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Establishing Sound Portfolio Practice *Reflections on Faculty Development*

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OUR FORMAL INTRODUCTION TO PORTFOLIOS BEGAN DURING THE 1992 TO 1993 school year when we were invited to participate on a district portfolio training committee. The committee provided us with the opportunity to train and collaborate with other teachers and administrators who were interested in integrating portfolios into their classrooms or schools. In addition to receiving books and materials on portfolios, our participation on the committee enabled us to attend conferences both in and out of state. In return, our district leader asked only that we do our best to implement what we were learning in our own classes and, when possible, share that knowledge with other interested teachers at our various schools. In addition, some of us might be called on from time to time to present at district or state teacher in-service workshops.

The two of us had known each other professionally for a number of years, but it was through working together on the training committee that we realized just how closely aligned our teaching philosophies and practices were. Throughout the course of our discussions, we not only recognized the potential for extending portfolio use within our own departments but also saw the possibility for portfolio sharing between schools. Because Bonneville Junior High is the main feeder school to Cottonwood High, providing 80 to 90 percent of Cottonwood's sophomore population in any given year, the idea of exploring the potential uses for portfolios between

schools seemed both plausible and full of possibility, especially since many of Geri's ninth grade English students ended up each year in Cheri's sophomore English classes.

Our intention in this chapter is to describe our experiences of experimenting with the application of portfolios in our own classrooms, training other teachers at our schools in portfolio practice, and extending the use of portfolios beyond the individual classroom and school. In formulating our thoughts for this piece, we found the discussion revolved around four main issues: What constitutes sound portfolio practice in the language arts classroom? In what ways can teachers work together to develop unified portfolio programs without infringing on the individual teacher's prerogatives? What necessary adaptations must be made as portfolios move between classes, teachers, or schools? And, finally, what roles do state or district mandates play in relation to grass roots portfolio practice?

Finding Our Separate Ways to Classroom Portfolios

Geri's interest in portfolio development began in 1990 when she read various articles on portfolio assessment and attended workshops focusing on ways to manage student-generated writing throughout the course of the school year. Previously, she kept student writing folders in her Bonneville Junior High classes in which she collected all pieces of student writing completed during the school year. Students informally viewed these folders in the spring and then took them home. A logical and practical extension of these folders led to Geri's trying to develop her use of portfolios with one or two classes each year. The portfolios extended the basic writing folder to include student selections of three to five pieces per semester, metacognitive activities, and peer, parent, and teacher reviews. This in turn led to further study of portfolio development and assessment as she gradually reached a level of comfort and flexibility, both philosophically and practically, as evidenced by her inclusion of portfolio work in each of her ninth grade English classes.

Meanwhile, at nearby Cottonwood High, Cheri's use of portfolios in the classroom had also been evolving. By the time she joined the district group, Cheri, too, had been collecting student writing in folders, one for each student, that she stored in a file cabinet in her classroom. The folders contained a wide variety of materials including freewrites, essays, and reading response writings and were excellent vehicles for displaying the

range and depth of student writing that Donald Graves writes about in the introduction to *Portfolio Portraits* (Graves 1992).

At the end of each semester, Cheri would distribute the folders to the students, most of whom were surprised at how the collection had grown. As a culminating activity, Cheri had her students compose a folder evaluation, an activity she constructed by combining elements from various reflective writing assignments found in James Moffat's *Active Voice* (Moffat 1991). Although the students initially complained about the assignment, their enthusiasm grew as they perused the contents of their folders. By the time the students completed the assignment, which each then read to the rest of the class, they had discovered or rediscovered much that was good about their writing, themselves as writers, and the uses of writing.

Cheri was more than satisfied with the results. In fact, she was sure she was "doing portfolios." But as she learned more about portfolios through the training committee and reading, in particular Kathleen Yancey's compilation *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom: An Introduction* (Yancey 1992b), she understood she had been depriving her students of one crucial element of sound portfolio practice: ownership. Because she was the gatekeeper of their folders, students had little access, except through her, to their work and, in turn, limited opportunity to control their writing processes and products.

Each of us had been preparing for the work ahead on the portfolio committee in her own way. As experienced writing teachers who believed in using writing for learning and for self-expression, who taught the writing process as the foundation of effective writing, and who relied on peer response as a means of improving our students' writing as well as their sense of community, adding portfolios to our classroom mix was a logical next step. As a result of our training and research, we both restructured our use of writing folders during the 1992 to 1993 school year so that they incorporated the key portfolio elements of collection, selection, and self-reflection. We also turned the responsibility of keeping folders organized and up-to-date over to our students. Having made these necessary changes in our own classes, we were ready to extend our support to those teachers at our schools who showed interest in instituting portfolios in their classes.

Portfolio Development on the Department Level

In 1993, Geri began talking through this course of portfolio investigation and experimentation with members of the Bonneville English department,

a few of whom subsequently initiated some type of writing portfolio development within their classrooms. One teacher incorporated portfolios within the context of poetry writing and study. Another used year-end selection and reflection to build portfolios from writing students had evaluated and reflected on over the course of the school year. Each type of portfolio included varying degrees of evidence of process writing, student selection, metacognition, and peer, parent, teacher, and self-evaluation.

These experiments sparked the interest of others within the department who began attending district in-service classes on portfolio development. Under Geri's leadership, her department agreed to incorporate some type of portfolio use within each classroom for the 1993 to 1994 school year. Over the course of that year, they met monthly to share, discuss, modify, and evaluate individual and grade-level portfolio proposals and practices. The four ninth grade teachers agreed to work closely to develop similar and complementary portfolio programs. Their intent was to assemble some form of a portfolio each term, building from term to term and culminating in two types of end-of-the-year portfolios.

The first type would be a personal portfolio which would involve student selection, self-reflection, and evaluation of various writing pieces chosen from the English class, learning logs, and reading responses, as well as some items selected from writing done across the curriculum or outside school. In particular, the ninth grade English team would work with the ninth grade geography teachers to develop cross-curricular writing projects.

The second portfolio would be built from the first and would extend beyond the classroom. This demonstration portfolio would be passed on to Cottonwood High School, which most of the ninth graders would be attending. It would include a letter of introduction and reflection (addressing each piece of writing included as evidence of writing development), one piece of writing focusing on some form of literary analysis, and two other selections. One of these pieces would show evidence of process writing. The purpose of these demonstration portfolios was twofold: to provide students a means of evaluating their own progress as writers throughout their ninth grade year and to give their tenth grade teachers a means of meeting incoming students and their writing abilities. There was no formal assessment for either type of portfolio. Students received full credit for completing their portfolios according to the general guidelines listed above.

At Cottonwood High School, events were proceeding along similar lines. The school received a substantial state education grant for the 1993 to 1994 school year, one feature of which proposed that all sophomore English

classes would become portfolio classrooms. During the summer of 1993, the six sophomore English teachers met to develop a guiding philosophy for portfolio use for the coming year. In preparation for their retreat, the teachers read selected materials Cheri culled from the training committee materials and books, along with additional information taken from the Yancey portfolio collection and Linda Rief's *Seeking Diversity* (Rief 1992).

They agreed that portfolios would be an effective tool for increasing student proficiency in English. As such, the portfolios would include all types of writing from in and out of class, reading response logs from students' outside free choice reading (as seen in Rief 1992), peer responses to writing, student self-evaluations of writing, and self-reflections on learning. All six teachers agreed to maintain the general principles and guidelines, although each was free to tailor her approach and the specific portfolio contents to match her individual class aims and student needs. The group planned to meet regularly throughout the year to share their experiences and to assess program development.

Focusing on Developing Practice

The Cottonwood project teachers all followed a similar procedure for managing portfolios. Student folders were stored in the classroom in crates labeled by class, but in contrast to what Cheri had done in previous years, students had access to them at any time and were free to take all or part of the folders home, provided they had what they needed for work in class each day. Students were responsible for keeping their folders organized and up-to-date. Each folder contained a writing log on which students recorded items as they added them to the folder. Students still wrote periodic evaluations of their folders, but because they had access to their folders at all times, reviews were scheduled more frequently than in the past and for a wider variety of purposes. All teachers noticed immediate benefits to this system, including the fact that students were better organized and completed more work. The folders did not necessarily reduce the paper load for teachers, but it did change the way the teachers approached writing with their students. Teachers did not read more although their students did write more. The folders brought control to the high volume of writing generated in the typical English classroom. Self-evaluation and peer review provided feedback to student writers even when teachers did not see papers.

Periodically throughout the year, teachers asked students to compose reflections about the contents of their folders and their language arts

progress in general. Depending on the purpose for the evaluation, the structure of the activity varied. For example, early in the quarter, the evaluation focused on the student. Many teachers used questions similar to Linda Rief's reading/writing survey as the basis for this first inventory (Rief 1992). This evaluation then was used as a baseline against which students could measure their progress throughout the year. At midterm the evaluation emphasis would shift to materials in the folders. Students reviewed their work-to-date, noting any changes and finding evidence of improvements and persisting or emerging problems.

At the end of the year, the focus turned to creating the final demonstration portfolio from the works collected throughout the year in the writing folder. Students wrote reflections on selected items from their folders in which they discussed the significance of each work and considered each in terms of achievement. Teachers read the reflections as they perused the portfolios. Teachers who were able to schedule the time conducted portfolio conferences one-on-one with students. These conversations created a sense of closure for both teachers and students. All teachers, regardless of whether they conducted final conferences or not, found that in talking to students about what they learned, they also discovered much about how students learn in their classes, including insight into how they might better serve their students in the future.

Teachers organized their portfolio selection criteria into categorical guidelines rather than listing specific items for inclusion or asking students to freewheel it and create their own portfolio structure. Categories would vary from teacher to teacher, but often would include categories such as the piece of writing the student worked the hardest on, the one the student was most proud of, and the one that taught the student something about writing. Other categories might ask for work that showed all phases of the writing process or that demonstrated exemplary samples of reading response logs or that illustrated progress toward language goals. Teachers also had students select three to five personal choices. These were works students felt revealed something unique about themselves as writers or people. Selections could include finished pieces as well as freewrites or unpolished drafts because the sophomore teachers felt it important to allow students to select from the entire pool of writing for their final portfolio selections in order to let them see that writing is dynamic and that it can be significant and worthwhile during any phase of the writing process.

Most often teachers assigned grades for the portfolios based on whether the student had completed the selection and reflection tasks. Others

included a grade for conferencing. Often collection folders were graded based on how complete they were. More significantly, by the end of the year, grades seemed almost superfluous in light of the fact that students had in fact developed a sense of pride in their accomplishments and ownership over the materials that Robert Tierney's research also found. When students were asked at the end of the year what they planned to do with their folders, teachers were surprised by the answer. Most students said they were planning to save all or at least some of the materials they had accumulated. For some, that meant adding to an already ongoing collection they had been keeping since their early school days. For others the writings represented the beginning of a future collection.

Working Across the Curriculum

Meanwhile at Bonneville, Geri found another opportunity for portfolio development, this time outside the English department. During the 1994 to 1995 school year, she began to work with the ninth grade English and geography team at her school to develop cross-curricular term writing projects in conjunction with developing portfolios within the context of the English classes. These cross-curricular projects presented new ways to connect students to learning through portfolios, but they also gave rise to new problems. As the year progressed, she found that constraints arose due to the coordination of English/geography time lines for project completion which prevented her students from generating as much writing of their own choice as they had done in previous years, thus limiting the selections available for their portfolios. The English/geography projects became extensive writing and research projects in and of themselves, often taking most of the quarter to complete. Geri outlined revisions and refinements of the projects for the following year, although she recognized that the time commitment would no doubt remain. In addition, she planned to move from term to semester portfolios in order to allow students more time to experiment with their writing and build a larger base for portfolio selection.

On the other hand, the WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum)-centered portfolios at Bonneville became a composite of experiences that replaced what might have been separate sets of content knowledge. Writing and reflection within the portfolios helped both student and teachers understand and strengthen the connections between subject areas. The first term's poetry project afforded a means of exploring geographical concepts and terms—as well as the physical and cultural geography of various countries—

through metaphor, imagery, and other figurative language. Both students and teachers established connections between geography and English classes, as well as between geography and creative writing. Portfolios were filled with poetry that first term. This project provided a strong, positive beginning for further cross-curricular activities.

Clearly, teachers working as a team to develop portfolio practice within a department or school is one key to effective implementation, but perhaps even more important is the idea that teachers must arrive at the new practice voluntarily rather than by mandate (Yancey 1992b). By the end of the 1993 to 1994 school year, other teachers from Cottonwood's English department had become interested in what the sophomore teachers were doing. Seeing this interest as a chance to possibly expand portfolio usage departmentwide, the teachers asked their tenth grade students to select any three pieces done during the year to send to their next year's English teacher. An accompanying letter served two purposes: after introducing themselves to their prospective teachers, students reviewed their strengths and weaknesses in language arts as well as articulated their expectations for the upcoming year. Furthermore, the letters explained the significance of the three attached pieces of writing. Most teachers accepted these demonstration portfolios in the spirit in which they were sent, namely, as an opportunity to learn a little bit about their incoming students' abilities and needs as they entered their classes. It wasn't long before problems with this proposal began to emerge.

The first problem was possession of materials. When these selections and their accompanying letters left the students' hands in May 1994, they were placed in a central file in the English office where teachers could pick them up when they received their new class lists in the fall. Most teachers returned the portfolios to the proper owners in the fall. However, some portfolios were never picked up. As a result, these student folders remained in the English file for the greater part of the 1994 to 1995 school year where they did no one any good, especially those students who owned the materials. Short of giving up entirely, the sophomore team agreed there must be an alternative for the following year.

At the end of the 1994 to 1995 school year, the sophomores wrote letters to junior English teachers again, as had been done by other tenth graders the year before. They did not, however, select pieces of writing to pass along with the letters. Instead their teachers advised the students to keep track of their portfolios over the summer with the express purpose that their junior English teacher might ask them to bring in some writing from the year before. The sophomore teachers then added a new category to the final

portfolio selection guide. They asked students to list three to five selections they would present to their next year's teachers if asked to do so in the fall and to explain their choices. The writings will leave the students' possession only at that time. While this solves the problems of rightful possession, it is not a perfect solution, of course. Some teachers will never ask students for their work; some students will not keep their portfolios. But at least the writing stays in the hands of the rightful owners while those teachers who are interested in expanding their opportunities for getting to know their students will still have the opportunity to do so.

The second problem highlighted by the situation at Cottonwood is teacher involvement. While other teachers expressed an interest in receiving the sophomore portfolios, enough failed to follow through with picking up the materials to make the sophomore group reconsider the efficacy of passing portfolios from grade to grade. Likewise, some teachers said they were curious about ways to use portfolios in their classes, but only two actually added some type of portfolio to their classrooms. In order for portfolio programs to work on a departmentwide or even broader base, teachers must be willing to use portfolios in their teaching. They must see that portfolios can work for them, their students, and their curriculum. Without that vision, no amount of coaxing or coercion will result in a successful transformation to a portfolio-based classroom.

Connecting Schools Through Portfolios

Our affiliation with the district committee and with each other has continued since those first meetings in 1992. Since that time, one of our primary considerations has been how to coordinate portfolio practice between our schools, in particular between the ninth and tenth grade teachers. Because Bonneville is Cottonwood's main feeder, we sought to establish continuity and a closer articulation between what happens to our students in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades and what can reasonably be expected of them in grades ten, eleven, and twelve. We saw the potential for portfolios to bridge the gap between junior and senior high.

We found ourselves in the position of acting as liaisons for the teachers in our departments in creating a plan for passing portfolios from school to school. We also found that in spite of the failed efforts at passing folders from tenth to eleventh grade at Cottonwood, the sophomore teachers welcomed the idea of receiving portfolios from Bonneville students who would enter in the fall of 1995. The portfolios arrived at Cottonwood

in June 1995. As mentioned earlier, the junior high portfolios included a letter of introduction, reflections on one work of literary analysis, and two personal selections. At this writing, the folders are waiting to be picked up from the Cottonwood English office by sophomore teachers as soon as they have received their final class rolls.

Benefits of Grassroots Development

Our experiences over the past few years have enabled us to see the benefits to both students and teachers of using portfolios in the classroom. The greatest advantage for students is the opportunity portfolios provide for reflecting on their learning process and progress. Another advantage is that portfolios help students develop good organizational skills. By keeping a writing log of all their folder entries and keeping their folders organized, students learn a systematic way to track assignments and work completed. Another unanticipated result teachers saw in their students was that the mere act of accumulating work in one place gave some previously reluctant students the impetus to produce more. The portfolios gave writing a place to be and a reason to exist beyond the teacher's assignment.

For teachers, the greatest benefit is flexibility in terms of teaching style and course content. This was a crucial element in introducing portfolios to our coworkers at Bonneville and Cottonwood. At both schools, the writing portfolio was an excellent vehicle for making connections, within, between, and across subject materials. Learning logs, reader response journals, research papers (including all preparatory materials), historical fiction, poetry, essays, freewrite lists, and quick writes all found a place in the writing portfolios.

Perhaps the most profound benefit we have observed at our schools has been the creation of new communities of teachers working together and supporting each other in the face of both our successes and setbacks. Sharing philosophies, developing practice, and establishing standards collaboratively with our coworkers has opened new communities of discussion within and between our schools. In doing so, we have redefined or at least reconsidered what it means to be a teacher within our various teaching environments. As a result, we have new-found respect for our coworkers, from whom we learn and find support. Coming together with others in this common project has shown us how to break through the artificial boundaries of subject matter, grade level, experience, and course content that William Condon writes so vigorously about in chapter thirteen of this volume.

As much as we have sought opportunities to collaborate with other teachers, we have reserved the right of teachers to create their own patterns for portfolio purpose and content. Moreover, because all of us encourage our students to develop both range and depth as readers, writers, and learners, we reject standardized, top-down, mandated portfolio programs, in spite of the fact that our own portfolio projects have been funded from state and district sources.

We are guided by the idea expressed by Catharine Lucas in the Introduction to *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom* that the most effective assessment of student ability takes place at the classroom level (Lucas 1992). We recognize that local and state school boards are interested in promoting the use of portfolios in any classroom. We applaud the efforts of schools and districts such as our own which support the development of portfolio programs at the grassroots level. However, we part ways with those states or districts which have turned to portfolios as a formal means of alternative assessment or those that deny teachers or principals any choice as to whether or how portfolios will be implemented and to what ends they will be used. Mandated portfolio assessment can lead to confusion and demoralization as in the case of Vermont (ASCD Update 1994).

In *Detecting Growth in Language*, James Moffat argues convincingly against the use of standardized tests as valid measures of learning. He writes: "But standards don't have to be set by tests and in fact *cannot* be set by tests, because standards are ideas of excellence that will always exceed what standardized instruments can afford to measure." In point of fact, he claims that standardized testing has led to learning standards being lowered rather than being raised for no other reason than they must "accommodate the masses." For Moffat, the answer to the assessment crises lies in "the three Ps—performances, portfolios, and projects" (Moffat 1991). We subscribe to Moffat's view. Through vehicles such as these we can see the complexity of our students' various learning environments. We also believe that the farther from the point of origin that learning is assessed, the more rigid and limiting the standards must be to assure accountability and reliability, a point implicit in Moffat as well. Likewise, district or statewide portfolio standards, because they define tasks that are achievable by the majority of those being assessed, might also lead to the mediocritization of achievement. Minimal standards open the door to minimal effort for many, if not for most, a situation antithetical to education in general and portfolio practice in particular.

Those of us at Bonneville and Cottonwood who have viewed firsthand the power of portfolios would no doubt resist any efforts by district or state

officials to institutionalize portfolio practice in Utah should the occasion for such action ever arise. We prefer to continue exploring the possibilities portfolios offer with our students and in conjunction with other like-minded teachers. We prefer our current level of practice—changeable, dynamic, and engaging—to any generalized portfolio program that would be doable for most, but stimulating to none. We would like to reserve the right to let the portfolios speak for our students within the context of our classrooms. In a world of such static achievement indicators as grades and standardized tests, the portfolio stands out as a dynamic portrait of student interest and ability.