

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO PROFICIENCY TESTING

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Introducer/Recorder: Marie Jean Lederman, La Guardia Community College, CUNY

Peter Elbow began the session by noting problems with current types of writing proficiency tests. He believes the major problem with most tests is that they include only a single sample of writing. Yet evaluators cannot, he maintains, get a trustworthy picture of a student's writing proficiency unless they look at several samples produced on several days in several modes or genres. Another problem is that most proficiency tests undermine our teaching of writing by implying to students that they can demonstrate their proficiency in one hour, without extensive thinking, talking, composing, and revising. Finally, the topics on most proficiency tests are irrelevant to the students' curriculum, unconnected to the study of any material, and cut off from ongoing intellectual discussions.

Thus, in 1982, five teachers at Stony Brook began experimenting with portfolio assessment: each student in an experimental section produced a portfolio consisting of four revised pieces (two arguments, one informal essay, and one piece of free-choice prose, in addition to an in-class essay). Only 55 percent of the students passed. The teachers then instituted a mid-semester evaluation of one of the compositions so that students and teachers

would have a better understanding of the criteria for passing. In addition, the number of pieces on the portfolio was reduced to three (one argument, one analysis of an argument, and one piece of free-choice prose). In the fall of 1984, portfolio assessment was made an official procedure for all sections of the freshman composition course. Every student must get a C, or higher in this course, and no student can get a C unless his or her portfolio has been judged worth a C by at least one other teacher who does not know him or her.

Currently, all composition teachers meet at mid-semester to discuss sample papers and to "calibrate" their standards. Scores on the essays are binary: C or above/below a C. If a teacher disagrees with the score of the second reader, the essay gets read and scored by a third reader. At the end of the semester, this evaluation process is repeated but with full portfolios. Each portfolio is treated more or less as a whole (that is, each essay within a portfolio does not receive a separate score). If two readers agree that a portfolio has failed because of one of the papers in it, the writer may revise that paper and resubmit the portfolio. About half of the mid-semester papers fail. At the end of the semester, about 10 percent of the portfolios fail, but that figure goes down to about 5 percent after some are rewritten.

Elbow stated that he and his colleagues see the portfolio as a way to ask students for better writing, a way that is proving successful. The portfolio process judges student writing in ways that better reflect the complexities of the writing process, and it does not insist that students be judged on a single sample. Moreover, the process makes

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teachers allies of their students, allies who work with them to revise and to pass. And it also draws teachers together, encouraging discussion about standards and pedagogy, and, inevitably, making departmental standards more consistent. Elbow acknowledged that the process makes much more work for teachers and puts more pressure on them. Also, some teachers feel that the opportunity to revise failed portfolios coddles students too much and lets lazy students get by with help and nagging from their teachers and peers.

Elbow concluded, however, that the portfolio system improves the trustworthiness of evaluation because raters can base their judgment on several pieces of writing. Moreover, it sends students the message that writing is a rich and multifaceted process. ■