
PORTFOLIOS AS PROFICIENCY TESTS

Speakers: Roberta Camp, Educational Testing Service
Patricia Belanoff, SUNY at Stony Brook

Introducer/Recorder: Karen Greenberg, National Testing
Network in Writing

Roberta Camp began by briefly describing the developments that led to portfolio assessment. She defined a writing portfolio as a collection of student writing gathered for the purpose of evaluating students' writing ability. Basically, portfolios provide a method of assessment compatible with recent changes in writing theory and practice (and purposes for assessment). Portfolios enable students to feel that they "own" the writing that is being assessed and they enable teachers to feel like coaches rather than judges. Portfolios grow out of instruction in writing (and thus, are compatible with it), and the results of portfolio assessment can be used to guide classroom instruction and decisions about writing programs. Camp then described the ETS writing portfolio. It consists of four pieces of writing: (1) a narrative/descriptive piece, (2) an expository piece or an analysis of a piece of prose, (3) a persuasive piece, and (4) a piece of writing of the student's choice. It also includes a cover letter that provides a rationale for the selections in the portfolio and a reflection on the collection.

After describing examples of portfolio use and design, Camp posed questions to consider in determining the uses of portfolio assessment: What kind of information do you want to obtain about students' writing ability and about their writing processes? What is the best method of obtaining that information? How should the writing be evaluated?

How should the results of the evaluation be communicated? What provisions have been made for revising the assessment after you have had some experience with it? She discussed these questions in detail.

Next, Patricia Belanoff described the assessment procedures of SUNY at Stony Brook, which uses portfolios to assess students' writing proficiency. The Stony Brook portfolio also consists of four pieces of writing: (1) a revised narrative/descriptive/expressive essay, (2) a revised essay organized around a point, (3) a revised essay analyzing another piece of writing, and (4) an in-class essay. These portfolios are evaluated twice during the semester. At midterm, selected pieces from the portfolio are evaluated by two or more teachers; if these papers fail, students can revise them and include the revisions in their portfolios. At the end of the semester, the full portfolio is evaluated by the classroom teacher and by a small group of teachers. Students are allowed to appeal their grades.

Belanoff noted that this system has many benefits. It provides a method of assessment that supports instruction and that is consistent and fair. Moreover, it has encouraged a high degree of communication and interaction among teachers. Finally, teachers no longer feel like judges. However, Belanoff pointed out some of the system's problems: it makes more work for teachers and causes them some anxiety over their grading criteria. Belanoff concluded by explaining the ways in which the portfolio system reflects the complexities of the writing process and recognizes the problems inherent in interpreting and evaluating texts.◊