

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Response to Robert E. Manganello's "Writing and the LD Student"

Students who have been identified with written expression disabilities can help other students with the writing process. Your article was useful as well as informative, and certainly crystallized some questions that I've been struggling with for the last four years.

Our school integrates LD students in a variety of ways. In some cases an LD teacher joins a teacher of a discipline, combines students with identified disabilities with other students, and works as a resource to the teacher and all the students. If LD students are kept in resource, the class is small and writing assigned in other classes forms the basis for the work done in the resource class. As we move toward more interdisciplinary work, we find that integrating students with identified disabilities is a very positive decision. As I read your description of the resource teacher's work to assist the college freshman with his essay, I realized that more than one valuable lesson was being taught to all teachers.

First of all, I have worked with LD students on projects with other students and have found that the LD students always excel. Why? In each case the LD students developed a series of compensating skills allowing them the benefit and frustration of seeing simultaneously several ways to approach the problem. As with your student, anxiety is introduced when this period of deciding on which approach to use is never solved. In a group, however, the LD student generates so many possibilities that the other students tend to divide up the options and go to work. The LD student has created more than one way in for the group members. This inability to set one plan and develop it is not seen as a deficit, but rather as a benefit. You referred to this stage as "setting sub-goals," and indicated that when the options were clear the student could begin to work. The paradox for teachers is: can an ability to see too many possibilities be a quality of a good leader, allowing her to set many people to work at once? Is it possible that some

of the students we identify as LD in written language are also displaying a comprehensive understanding of the largeness of a problem in its initial stages which could benefit students who are not identified as LD? How many students forgo the examination of what “discuss” means?

Specifically, the method you used to help the freshman student achieve his goal is important for all teachers. You took it a step at a time. So often when our students are verbally adept and have become proficient in basic writing responses, we stop going through the steps. Are we afraid these students will become detached and bored? Or are we under pressure to keep the train rolling at a pace to “cover the material?” Many of our students can get by and be good enough with their use of the language that reveals that their symbolic reasoning is thin and uncertain.

Again, with the LD student, identifying sub-goals can be done with reading as well as writing. When working with a mixed class of LD and regular students, I’ve discovered that few of them know how to luxuriate in their reading. Their education has been so narrowly purposeful that enjoying, predicting, clarifying, or likening characters to people they know is foreign to all but the LD students who have been penalized for needing to slow down because they recognize the enormity of the characters and conflicts. Ruminating demands time. Here again is the paradox: does the straggler teach us to look more closely at the artwork in a museum than the lock-step willing marcher?

Certainly, the evidence you’ve presented in the beginning of your article alerts the reader to the testing materials available to identify learning problems. Do these tests always reveal deficits in the students, or do they identify deficits in the society that created the tests? As a consultant, one of my favorite activities is presenting original pieces of text dated 1595 or earlier. The text is always a lesser known work of a famous writer, presented as originally written. Shakespeare regularly earns a grade of C+, with points lost for mechanical errors. Translations of Ovid have received marks of D for failing to stay on the subject. Is our modern system, in its pristine, mechanical pragmatism, missing something in its young people? Who is disabled, the student or the system?

Writing, at its heart, springs from the human spirit's desire to express itself. The writing process echoes other human processes, such as the processes of thinking, developing relationships, and learning. By allowing LD students the leadership of explicating the complexity of a problem, whether it be how to answer an essay or how to create a movie, we are allowing them to share a strength, rather than trying to remediate a perceived weakness.

– Milde Waterfall  
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### **Response to Christine Hult's "Using Portfolios to Evaluate Teachers: Learning From Ourselves"**

#### *Observations and Practical Applications*

In reading this article I was interested in the basic premise that portfolios could be used as an evaluation tool for classroom teachers. As an experienced teacher of twenty-four years, I have been subjected to many and various forms of evaluation. I am intrigued by the idea that if teacher improvement is indeed the desired outcome of any teacher evaluation program, portfolios could very well be the instrument by which a teacher could literally be "put in charge of his or her own instructional improvement plan." In my own school system, teacher evaluation has gradually changed from a very subjective, end-of-the-year checklist of attributes which were rated on a scale of one to ten, to an ongoing, goal-oriented process, discussed by the principal and teacher three times during the school year. A portfolio option that focused on early goals would seem to be an ideal way to enable "reflective practice, the necessary precursor of improvement" by providing the "needs and purposes" for such a portfolio in the first place. Although such portfolios could be used for accountability evaluations, "formative evaluations" of a teacher's performance, "carried out during the development of a program" relating to his or her goals, would help insure improvement in classroom teaching.

The “seven principles to insure growth” when using portfolios, outlined by Donald Graves in *Portfolio Portraits* and discussed in Christine Hult’s article, all have an important bearing on this particular application. I was impressed not only with the perceptiveness of the author’s summary of each point, but also with her ability to make very clear, insightful, and decisive statements about their connection to her premise. Her summaries also help me illustrate the appropriateness of my idea:

1. **Involve the teachers being evaluated.** Using portfolios as an option to the present outline of goals and procedures to implement them would ensure that “teachers are not only involved in the process but also ultimately have control over their own improvement agendas.” The portfolio process would encourage teachers to “reflect on their teaching” which would lead to “a cycle of learning, self-reflection, and performance feedback for improvement actually to take hold in the classroom.”
2. **Help the staff keep portfolios of their own.** This principle was most interesting in that it put administrators in the same position as teachers. In order to truly understand what teachers must go through to realize the need for change and/or improvement, principals should themselves develop a portfolio. “In this way, we can all become better at explaining our work to ourselves and to others.” I feel that this step would go a long way to improving and strengthening the working relationships of administrators and teachers.
3. **Broaden the purpose of portfolios.** I agree completely that traditional evaluation procedures, especially classroom observations, typically “kill experimentation and creativity.” Although with experience and tenure most teachers gradually become less intimidated when their principal observes them teach, most teachers still choose the “tried and true, not the innovative and imaginative” as examples of their teaching effectiveness. With a portfolio as

the basis of an ongoing evaluation, a teacher would be much more comfortable demonstrating a more innovative or creative teaching method, related to his or her goals, during an observation session. Within the context of a portfolio-based evaluation, a teacher would be free to “discuss . . . attempts at innovation and how they were working with . . . students.” It would be obvious that “constant adjustments . . . must take place when a teacher is sensitive to both the needs of the students and the demands of the subject.”

4. **Keep instructional opportunities open.** Colleagues I know who are considered by their peers and the public to be excellent teachers are examples of the appropriateness of this point. “Active, alive teachers are active, alive people.” Teachers whom I admire bring their “passion” for some aspect of their private, non-academic life to bear in their classrooms. It may be a love of reading, the environment, space, dance, art, sports, or travel. Regardless, this aspect of themselves should be represented in any portfolio as related to goals and expectations. “Portfolios should include information from others as well as from ourselves . . . who come to us because of our reputation or expertise.”
5. **Reexamine issues in comparability.** Portfolios would enable the evaluation procedure to “reveal potential for more effective teaching and learning . . . . Self-reflective pieces that discuss a teacher’s attempts at innovation and how new ideas ‘worked’ in a classroom” would go “a long way toward helping teachers improve because ‘they enable faculty—indeed REQUIRE them—to become more important actors in monitoring and evaluating the quality of their own work.’”
6. **Study the effect of school policy on portfolio practice.** The author advocates a “go-slow approach” in implementing any portfolio usage. I feel that an excellent place to start would be with new teachers, fresh out of college. If they were asked to keep a portfolio, or “teaching log,” of their

experiences and frustrations as well as their triumphs, perhaps some of the problems they face would not seem so insurmountable. These experiences could be linked to a set of goals.

7. **Enlist the ingenuity of teachers.** The author's explanation of this principle was most encouraging and appreciated. *Teachers* will determine the success of portfolio practice. "We need to view teaching as a complicated, expressive human activity deserving of a sympathetic, thoughtful, flexible response." Formative portfolio assessment would provide the vehicle for this to take place. "Teachers want the freedom and independence to be able to influence positively their students' learning." I believe the author is right on target with her advocacy of portfolio use for evaluation of teachers and their teaching.

– John Chapin  
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I applaud your new open review policy! How healthy! How refreshing! Hooray!

– Marcia Halio  
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