

ALONE AND LOVING IT

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Most writing teachers realize that the university's mandate that all students be "graded" on their work is not very conducive to teaching writing, but it often seems that there is no effective way to overcome the obstacles presented by that mandate while we work within it. This paper argues that if we reconsider the uses of portfolios in the writing classroom, we will discover new ways of encouraging students to engage in serious revision of their texts and of initiating students into academic discourse communities while we work within university systems that mandate grading. As a means of making that argument, I begin this presentation by defining portfolios in terms of their current uses in universities; I then follow that with a summary of my own experiences the first time I used portfolios in the writing classroom, and with a survey of the research done by teachers using portfolios in departments that have not yet instituted their use on a program-wide basis. Further, because teachers often find it difficult to implement programs that utilize portfolio evaluation, this paper also reviews some of the most common complaints and questions writing teachers have about portfolios and proposes a few methods for solving those problems. Finally, the paper ends with descriptions and examples of student portfolios and with student reactions to classes that utilize portfolio evaluation.

The Traditional University Uses of the Portfolio System

University systems in which portfolios are used on a program-wide basis often focus on the portfolio's use as a means for monitoring programs, for setting curriculum standards and for evaluating students' progression as writers.

As early as 1970 Robert Tippets, Charles J. Fox, and other English faculty at the Hawaii campus of Brigham Young University used the portfolio system to "combat grade inflation and the decline in students' English abilities" (Ford 951). In 1978, James Ford and Gregory Larkin, themselves from the Hawaii Campus of Brigham Young, extolled the virtues of that program and claimed that the portfolio system installed at Brigham Young is the best way of "establishing definite minimum standards for each continuing course and then enforcing them as the necessary requirements for exiting the course" (950). As far as I am able to tell, the system is still in use in Hawaii and is still seen primarily as a means for monitoring student and teacher standards.

A similar program, and one perhaps with more recent renown, is the one instituted by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff at SUNY-Stony Brook. In the Spring of 1986, Elbow and Belanoff, in their "Using Portfolios to Increase Collaboration and Community in a Writing Program," asserted that the portfolio system in place at Stony Brook allows a high level of institutionalized collaboration among students, teachers and administrators. Their argument is that the conversations about whether portfolios deserve passing ratings from committees are beneficial to all because they create situations in which serious discussions about writing are necessary. They argue further that the portfolio system puts teachers and students in a much more productive relationship because teachers become coaches trying to help students create portfolios that will be "passed" by a nameless, faceless committee of judges.

Later that year, in a *Staffroom Interchange* Elbow and Belanoff said:

We believe proficiency examinations undermine good teaching by sending the wrong message about writing process: that proficient writing means having a serious topic sprung on you (with no chance for reading, reflection, or discussion) and writing one draft (with no chance for sharing or feedback or revising) (336).

Elbow's and Belanoff's conclusion—that proficiency examinations given under traditional circumstances are not only

unnatural but actually detrimental to students—is really nothing new. The real contribution here is the outline of a system that replaces the traditional examination with a comprehensive, program-wide use of portfolios.

Problems with traditional writing proficiency examinations are not the only ones Elbow and Belanoff find with English departments that do not have program-wide portfolio systems. They argue that in such programs "there is enormous inconsistency among the grades of isolated teachers, so students often drift . . . into complete skepticism or even cynicism about the possibility of evaluation or even judgement at all" (338). Here, Elbow and Belanoff move to the other side of Ford's argument about university standards and look at the effect of individual teacher evaluations on students. And finally, Elbow and Belanoff, crediting Kenneth Bruffee's work in collaborative learning, say, "that the portfolio promotes collaboration and works against isolation may be, in the end, its main advantage" (338).

In the winter of 1990, David W. Smit of Kansas State University argued that the portfolio system at that university had been instituted to make grading more consistent from section to section, "to judge adequately the writing competence of . . . students," and to improve teaching (51). Smit's argument, like those made at Hawaii and Stony Brook, is that the administrative use of portfolio systems in university English departments improves the overall quality of writing instruction by setting program-wide standards, by forcing teachers and students to collaborate in the process of writing and by implementing the practical results of the theories of writing as a process and of collaborative learning. Of course, these discussions about the portfolio's usefulness for setting program standards and for evaluation are accurate and worthy of note. But the question becomes: What about the teacher who decides to use portfolios on an individual basis in a department that has not yet adopted them program-wide?

My Initiation

In order to explain how I came to ask this question, I would like to digress for a moment and summarize the situation at Ohio

University that gave rise to my own introduction to the uses of portfolio evaluation for the individual teacher of composition. Until about a year ago, portfolios were used on a relatively small scale at Ohio University. In fact, until the 1990-91 class of new teaching associates was given the new writing textbook by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff and asked to use portfolios in the manner outlined in that text, the only consistent use of portfolios was in the creative writing program. Therefore, in 1989 when I began to use the portfolio system in my classroom I was the only composition teacher I knew of who used it, and, further, (perhaps more importantly) I was the only TA using portfolios.

Almost instantly I became a vocal advocate of portfolios and began pushing other teaching associates in my communal office to try them. I kept telling them that using portfolios was the rational end result of any classroom in which writing was taught as a process. I told anyone who would listen that portfolios revolutionized the way I read student texts, that literary theories like reader-response criticism could be applied to student texts when the system was used and that collaborative learning and portfolios can be a most natural, useful combination of practices for the writing classroom. At first, my colleagues, always anxious to hear what was happening in each others' classrooms, listened attentively and asked how the system worked. However, when I explained my system, they began to view portfolios as a means for increasing the teacher workload and began to avoid my discussions with a vengeance.

Interestingly, however, at the end of that first ten-week term when I collected student portfolios I came into the office every day to find a group of my colleagues gathered around my desk surveying the results of my efforts. And even I could not believe what I saw when I made it through the mass of chattering TAs. My students' portfolios looked like published texts with colorful covers, professional tables of contents, catchy titles, neatly typed, laser-printed final drafts and at least four rough drafts of each of the five papers written that quarter. Only one student of the twenty in that first class did not produce a portfolio that I was proud to say I helped create. Better yet, the writing of students in that class improved much more than had the writing of any students I had taught previously.

The Transitional Work

In spite of how all this sounds, I am not the first person to realize that portfolios have an advantage beyond their usefulness for evaluation. High school teachers have been making the shift from the view of portfolios as a means for evaluation to portfolios as a means for learning about writing for a long time. Perhaps the reason they have been the ones making the shift for so long is that, like me, they do not work in programs that have adopted the portfolio on a departmental basis.

In April 1989, Dennis Palmer Wolf published an article entitled "Portfolio Assessment: Sampling Student Work," which argued that "when students maintain portfolios of their work, they learn to assess their own progress as learners, and teachers gain new views of their accomplishments in teaching" (35). Even though Wolf's work seems to be very much like that of Elbow and Belanoff, etc., there is a mild yet important shift taking place. For instance, Wolf tells teachers "Portfolios are messy. They demand intimate and often frighteningly subjective talk with students" (37). What we see here is an illustration of Wolf's insight into the change that takes place in the student-teacher relationship. Wolf's shift in perspective from evaluation to conversation's impact on the student-teacher relationship may seem minor, but it is vitally important to the teacher who uses portfolios individually rather than as a part of a program because it focuses on process (the time before the portfolio is created) instead of on product (the evaluation time when the portfolio has already been created).

In February of 1990, Margie Krest shifted even further away from the view of the portfolio as a means for evaluation to the portfolio as a student-centered system functioning entirely on its on merit when she listed four of the portfolio's advantages:

1. I lightened my paper load.
2. I began spending most of each semester coaching rather than grading students.
3. I began looking forward to grading students' paper (at least I became excited about how an idea or revision

- turned out).
4. Most importantly, I watched as previously unmotivated writers became motivated to work for a grade they desired and at the same time to improve their writing (29).

The fact is, even on an individual basis, the writing teacher can utilize the portfolio to enhance collaboration and creativity to increase student investment in the work while also increasing the level of improvement in writing skills. Further, although Krest only hints at this, the portfolio system can revolutionize the way teachers read student texts, thereby creating an environment in which all concerned can work together to understand the writing process and, subsequently, the reading process more fully. If teachers begin to view the portfolio as a system of education rather than as a system of evaluation, then we will find at our fingertips one of the most vital, revolutionary means of writing instruction to come our way in years.

Fears of Teachers

The most common fears about portfolio, however, keep many teachers from even trying the system when they are not surrounded by the departmental support described by Elbow and Belanoff. I have heard time and again that teachers fear a paper overload at the end of the term, that they are concerned about the anxiety of students who are used to always knowing "where they stand," and that they believe that portfolio systems require extensive one-to-one contact with students. Colleagues of mine who used the system at my urging found that their first terms using portfolio were overwhelming and often did not produce the results they expected or desired. It is difficult to argue with a colleague who comes to me looking like she has not slept in days and complains that she is in over her head with portfolios. However, I have found several key elements to managing the system:

1. Use portfolios because you believe in them; and if you don't believe in them at first, then "fake it till you make

it." Students are great reflectors of teachers' fears. If they believe that you are not convinced that the portfolio is a valid, fair effective means of teaching writing, they will challenge your use of them (and rightly so) at every turn, and the tension in the classroom will be unbearable and unproductive.

2. Employ the most productive, tangible components of Bruffee's collaborative learning in any classroom in which you use portfolios. By this, I mean that students need time to talk about writing and you need to set clear goals, to ask students to become actively involved in each others' writing and to maintain strict standards for writing and for classroom discussion of writing.
3. Now, this is where the revolution in the way you read student texts takes place. Respond to writing as a reader would, carrying on a running dialogue with the student text and offering questions that lead to discussion—not criticisms that imply that there is some right, totally objective answer to questions about writing or that are meant to justify a grade.
4. Hold only one mandatory conference during a term, leaving students to their own discretion about when they need one-to-one contact with you; most students will show up for help more often than you think, and all who come to you will do it because they need to. This removes you from the role of "bad cop" enforcing what may seem like senseless laws and places you in the role of the available "good cop" there to answer questions and to help them learning to work within the system.
5. Don't grade until you grade the portfolio. Don't even guess at students' grades because every time you think about or discuss grades you undermine your assertion that the papers students are giving you are drafts. Further, this discussion of grades gives students the impression that you are putting grades on drafts and just not telling them what grades they have received.
6. Set strict deadlines for taking up drafts and allow students to make choices about whether to meet those deadlines. When students realize that they will not receive feedback on late drafts and when they hear how

helpful the feedback is to those who take advantage of it, problems with late papers will almost disappear.

7. Ask students to keep process writing journals and to write metadiscursive papers about their writing processes.
8. Finally, set the criteria for evaluating papers and portfolios early in the term and create criteria sheets. These criteria sheets will give students a tangible means for comparing their standards with yours and a useful tool for talking with other students about writing; they will also make final evaluation quick and relatively painless for you.

Student Reaction to Portfolios

Students in my classes have had disparate reactions to the portfolio system. Every term a few students complain that they do not know how to guess at their grades, but most say that they believe that the system is fair because they do not have to hand in anything for a grade until they have an entire term to work on their writing skills. Most tell me that they are thankful that they are able to build not only their writing skills but also their social and reading skills in a classroom environment that requires the development of relationships. Many are hesitant to hand portfolios to me at the end of the term because they are so invested in their work. Some have asked me not to drink coffee while reading their portfolios because they fear I will smudge them or stain them somehow. Others have asked whether they can come to my classes the next term and give them advice about how to put together a portfolio. Finally, since I have been using this system, 100% of my students have returned to pick up their portfolios and to discuss them with me after the term is over and a good quarter of my students have returned to me later in their college careers to talk about papers they are writing for other classes—two reactions that indicated to me that my students are learning that writing is a life-long process, not one that ends when a teacher stamps a grade on a paper.

Conclusion

In my experience, the portfolio system is the best way to transform the writing classroom into a writing workshop, a place where students can come to learn about the process of writing. Portfolios are less about evaluation and monitoring standards than they are about transformation—the kind of transformation that takes place when students and teachers alike have to face the reality that some processes are never-ending.

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