Writing Portfolios

Making Growth Visible

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Background

Gathering one's work together into a portfolio as a showcase of best work has been accepted practice in visual art for years, but the concept of using portfolios in writing instruction is not new, either. Portfolios have been used in classrooms and writing programs for nearly two decades (Yancey, 2004). By 1992, the first major conference devoted to portfolios was held at Miami University (Sommers, 1997).

Portfolios have been categorized into three basic types: documentation portfolios showing growth toward achievement standards, process portfolios that document phases of the learning process emphasizing student reflections on how they learned, and showcase portfolios for students' best work (Hewett, 2004, p.26).

Making writing process and growth visible

Basing writing assessment in portfolios moves assessment away from numbers lined up in a grade book to authentic assessment in the form of conversations with students about the writing itself (Chancer, 2001, p. 96).

In the age of standards and state-mandated testing, teachers like Mary Kay Deen (2001) find that having students develop portfolios empowers them to grow as writers and learn to

develop their authentic voices, things that students are robbed of by teaching to a test.

Standardized writing tests are little help for students' personal growth. These kinds of assessments are given to compare learners with each other and place students at different developmental levels, actually disconnecting assessment from teaching and learning (Townsend, Fu, & Lamme, 1997). Portfolios, on the other hand, offer crucial opportunities for students to revise, reflect, and become part of the assessment process. When students are asked to compare their earlier writing with recent writing, they are able to see how handwriting, spelling, and sentence length have improved. This approach to assessment reveals what students have achieved instead of emphasizing what they have not (Townsend, Fu, & Lamme).

Not everyone agrees, however, that portfolios will automatically improve student attitudes about writing. C. Beth Burch (1999), who has used portfolios in her college classes for years, examines challenges in implementing them. She calls for educators to examine students' responses to portfolios in order to make better use of them. Burch conducted a qualitative study with university students in first-year portfolio writing classes, comparing their attitudes to students in non-portfolio classes. Using questionnaires and interviews, she found uncertainty and discomfort on the part of many students as they

were required to assume increased responsibility for their learning. Because of students' need for guidance through the portfolio process, their emphasis on product over process, and their concern about grading Burch concluded that teaching assistants with little experience in portfolios should not teach portfolio classes.

Valuable tools for reflection

Educators have found portfolios to be powerful tools for reflecting on learning that has taken place (Galley, 2000; Kish, 1997; Swartzendruber-Putnam, 2000; Yancey, 1998). When teachers expect self-assessment, students initiate a dialogue about their writing to which teachers can respond, bringing the author and reader together (Yancey, 1998). Teachers, Yancey asserts, should demonstrate the value they place on this self-assessment by including it in a small percent of the grade given.

Portfolios have been used as an assessment tool in numerous settings, including writers' self-assessment, teacher assessment, district-wide assessment, and even as a state writing assessment tool.

One quantitative research study (Herman, Gearhart, & Baker, 1993) on the validity and meaning of portfolio assessment scores found inter-rater consistency, but the study raised serious questions. There were substantial differences in students' scores among the standardized writing assessment, individual

samples of classroom work, and on the portfolio collections as a whole. The portfolio competence score was consistently higher than the aggregates of the individual scored pieces, leading the researchers to believe that raters may have looked for capability and not typical performance in scoring the portfolio as a whole. This finding raised the question of what raters are really rating: capability, best performance, or typical performance.

Geof Hewitt (2001), who coordinates the Vermont state portfolio assessment, argues that although achieving inter-rater reliability and producing reliable data is hard work, the benefits are worth the effort, because the test becomes a learning experience in ways a multiple-choice test could not. He cautions educators, though, not to equate portfolio assessment with portfolios. This type of thinking could doom portfolios in schools where large-scale assessment of them was ended. He considers teachers in schools without this large-scale assessment fortunate because they have the flexibility to invite students to be partners in designing the portfolio system, giving students responsibility and ownership of their learning.

Effects of Technology

As technology has taken its place as a tool in the writing process, educators are seeing ways that technology can enhance portfolio development and presentation. Digital or electronic

portfolios make it possible for students to include products other than just written compositions, such as hypertext and student-created digital recordings. This flexibility allows students to create connections in their learning process that they might not make otherwise (Batterbee & Dunham, 2004).

High school teacher Kevin McNulty (2002) prefers digital portfolios because they allow both instructor and students to revisit and assess writing several times a year. Traditional portfolios often become a storage folder of forgotten work left in a filing cabinet. Calling digital portfolios a record of student work in progress, he explains that his students regularly visit their Internet portfolios to revise their work and revisit previous projects, gaining insight into their growth as writers. McNulty maintains that students gain much more from their frequent visits to their digital portfolios than from their state-mandated writing portfolios.

Electronic portfolios are seen by many as motivational tools (Gibbs, 2004, Hewett, 2004, McNulty, 2002). Venezky and Oney (as cited in Hewett, 2004, p. 27) maintain that e-portfolios can help create a learner-centered classroom where students become active learners by setting goals for learning, writing reflections, and reviewing goals. Pre-service teachers at The Citadel in Charleston, SC, create electronic portfolios that are made available over the Internet as a tool for

increasing their level of technical knowledge, reflect on their instructional practices, and as a strategy to introduce themselves to potential employers. In student evaluations of the class, 90% of the written comments on the strength of the class included learning technology skills through the creation of an electronic portfolio (Hewett, 2004, p. 29). Likewise, Holt and McAllister (2004) highlight numerous pre-service teacher preparation programs that require students to produce electronic portfolios as evidence of personal growth and development.

It has been argued that electronic texts and computer-assisted writing are changing writers' process by blurring the distinction between drafts and final product (Tayayoshi, 1996). Tayayoshi suggests that in a computer-assisted environment where students make their own decisions about process, their portfolios could contain artifacts of each writer's process with self-reflections on their understandings of themselves as writers.

John Brown (2003) is another teacher who sees computers changing the way students write. In his vocational high school English class, students maintain an electronic portfolio stored in shared folders on the school's local computer network. Brown begins the period with students writing in their electronic journals and then having students take turns sharing what they have written over a data projector (made possible by the

network). This instant publication fulfills students' need for instant gratification and builds a community of learners as others read and respond to what is displayed on the projection screen. These journal topics can then be developed into documents that are saved in the electronic portfolios (p.29). Brown maintains that holistic review of these student portfolios demonstrates that students have a better understanding of their own writing processes and that their products are higher quality after working on their writing this way.

Electronic portfolio use raises several logistical questions. Storage space can become an issue when a large number of students are including numerous files, especially multi-media, in their portfolios. As with traditional portfolios, the e-portfolio should contain only pieces that students have selected for reflection and presentation. One suggestion offered is to start with a working file in the classroom that students can select pieces from to include in their electronic portfolio (Moersch & Fisher, 1996).

When digital storage space is not an issue, electronic portfolios can be an effective way to deal with the reams of papers that keeping portfolios create. Celeste Diehm (2004) made the switch from paper to electronic portfolios in 2001 in response to her dread and agitation of bulging folders that many students could not wait to throw into the trash on their way out

the door at the end of the year. She had students create an opening page as a reflection of themselves and their work, encouraging them to be as creative as possible. Students were free to include a broad range of products, not just papers written in English class. Diehm found students taking more pride in their products because the electronic portfolios allowed them to edit, display and publish their work in ways that traditional paper portfolios did not. She identified three distinct benefits that e-portfolios offer: a creative form for students to show their best work, an awareness of a larger audience, and the fact that the portfolios can grow and evolve over students’ entire high school careers.

While teachers like Celeste Diehm (2004) are only too happy to switch totally over to electronic portfolios, some like Bob Dulce (as cited in Gibbs, 2004, p.28) believe there will always be a place for paper portfolios with original documents. Others like graphic design instructor Gay Johnston (as cited in Gibbs, 2004) have their students maintain both a paper portfolio and a digital portfolio. Johnston’s students burn their digital portfolio onto a CD that they can leave with a prospective employer, but she also has them take a showcase portfolio of certificates, resume, course projects, and references with them to job interviews. Having tangible evidence of their skills and

achievements has landed her students jobs over applicants without portfolios.

A first step in implementing electronic portfolios is to decide which software program students will use to create them. Moersch and Fisher (1996) suggest using a portfolio-authoring tool such as *Electronic Portfolio* that provides templates as well as a predefined scoring rubric as well as a predefined scoring rubric. In her reviews of numerous software programs, Helen Barrett (1996) found that most of the programs are written for Macintosh computers.

Other teachers prefer to allow students freedom to choose whatever software they feel comfortable using to create their portfolios (Diehm, 2004). There appears to be a tension between loss of student control with prefabricated portfolios (Sawyer & Heyd, 1997) and the danger of overemphasis on elaborate presentation that can minimize the student's reflection and learning process (Zubizarreta, 2004, p. 5).

Instructor Jena Burges (2004) opted for student choice when designing his Web-Based Learning Environment Project Portfolio. Quoting physicist Murray Gell-Mann's comparison of 20th century education to being fed the menu at a great restaurant, Burges asserts that portfolios create deep learning for students. He explains that being given the assignment to develop a web-based resource that addressed a need for an identified audience and

producing documents aimed at solving it, caused deep reflection and learning about learning itself.

Conclusion

Portfolios can transform writing instruction, but they are definitely not “a quick fix” (Sawyer & Heyd, 1997, p. 69). Their successful implementation requires teachers to change the way they teach, to become a facilitator, a coach, and a researcher, rather than an imperial judge (Chancer, 2001). For the student, portfolios provide stimulus for self-reflection of learning and visible evidence of growth. The benefits for all involved make the effort worthwhile, as teachers and students become partners in the interactive processes of reading and writing.

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