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ED 6391
June 20, 2005

Sommers, J. (1997). Portfolios in literature courses: A case study. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 24(3), 220 – 234.

Qualitative Article Summary

Purpose: Jeff Sommers, the researcher, centers his quantitative study on the question of whether there is a place for portfolio assessment in the literature classroom. He considers it an important question because, even though little direct evidence in portfolio literature supports this particular use, the interactive nature of reading and writing processes can help students learn about how they read. He also hopes to create more discussion on the topic. Sommers focuses on three subquestions that he frames as his “central argument.” They are that portfolios encourage students to use writing in a variety of genres as a way to productively process literary texts; literature portfolios provide a richer form of evaluation for the instructor; and that literature portfolios create a more meaningful learning experience for students than an individual writing would. Through the study, he hopes to offer an explanation of why portfolios should be used in literature classes.

Method: The participants in this study were students enrolled in a section of English 293, Contemporary American Fiction, a sophomore-level literature course, that Sommers teaches at Middletown campus of Miami University in Ohio. He adds that he used the portfolio in this particular class because it happened to be small. Both these facts indicate Sommers’ use of nonrandom, convenience sampling.

The portfolio assignment was called an independent reading project, and students were asked to select a piece of contemporary American fiction over 100 pages to read. Students were expected to bring work about their project to selected class meetings to share with classmates as a springboard for discussion of the literary text: a one-page summary of the reading, a one-page excerpt of a key passage, and a one-page response. The portfolio was developed out of this independent reading and class discussion. The assignment required 6 – 8 typewritten pages of various types of writing. Students were offered the following possibilities: summary, review, parody, analysis, rationale, and video/song/collage. A cover letter explaining the portfolio was also required.

Data for the study consisted of students’ portfolios turned in at the end of the course for evaluation. After reading all the portfolios submitted, Sommers focuses in on one student’s portfolio as a single case study “as an illustration of how the assignment can influence a student’s learning.” Sommers identifies the student as Cary Henderson, a 21-year-old education major who planned to become a high school English teacher.

Results: After careful analysis of this one portfolio, Sommers concludes that the portfolio shows how a student can learn about himself, and his reading and writing

processes. Additionally, an instructor can gain insight into the student's reading process through the student's multiple writings. Sommers leads the reader logically to this conclusion by reconstructing his analysis of the pieces contained in the portfolio.

Evaluation of Research Study

Introduction: Sommers clearly identifies portfolios in the literature classroom as the research topic both in the article's title and in the first sentence of the introduction. He defines the research problem with the opening question: "Is there a place for portfolio assessment in the literature classroom?"

The literature review includes five books and 12 articles that address portfolio use and assessment with writing as well as literature. After establishing how little has been written on using portfolio assessment in literature classes, Sommers thoughtfully selects relevant claims concerning writing portfolio assessment and relates them to the context of reading literature.

In the first page, Sommers clearly states his purpose as determining whether portfolios should be used in literature teaching. He quickly follows with three subquestions to consider: whether portfolios encourage students to use writing in various genres as a way to read literary texts productively, whether literature portfolios provide a richer form of evaluation than a single writing or an objective test would yield, and whether they provide a more meaningful learning experience for students than an individual writing would.

Methods: The context and site of the research are thoroughly explained in the article. The class title and level is given, as well as the reading assignments and main objectives for the course. Sommers reproduces the entire portfolio assignment for the reader, as well as the entire contents of the case study portfolio. However, the participants, other than the one whose portfolio is discussed, are identified only as students in the sophomore level college English class, and the researcher never says whether students were made aware that they were part of a research study. This fact may not be a problem, though, since the case study student is very clearly identified. The reader is left to wonder, though, whether Cary Henderson is the student's actual name, and whether he knew from the outset about the study or only gave consent for his work to be published once the portfolio was assessed by the instructor/researcher. Since the study is published in a peer-reviewed journal, it is probably safe to assume that the student did give permission, but clarification of this point would have been appreciated.

The total number of participants is never revealed, only that the class size was small. The small number of participants brings up the question of how practical these portfolios would be for an instructor who has a class load of 80 – 100 students. Sommers raises that very question himself, though, in his conclusion and admits that he has no simple answer to the question. He does offer several suggestions, including how he handles portfolios for another class he teaches that usually has 30 students. For this class, students simply

receive credit for completing the portfolio so that his response to student work is minimal.

No evidence of triangulation of data was present in the article. One wonders why Sommers did not interview at least the case study student or have his students respond to a questionnaire. The reader is left to trust the researcher's judgement as to the meaningfulness of the students' learning experience when using portfolios and wonder what additional insight the student could have offered.

Results: Despite the concerns about whether the participants were aware they were part of the study, the findings seem trustworthy and Sommers' conclusions logical. He does not appear to ignore any data in his analysis, as he reproduces the entire contents of the case study portfolio in the article, along with the insights he gains from his analysis. The narrative of his analysis of the writings that make up the portfolio is very clear and sufficient to make his findings trustworthy.

Discussion: Sommers discusses his conclusions in the context of other research, especially finding ways to connect writing portfolio research with what he finds in the literature portfolios of his students. He does not offer any alternative explanations for his insights, but the ones he offers seem valid. He is careful to address the limitations of the study by admitting that teachers with heavy teaching loads would have difficulty reading and responding as thoroughly as Sommers did with his students' portfolios. He also fairly asks the question whether journals would accomplish the same goals of revealing students' reading processes, being meaningful learning experiences, and effective evaluation tools that the portfolios served. He further questions how other literature teachers view portfolios. As any good research article does, Sommers' article includes the desire for more published research in the area of the study. He ends his discussion on the persuasive note that there are ways to implement portfolios if the instructor believes in their value. He claims that it is time for more instructors to begin using them because "there is so much to gain from doing so."

Final Words: The thorough literature review, detailed narrative, and findings that are related back to similar findings in literature combine to make this study credible in spite of its narrow focus. Its significance stems from the fact that so little has been published in the area of literature portfolios, causing it to be, from the researcher's perspective, a possible catalyst for further research and discussion. Sommers' style is clear and logical, adding to the study's credibility.

I would certainly model aspects of my own research study on this one, especially the narrative style, the completeness of information concerning the assignment and the sample of student work. I would also attempt to discuss my findings in the context of the literature to reinforce their validity, as Sommers did. One change I would make, however, is that I would find ways to include additional data, possibly through interviews, a focus group, and student questionnaire so that triangulation of data would be present. I would also clarify the extent to which the students were aware of the research study and how I obtained their consent to take part in the study.