

Revising Our Practices

How Portfolios Help Teachers Learn

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I REGULARLY TEACH A PRACTICUM FOR NEW TEACHERS OF WRITING, MOST of whom are first year graduate students and teaching assistants with little or no prior teaching experience of any kind. For these new teachers, many of whom were undergraduates only a few months earlier and are often only a few years older than their students, a major concern is their authority in the classroom. They are worried about whether they know enough to teach, whether their students will accept them as teachers, whether they will be able to handle any problems which might occur, and whether they will be able to make appropriate decisions in the classroom or in dealing with individual students. They are worried, that is, about all the things experienced teachers continue to worry about, but they have no base of experience which assures them that most of the time they will teach and interact with students successfully and responsibly. A central worry for these new teachers, students themselves and quite close to the undergraduate experience, is evaluating their students fairly. They understand that grades matter—that they help determine if a person will get into graduate or professional school, or get a good job, or in some cases simply stay in school—and they understand the anxiety and self-doubt low grades can cause even good students. They want to learn to assign grades fairly and appropriately and to be able to explain why they have assigned a particular grade should a student question them. And, like all good teachers, they want to establish a learning environment in their classes which encourages and motivates students, particularly those with less ability, rather than

reinforcing students' often negative views of themselves as poor writers. Many wish to do even more; they want to decenter the authority in the classroom, to redefine—to the extent institutional constraints allow—their role and the roles of students.

In recent years, I have encouraged the new teachers I work with to use portfolios in their writing classes as a way to address several of the concerns I have just identified. It is my experience¹ that portfolios allow new teachers of writing to develop both confidence and skill, not simply as evaluators, but as classroom teachers, by temporarily relieving their anxiety about grading and allowing them to focus on learning to teach. In this chapter, I want to describe how we use portfolios in English 502, a graduate practicum in the teaching of composition, then discuss how portfolios contribute to the development of the new teachers who take this course.

English 502 is a one-credit course which graduate teaching assistants must enroll in during their first year of teaching at Purdue. Each semester, the students meet weekly with their instructor or mentor. Because English 502 carries only one credit per semester, because it is a practicum, and because the primary interest of most of the students is how to teach the composition classes they are assigned, the focus of these weekly meetings is on the syllabus, the text, the writing assignments, and practical matters of planning classes, working with students, and evaluating writing. There is plenty to consider, discuss, and learn in these sessions, and portfolios have helped open a space for that learning to take place.

I explain our use of portfolios in the context of the process-based pedagogy of our course.² During the week prior to the first semester when the practicum meets for a series of intensive sessions to learn about the goals and teaching philosophy of the course, we discuss the rationale, new to many first-time composition teachers, behind teaching writing as a process. We write about and discuss our own writing practices and processes, talk about the kinds of generalizations we can make and researchers in cognitive processes have made about how people write, and examine how each writing assignment will be approached as a series of overlapping processes of planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Through these discussions, it becomes clear that writing courses are unlike many other courses at the university. Whereas in some science or math or social science courses there is a fairly discrete content to be studied and which students can often be tested on in similarly discrete chunks, students' learning in writing courses can best be evaluated at the end of the course after they have had as much time as the calendar allows to practice, get feedback, and improve.

We expect, in fact, that students who are working at their writing, who are spending time planning, writing and getting responses to drafts, and revising and editing, will be better writers at the end of the semester than they were at the beginning; and thus we assume that the most accurate and fair measure of what they have learned is one based on their writing at the end. Our approach then, is to assign five papers over the course of a sixteen-week semester, all of which are responded to by the instructor at least once during the course of the term, and to require students to submit a portfolio containing new revisions of a specified number of these papers near the end of the course. As is typical of portfolio-based courses, the early versions of papers are not graded; nor are the revised papers in the portfolios graded individually. The portfolio receives a single grade which makes up the largest part of the student's course grade though additional assignments, participation, attendance, and so on influence the final grade the student earns.

How does this use of portfolios benefit new teachers? How does it contribute to their learning? Most obviously, new teachers benefit by not feeling the pressures of assigning grades as they are learning what it means to teach and evaluate writing. They are relieved from wondering if the grade they assign the first paper is too low and potentially discouraging and unfair to the student or too high and thus either sending an inaccurate message to the student or beginning a spiral of grade inflation as the student's work improves. Without the pressure to get the grade right, instructors (and of course this is a benefit shared by the students) are able to focus their attention, both in our practicum and in their comments, on the writing itself. Instead of trying to decide if we can agree on the *grade* a paper should get, we can discuss what the paper accomplishes, what its weaknesses are, how it might be improved, and most importantly, how all of this can be most clearly, helpfully, and positively conveyed to the student. What occurs is a form of learning parallel to that we hope the students are experiencing: instructors are gaining experience, through practice, at reading and responding to student writing, and they, like their students, are doing so without the specter of a grade peering over their shoulders.

If portfolios only helped new instructors become more experienced, confident readers of and responders to student writing, I would say they're worthwhile. But I think there are other ways instructors can learn by using portfolios. In particular, I want to discuss how working with portfolios brings into sharp focus our definitions of the writing process and successful writing. And in doing so, I want to acknowledge the contributions

of Kathleen Yancey to this discussion since our email exchanges and conversations about this issue have been influential and helpful to me.

Portfolios allow us to consider the writing process in a broader context than the familiar planning, drafting, revising, editing concept of process does. While revision is an inherent part of portfolio approaches, the decision to use portfolios as the means of evaluating students' writing ability and development extends the process to include additional decision-making conditions: the *collection* of writing, *reflection* about that writing, the *selection* of pieces to be further revised for the final evaluation, the *revision* of those pieces, and finally, their *evaluation*. Each of these, often overlapping practices, contributes to both students' and teachers' extended understanding of what it means to write.

Collection is perhaps the most obvious element of portfolio use. The portfolio is, by definition, a collection of some or all of the writing students have done during the course. The very act of collection implies that what is valued in the writing course is not the individual written product, but instead development and improvement. For teachers, especially new teachers, as well as for students, such valuing may require a change in thinking about the purpose of the writing course—its major goal is not to teach students a particular set of skills or forms, each evidenced in a separate paper, but instead is concerned with continuing improvement, evaluated formally only because terms have ends. Teachers and students alike learn to view each piece as part of an ongoing process, and each piece can be considered as contributing to the student's development, not as a discrete marker of it.

Reflection can be considered in a variety of ways. On the one hand, reflection is an inherent part of revision. Whether students revise as a result of their own reflection about a version of a paper, or because of comments they have received from a peer or an instructor, the recognition that particular revisions can improve a paper requires reflection about that version and other possible versions it might become. Such reflection takes into account all of the matters we typically consider in revision: appropriateness for the rhetorical situation, clarity, organization, development, and style. In addition, reflection which leads to revision requires writers to consider the advice they receive about a piece—do they wish to accept the advice, do they agree with it, are they sufficiently invested in the piece to continue to work on it, and so on. Leaving such decisions up to the writer is a part of the decentering of authority many instructors want to bring about. A second form of reflection, one more exclusively the province of portfolio use, is the reflection

which occurs when students write letters or statements which accompany the portfolio they submit for evaluation. In these writings, students typically are asked to reflect upon the work they have done in the course, to look back on and analyze their strengths and weaknesses and their progress, to articulate what they think the portfolio says about themselves as developing writers, to explain why they have chosen to include the pieces they have and what they think they have accomplished in revising them. Here reflection begins to overlap and interact with selection, another part of the portfolio writing process which I will turn to shortly. Like the decisions students make about how and what to revise, the reflective statements shift to students some of the responsibility and authority for their work, particularly in this case how that work may be perceived by those who grade it.

Instructors, in deciding how they will use portfolios in their classes, must consider how much of the authority for selection they will keep and how much they will give to students. In many portfolio systems, students are required to include papers representing a variety of discourse genres or assignment types³ while in others, students are told the portfolio must contain a specific number of revised pieces, but they are to choose which pieces best represent their accomplishments during the course. Our practicum offers new instructors the opportunity to consider when one approach to selection may be preferable to another. In courses which focus on one or a very limited number of discourse types (for example, a course on the personal essay or review writing or autobiographical writing or argument), it makes sense for students to be responsible for selecting the pieces they revise for the portfolio, while in a course which introduces very specific genres (for instance, an introductory creative writing course in which students are asked to write both poetry and fiction or a course with some major projects and other less demanding work), the instructor will probably want to provide more specific guidelines for the contents of the portfolio.

Implied in each of these discussions is revision, though revision is so inherent a part of our conceptions of writing, of process, and of portfolios that it's easy to forget that new instructors may have little or no understanding of how to teach and encourage revision; that some may never have been required to revise, and, in fact, one could call an unrevised, unselected, unreflected-upon collection of writing, a portfolio. I would like to be able to say new teachers who use portfolios learn more about revision than they would if they graded each piece of writing when students submitted it, but I do not think that is necessarily the case. The principles

of revision I introduce to teachers, and they in turn teach their students, are no different now than they were before we used portfolios. But what is different, I think, is the attitude toward revision portfolios encourage. When instructors allow students to revise papers which have already been graded, the focus becomes the grade, not the quality of the paper itself. For instructors, this means writing comments which not only attempt to be comprehensive, but which also justify the grade the paper has received. Yet extensive, comprehensive comments are likely to confuse and overwhelm students. If, on the other hand, instructors choose to concentrate their comments on the most significant problems of a particular paper and to offer suggestions for specific kinds of revisions, students may complain if their revised grade is not significantly higher since, they point out, they've done what the teacher told them to do. Portfolios allow the attention of instructors and students to remain on the quality and improvement of writing. Instructors can tell students their comments will focus on concepts they have emphasized in class or on revisions which will make the largest improvements in the writing, and by the end of the course, students will have accumulated a repertoire of writing abilities they can call upon when they revise their work for their portfolios.

Finally, portfolios can contribute to teachers' understanding of the evaluation of writing. I indicated earlier that one of the benefits for new teachers who use portfolios is that they have time to gain confidence in their ability to evaluate writing. They do not have to assign a grade to a paper after they have only been teaching a few weeks; they have time to learn to evaluate before they assign grades which, whether we like it or not, matter enormously to students. New teachers are relieved, at least temporarily, from worrying about whether they are being too harsh or too generous, whether they are fair in their assessment of student work. In the practicum, we can discuss how we would assess a particular piece of writing, what we would tell the student about its strengths and weaknesses, and how it might be revised. And we can talk about the grade we might give the paper, working out standards gradually over time, so when the instructor does grade, he or she is more confident. But portfolios, as we are beginning to discover, carry with them their own specific evaluation issues, issues which themselves provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practices. I have touched already on one issue: portfolios suggest that progress, development, and improvement in writing should be evaluated with as long a view as possible, and that a student's performance on an individual paper is less important than what the student has achieved over the course of the term.

For many teachers, this view may make sense, but it is nevertheless quite different from traditional views of evaluation in education which support the grading of individual assignments. Grading each assignment reinforces the hegemony of the classroom since each graded assignment emphasizes the power of the instructor, while portfolios have the potential to contribute to decentering the authority. But it is not that simple since the decision to assign only a single grade to the portfolio may also reinforce the instructor's authority because the portfolio grade is assigned at the end of the term, when students have no further opportunity to improve. And portfolio grading may increase students' anxiety about their grades instead of relieving it. While individual grades may lead students to give up if they are dissatisfied with their evaluation or become complacent if they are pleased, grades do give students familiar indicators of where they stand. So instructors who use portfolio evaluation face decisions about how best to keep students informed of their progress, how to reduce the number of dramatic surprises for students whose portfolio grade is lower than they expected it to be, and so on. In our practicum we discuss a variety of options, always emphasizing the importance of specific, clear, and detailed comments on early drafts, but also individual conferences, especially after the first paper and around the middle of the term to be sure students are reading and understanding comments accurately. Another option some teachers adopt is to offer students the opportunity to receive a tentative, unrecorded, grade on one piece of writing during the semester. Still others give their students unofficial midterm grades, again emphasizing the tentative nature of those grades.

A second evaluation issue, one I have only recently become aware of, is what I refer to as "psyching out the port. prof." Recently a student told me that the lore in his class was that the way to get a high grade in a portfolio course was to write poorly early in the semester so it would be easier to make significant improvements in the revisions for the portfolio. Now, there is a part of me which admires the cleverness with which students have found a way to turn their resistance to a required composition class into accommodation which works to their benefit. But I also am idealistic enough to want students to make honest efforts on their assignments, and I see this attitude provides both me and the teachers I work with a pedagogical problem to work out. Where does the problem here lie? Certainly in part it is institutional, since composition is one of the few university-wide requirements at most schools; a requirement which, regardless of how we view it, carries some historical baggage as gatekeeper or at least as a hurdle to be leaped before one gets to the serious work. And in part it is societal since

we value measurable performance—grades and GPAs—over learning. The problem may also lie in our very notion of process—a notion which perhaps overprivileges revision, in which tangible signs of the process or particular concepts of revision are valued more than the result—the discourse the student produces. The comment from the student I referred to earlier and the following student’s comment suggest that students find our insistence on revision to be one more teacher-mandated step in getting a good grade: “I think portfolios put more pressure on me to botch my papers so it looked like I revised. I didn’t know how much I needed to scratch out to get a good grade” (Jill, quoted by Metzger and Bryant 1993, 284). These students’ comments suggest that we may need to revise our conceptions of process and revision to account for writers’ more idiosyncratic, yet successful approaches to both.

The final evaluation issue I want to raise is one which Kathleen Yancey has called “schmoozing.” I think “schmoozing” is a variation of psyching out the port. prof. “Schmoozing” is a phenomenon of the reflective writing which is often submitted with a portfolio. According to researchers at Miami University, the reflective letters which are a required part of the placement portfolios used there “affect the rating situation in a powerful way” (Sommers et al. 1993, 11). Their speculation is that these letters lead to more reliable ratings of portfolios because the “raters feel better prepared to read the remainder of a portfolio after reading the reflective letters” and because “they bring the personal back into the scoring situation” (Sommers et al. 1993, 11). Later in this article, the authors refer to a concept they call “glow”—the positive effect a particularly strong piece of writing may have on the rating of the portfolio—and cite as an example a reflective letter that ended like this:

Over the past few years, I’ve developed new attitudes toward writing, enjoying it rather than dreading it, and viewing each piece not as one completed but as a work-in-progress. There is always a more appropriate word (most often, the one that awakens me out of a sound sleep at 4 A.M. the day after the deadline), a better phrase, room for improvement. I find this stimulating, not frustrating. (Sommers et al. 1993, 21)

This is writing to warm the heart of a composition teacher, and as the Miami researchers point out, the rest of the portfolio “dropped off in quality” (Sommers et al. 1993, 21). They acknowledge that “it’s not hard to surmise that the very strong impression made by the opening letter must have influenced the raters positively” (Sommers et al. 1993, 21). “Schmooze,” I want

to suggest, is the often indistinguishable evil twin of “glow,” the telling-the-teacher-what-he-wants-to-hear that students may very well write in their reflective letters to set the stage for a positive evaluation. Individual teachers, no less than raters in placement or proficiency readings, must be sensitive to “glow” and “schmooze” (and, as the Miami researchers also point out, to the roller-coaster effect of uneven quality of individual pieces in a portfolio). I don’t want to suggest that we discount or mistrust students’ reflective writing; I mean that reflective letters, precisely because they reintroduce the personal, force us to recognize the subjective nature of our readings, always a particular concern for new teachers.⁴ When portfolios become an integral part of our courses and programs, we need to consider their implications, their benefits, and the new issues they raise. For teachers of writing, experienced and new alike, portfolios encourage us to be, in Donald Schon’s terms, “reflective practitioners.” Our use of portfolios in the seminar has given us the opportunity—demanded, in fact—that we reflect upon how our concepts about teaching, process, evaluation, and grading are intertwined. It has encouraged us to consider how an approach to evaluating student work can contribute to changes in the power and authority relationships between teacher and students—and the extent to which those changes actually shift authority or only modify how students respond to it. Portfolios thus have become a means by which we can examine and revise our practices.

Notes

1. Portfolio evaluation has been part of our composition program since 1983 when I introduced portfolios in our basic writing course. Their use in this course is described in my “Portfolio Practice and Assessment for Collegiate Basic Writers” in Yancey, *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom*, pp. 89-101.
2. For an extended discussion, see my “Portfolios and the New Teacher of Writing,” in Black et al., *New Directions in Portfolio Assessment*, pp. 219-229.
3. Belanoff and Elbow describe such an approach in “Using Portfolios to Increase Collaboration and Community in a Writing Program.”
4. See Glenda Conway, “Portfolio Cover Letters, Students’ Self-Presentation, and Teachers’ Ethics” in Black et al., *New Directions in Portfolio Assessment*, pp. 83-92. Lester Faigley points out “the strong preference for autobiographical essays” and personal experience papers in the student writing contributed to Coles and Vopar’s *What Makes Writing Good* by forty-eight professors of writing and linguistics. Faigley notes that these teachers cite what they identify as the “honesty,” “truth,” authentic voices, and strong sense of self in these essays (“Judging Writing, Judging Selves”).