An Overview of Portfolio-based Writing Assessment

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The notion of portfolio-based assessment began to attract attention around the mid-1980s as a reaction against the psychometric climate prevailing at the time. In the United States in the 1980s, there was growing concern about declining educational standards. This atmosphere led to intense pressure to place more emphasis on testing as a means of raising standards, in accordance with the belief that the more students are tested, the more they will be motivated to improve efforts and performance. Elbow and Belandoff (1997), in looking back on that period, noted that "in retrospect, what was striking was urgent and growing pressure for assessment, assessment, assessment: test everything and everyone for a score; don't trust teachers" (pp. 22-23). In fields like composition, in particular, this view of testing was seen as counterproductive to the whole process of teaching and learning the complex, multifaceted skill of writing. As a result, many composition specialists began to search for ways of measuring student writing that would be more consistent with the emerging process approach to writing, allowing other views of student writing than the single, timed test, usually placed at the end of a writing course. In an attempt to find an attractive alternative approach to writing assessment, many composition researchers began to experiment with portfolio-based approaches, and, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, portfolio pedagogy began to emerge as a personal, multiple-use tool for both teachers and students.

In the context of writing instruction and assessment, a portfolio can be defined as "a collection of texts the writer has produced over a defined period of time" (Hamp-Lyons, 1991, p. 262) and the collection may consist of "selected but not necessarily polished or finished pieces" (Privette, 1993, p. 60). To emphasize the fundamentally developmental character of a valid portfolio system, Yancey (1992) set forth the following principles and features:

1. A portfolio is a collection of work, but it is a collection that is a subset of a larger archive. Theoretically, the archive is the whole of a student's work, but more practically and more frequently, it is a subset of writing completed in a class, a program, and a school.
2. The process by which the subset is created is one of selection, which is the second principle of portfolios. How entries are selected varies according to the rhetorical situation contextualizing the portfolio.
3. A third principle is reflection, the process by which a student explains his or her learning.
4. A fourth principle is communication, in the sense that the writing portfolio, like any portfolio, will communicate something about the writer, about what he or she values, about the context in which the writer has worked, and so on.

Yancey (1992) also stated that all portfolios, regardless of the particular context, share three essential characteristics. Firstly, they are longitudinal in nature. That is, in a portfolio classroom, the teacher sets out quite explicitly to create the time necessary for writers to develop. In practice, what this means is that the piece initiated on Monday need not be submitted a week

or two later for a final evaluation. Instead, it can be reshaped and revised in light of what is learned days or weeks or even a month or two later. Secondly, portfolios are diverse in content. That is, as a system, the portfolio is open rather than closed and its contents are intended to be diverse and inclusive. Thirdly, portfolios are almost always collaborative in ownership. In other words, portfolios are created collaboratively by the student as author, working with the teacher and other students as partners, who respond to and advise the writer, helping to evaluate and rework and select pieces to be submitted for the institutional assessment that fully determines the grade.

One advantage cited frequently in the portfolio literature is the notion of student authority or ownership enabled by the opportunity students have to review their writing and decide which pieces they will present to the teachers and what they would like teachers to see in that writing. According to Genesee and Upshur (1996), portfolios stimulate student interaction with peers and student ownership in the learning process. This feeling of ownership is enhanced by the fact that the portfolio experience is not a brief, one-shot presentation of writing. A greater sense of authority or ownership, in turn, can increase learner motivation, since learners feel a greater personal stake in the work they produce.

Another often cited benefit of portfolios is that portfolios can be used to encourage students to reflect on the pieces they write and on the processes they use to write them. Student reflection on their writing in preparation of a portfolio is a key concept in portfolio pedagogy and an essential aspect of learner-directed assessment. According to Murphy (1994), portfolios can be used to encourage students to reflect on the pieces they write and on the processes they use to write them. As Camp and Levine (1991) noted, reflection plays an important role in a portfolio classroom as students study the material they have produced in a writing course and decide what to include in their portfolio and how to present it to the reader.

Although portfolio assessment might be seen as an alternative to traditional approaches to writing assessment, there are some concerns about portfolios, particularly when used for large-scale performance evaluation. One major area of concern is the complexity involved in grading such collections of writing, such as developing appropriate grading guidelines (Hamp-Lyons & Kroll, 1996), maintaining consistency in portfolio grading (White, 1994), and avoiding subjectivity in grading (Smith, 1991). A possible solution to these problems is the development of explicit instructions for both students and instructors that ensure consistency and reliability in both the compilation and evaluation of portfolios (Herman, Gearhart, & Aschbacher, 1996). Yet another concern is the lack of research demonstrating conclusively that portfolios are more effective than other forms of writing assessment. As Condon and Hamp-Lyons (1994) noted, the portfolio has tended to be accepted on the basis of "writing specialists' feeling that the portfolio is better" (p. 227). In addition, portfolios, until now, have appealed more to the L1 teaching domain - mostly elementary and secondary teachers working with native speakers of English - than to the L2 teaching domain. Given that research on portfolio for second language learning is generally recognized to be practically nonexistent (Herman & Winters, 1994), studies on how portfolios influence ESL/EFL instructional and assessment practices are desperately needed in order to provide clarification to stakeholders as to their respective roles and contributions to the learning process.

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