.¹

Though pleased with the progress of our students in language arts, our 5th grade team nonetheless has experienced the teacher's old frustration: how do we pull students *inside* the learning process, so education isn't something that happens to them, but something they make happen?

Last year, Bellerive made portfolios a permanent part of each student's records. With the computer program *The Grady Profile - Portfolio Assessment*,² we scan and record two pieces of writing (one in September and one in June) and log the books each child reads during the year. The program also helps us maintain assessment checklists by subject and provides room for extensive teacher/student comments.

With support from the Parkway School District and a Chapter II grant, we have extended the project to include all three 5th grade classes. Each teacher has a Macintosh computer, a microphone, and a printer.

Our goals are to involve students in self-evaluation and critical thinking, promote students' ownership of the learning process, and make reading "samples" part of student portfolios.

As part of our Reading Workshops, we model and discuss good oral reading skills. At an initial reading conference, we explain that the computer can help students hear how they read and help them decide what to work on in reading. Each student chooses a brief passage to read: his or her own writing, published material, or a sample paragraph from *The Grady Profile*. After reviewing the passage silently, the student reads it into the microphone.

Before and after they listen to the playback, we talk about how well students think they read and where they can improve. We type their self-evaluations in *The Grady Profile*. As their summaries show, students can assess their performance accurately and select appropriate skills to work on:

I stopped at periods and used a little expression. To be the best reader I

need to stop stuttering at words. To accomplish this I need to look at the words more carefully. I read at home every night. I read to my mom and she reads to me. This helps me.

Reading conferences take 5-7 minutes per student. With the computer, everything is there: the microphone, reading sample, and assessment log. The student's reading is stored on the disk, which avoids having 30 separate audiotapes.

Today's 5th graders are wired for the electronic age. They have computers at home and associate them with challenge and skill. After a reading conference, a student said, "I've seen computers with a computer voice, but never one with *my* voice." A teacher isn't likely to find a juicier carrot to dangle in front of a reluctant learner.

When students hear their own words and make immediate assessments, they become discerning critics, aware of the learning *process* as well as the product. They can state *why* they do well, not "It's good," but "I lowered my voice at the end of sentences."

Being one-on-one with the teacher makes students feel special and provides teachers another chance to individualize instruction. The additional reading conference time extends the benefits of writing conferences because it focuses attention on a specific need and builds student confidence. We know our students better than we have ever known them.

Self-assessment gives students control. Recording their evaluation, not our judgment, transfers ownership to the rightful owner of learning . . . the student. □

¹D. Graves, (1983), *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann).

²*The Grady Profile*—available from Aurbach and Associates, Inc., 8233 Tulane Ave., St. Louis, MO 63132—is a Macintosh, HyperCard application requiring two megabytes of internal memory and a hard drive.

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