

Promoting Active Learning through Writing Portfolios

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A writing portfolio is a collection of student writing over the course of an academic term in which students organize, select, and reflect on their best work. In this way, students are presenting what they have achieved over the semester and commenting on not only their finished products, but also on their growth as writers. This method of performance assessment more accurately reflects the skills for functioning at university or at work than end of term paper tests (Wiggins, 1989; O'Neil, 1992). Moreover, using writing portfolios in the writing classroom can help students become active learners and critical thinkers (Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991; Kish & Sheehan, 1997). This paper presents how writing portfolios have been implemented at a four-year private university in Japan that advocates the benefits of writing portfolios for students, teachers, and the writing curriculum.

ライティングポートフォリオとは、学生が一学期間あるいは一年間という一定期間の中で書いた作文の中から、各々最も優れた作品群を選び、自己反省を加えたものの集大成である。このシステムを通して学生たちは、その期間に各自達成した成果を提出し、各々の作文のみならず、書き手としていかに成長したか自ら振り返り、考察する。この自己評価法は、学期末テストを行うより正確に、大学や職場においてどれだけ各々の能力が通用するかということを反映する(Wiggins, 1989; O'Neil, 1992)。さらに、作文の授業において、ライティングポートフォリオシステムを活用することにより、学生を積極的な学習者かつ批判能力のある思考者へと育成していくことが可能である(Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991; Kish & Sheehan, 1997)。この論文は、ライティングポートフォリオシステムが、学生や講師、また作文カリキュラムにとっていかに有効な手段であるかを主張するある四年制私立大学において、実際にそれが

どのように行われてきたのかを提示するものである。

Several of the challenges writing teachers face is teaching students to learn from their mistakes and to gain both writing fluency and accuracy over a fairly short period of time. As Leki (1992) explained, students often show little improvement in their writing despite teacher feedback and multiple revisions. One reason for this problem may be that students ignore or do not fully understand teacher feedback. Some of this misunderstanding can be explained because students are often neither given time to analyze or review their mistakes nor are they asked to comment or reflect on their writing skills (Elbow & Belanoff, 1986). In order for students to become more independent and competent writers, to learn from previous writing experiences, and to be more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, students must not only develop writing skills, but also critical thinking skills. One approach in the teaching of writing is the use of writing portfolios which stresses the importance of reflection and review. This paper briefly defines the main principles of writing portfolios and presents a model of how writing portfolios are implemented in a four-year university general English writing program.

A writing portfolio is quite simply a collection of student writing selected from a body of work over a semester or academic year (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991). It can include not only completed works, but also drafts, works in progress, or examples of writing skills from class assignments and activities (Valencia, 1990). In this way, writing portfolios can reflect all the work that students have achieved in a course, not only the final product of several writing assignments. However, a writing portfolio is more than simply a folder containing students' work. Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) list nine characteristics of portfolios:

- (1) The portfolio should be a collection of student work that judges more than a single performance to offer a richer, more complete view of a writer's ability. In this way, the writing portfolio can be a more valid

method of assessment (Elbow & Belanoff, 1986). One-off writing tests can only measure student progress once or twice a year and do not take into account student progress throughout a semester or an academic year (Pierce & O'Malley, 1992; Moya & O'Malley, 1994). One-off writing tests are also limited in that they often only assess one writing task or genre and, thus, are often not truly representative of the writing skills taught in class. Moreover, writing portfolios offer clear connections to the kinds of writing students may encounter once they leave university, as compared to grammar or writing exams, which often fail to assist students in developing the type of active, productive writing skills needed for the workplace (Wiggins, 1989; O'Neil, 1992).

- (2) The portfolio should present a range of writing, such as covering different genres to demonstrate different areas of expertise.
- (3) The portfolio should demonstrate the context in which the learning took place, taking into account the student's level of ability. As Tannenbaum (1996) explained, writing portfolios often consider the learning styles, language proficiencies, and even cultural and educational backgrounds of students.
- (4) The portfolio should offer students the opportunity to return and revise their work so that they become more invested in their own writing.
- (5) The portfolio should offer a selection of student work rather than simply a summation of student work. Students need to review and re-evaluate their own work to see the progress they have made and what they still need to achieve (Conway, 1994).
- (6) The portfolio should be student-centered. Students should be given freedom to decide what to include in the portfolio, whether to revise work or not, or how the work is organized or presented. Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer (1991) also stated the importance of student involvement in the selection of materials, reflection, and evaluation, claiming this involvement leads to increased motivation.
- (7) The portfolio should include reflection and self-assessment. By reviewing and reflecting upon written work, students are more deeply

involved in their own learning (Tierney, Carter, & Desai 1991; Frazier & Paulson, 1992; Smith & Ylvisaker, 1993).

(8) The portfolio should measure growth along specific guidelines. By doing this, students can demonstrate their writing skill and development. In this manner, assessment is more authentic because students are evaluated by what they have actually accomplished in the class (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991; Moya & O'Malley, 1994).

(9) The portfolio should demonstrate development over time. By assessing student progress, writing portfolios represent the students' actual writing abilities and make it easier to assess whether students have progressed sufficiently to pass the course (Elbow, 1994).

It is important to acknowledge that while each of these characteristics can be found in portfolios, they may not be developed equally. However, for writing portfolios to be successful, they must involve students in their writing, must motivate and promote self-assessment and learning, and must represent the work and progress students have achieved throughout the semester or academic year.

Writing Portfolios at the University Level

For teachers or universities considering writing portfolios, there are several model programs to choose from. This paper presents one model of a university writing program which offers writing classes to non-English majors, as electives or as required courses. Most courses are for one academic year, meeting once a week for 90 minutes for two 15-week semesters. Students are streamed by ability, except in elective classes. Regardless of whether they take an elective or a required course, all students must submit a writing portfolio using the following guidelines.

First, each portfolio must contain a minimum of three writing samples where a sample is defined as the accumulated work toward one writing project. Thus, a sample would include not only a final

draft, but also any and all pre-writings and rough drafts written in the process of writing the final draft. In the first semester, students are expected to write at least one paragraph of a minimum of 150 words. In the second semester, students are expected to write at least one multiple-paragraph essay of a minimum of 300 words. Since students are streamed by ability, most classes exceed these requirements. Some teachers ask for more than three samples from their students; however, teachers are encouraged to give students a choice in selection and to not have students select every piece of writing they did. In other words, while students must submit three writing samples, it is assumed that they are writing four to five papers each semester, so that students have a choice of what to submit in the portfolio. In the event that students only write three papers, they are expected to rank their papers with their best work first so that students must still review their work.

Second, students also have to submit a minimum of two reflections with their portfolio. One reflection should concern their writing ability for a particular paper while the other focuses on their overall writing ability for the semester or academic year. Most instructors assign a student reflection for each assignment.

Third, students are required to submit a cover letter with their portfolio that lists what writing samples have been submitted and state the reason why. This checklist serves as not only a student reflection, but also as a guide for the teacher and writing coordinator.

The guidelines are fairly flexible in that teachers have a choice in determining the kind of assignments to give or the choice of textbook to use since classes are streamed by ability and cover different departments with varying needs. For most departments, writing is not a required subject, so students do not need specific writing skills in order to continue to other English language courses. However, students are expected to be able to write cohesive, well-organized and developed paragraphs and essays so that they are able to write in English in their other introductory courses. This course should also prepare students

who elect to take a more advanced English writing class in their own department.

How the portfolio is assessed is also decided by each teacher. However, in principle, students should receive a passing grade for each of the three submitted assignments. The writing portfolio should also be at least 25% of the final grade. If a student fails to submit a portfolio, that student automatically fails the course as if the student had not taken a final exam or not submitted a final report. Since classes are streamed, there should be a higher percentage of students who receive a grade of A in the upper-level classes than in lower-level classes, since the course title is the same for both. Once grades are finished, each teacher selects and submits five sample portfolios to the writing coordinator, who uses the samples to assess the writing program. Some teachers submit the best five portfolios while other teachers submit a range of the best and worst portfolios in the class.

Specifically, the coordinator assesses whether students take a process approach to writing, can successfully respond to a variety of writing tasks, can fulfill the word count requirements (150-word paragraphs in the first semester, 300-word multiple-paragraph essays in the second semester), can correctly format a paper, and can follow basic typing conventions. This review has prompted some changes to the program to better reflect the writing capabilities of the students. For example, students are required to submit three instead of four writing samples per semester to ease the paper load for teachers, and to allow teachers who are teaching the lower streams to spend more time addressing their students' writing problems. However, the word count requirement in the first semester was raised from 100 to 150 words as students even in the lowest stream were found capable of writing this length.

The coordinator also assesses whether teachers assign a variety of level-appropriate assignments that meet course objectives as well as provide feedback on student drafts that addresses both form and

content. Teachers receive written comments from the coordinator on these points.

Step-by-Step Implementation of the Portfolio

At the beginning of the semester, portfolios are introduced, and sample portfolios from previous semesters are shared in small groups. This activity takes one entire class period, but it is essential that students understand what is being expected of them, how important it is for them to save their work, and how they are to be assessed. Students examine each component of the sample portfolios, the cover sheet (Appendix A) for each project (which includes pre-writing, one or two rough drafts, a final draft and a reflection), the final reflection (Appendix B), and the evaluation sheet (Appendix C). Students and teacher also discuss the purpose of a portfolio and the importance of reflection. Students are then asked to purchase a plastic folder and to save all of their work throughout the semester, so that at the end of the semester they will be able to submit a portfolio similar to the samples shown.

In the following weeks, students complete four or five writing projects. After each project is submitted, students write a reflection of their experience and their writing progress (Appendix D). For each writing project, students complete a minimum of one rough draft. Each draft and reflection receives comments from the writing teacher, but may also receive comments from peers. After the final paper is given a grade, students are reminded to put all materials related to that project together and include them in their portfolio. Students who score poorly on a final draft may continue to revise.

In week nine after the first three papers have been completed, students write a report in which they reflect on their writing progress. In the report, students explain what their goals are, how well they are meeting these goals and what their future goals might be, how their

writing has improved and what improvements they still feel they need to be made, which of the papers they may include in their writing portfolio, what their best work so far is and why, and what their writing process was from start to finish for one of the papers they did and how they felt at each stage. This report is done to remind students about the portfolio process, to give students more practice reflecting on their work, and to make them more aware of how they are doing in the course.

In week 15, students finish their final project and must choose three writing projects out of the four or five they wrote in the semester to include in their portfolio. Students are naturally encouraged to choose the papers that they feel represent their best work or the ones that they enjoyed writing. Sometimes students ask for help in selecting papers, so teachers ask them questions about which papers they worked the hardest on or which ones they would most want to share with a friend to guide their decision making.

In week 15, the sample portfolios are again available to help students organize their own portfolios correctly. When students submit their portfolios, teachers verify that it is complete. If it is missing anything, such as a rough draft, students have a choice of submitting the portfolio incomplete (and losing points) or getting a one-week extension to find missing drafts or to complete their work. Students may also revise previous work they have submitted before turning in the portfolio. In this way, students can take the writing skills they have developed and apply them to earlier work, which helps them realize how they have grown as writers. The final revisions also remind students that the writing portfolio is not merely a summation of their work, but is evidence of their skills and growth as writers.

During exam week, students who needed an extension can turn in their portfolio. In the first semester, student portfolios are returned with teacher comments at the start of the second semester. In the second semester, students are able to receive their portfolios at the conclusion

of exam week.

Disadvantages of the Writing Portfolio Model

The greatest challenge for teachers of writing portfolios is time, and the model above is no exception. Collecting student reflections for each assignment and returning them with comments is demanding. Writing classes are burdensome, especially when considering that university teachers, particularly part-time teachers, often have 15 to 20 separate courses per week, each with 30 to 40 (or more) students. The sheer paper load can be stressful. Classroom time is also needed to instruct students in what portfolios are, how they are created, and how they are used in assessment. It can also be time-consuming in coordinated programs to reach a consensus among teachers on how to assess the writing portfolios. However, some of this burden can be reduced if portfolio paperwork collection is part of the daily classroom routine, and students are held accountable for collecting and organizing their information periodically (Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991; Pierce & O'Malley, 1992). It was for this reason that the number of required projects was reduced from four to three and the types of projects assigned is decided by each teacher.

Advantages of the Writing Portfolio Model

In the model above, the writing portfolio encourages student involvement and dialogue through reflections. Since students are involved in the planning, revising, and editing not only of each individual formal assignment, but also in the portfolio as a whole and, therefore, in how they are assessed, the writing portfolios increase the stake students have in their learning. This is evidenced by the fact students often revise their work after receiving a final grade. As Tierney, Carter, and Desai (1991) and Apple and Shimo's (2004) research discovered, students feel portfolios promote active learning by providing them with

ownership of their work, awareness of course goals, accountability, and “continuous and extended learning opportunities” (Apple & Shimo, 2004, p. 56). The self-reflections—particularly the mid-term reflection questions on goals, writing strengths and weaknesses, and types of mistakes or revisions they have made—create learning opportunities for both students and teachers. Sometimes they reveal the thought process behind key writing decisions or areas in which students still lack confidence; they have also given teachers an opportunity to provide individual instruction. In student feedback, students also commented that the reflections were helpful for them, giving them focus or making them more aware of their actual writing skills.

Another advantage of this model is that students and teachers have considerable freedom. Teachers can decide for themselves whether to assign four or five projects and can choose what types of genres or projects they like. By giving teachers choices, they can then teach to their own individual strengths, and the writing portfolio becomes less of a burden on them. Since students also have freedom to choose what projects to include in the portfolio, they are able to present their best work and demonstrate what they can do rather than what they cannot. For some students, the writing portfolio becomes a source of pride as evidenced by the fact that some students come to reclaim their portfolio at the end of the second semester.

Conclusion

While there are issues about time and effort and even whether portfolios actually lead to an improvement of writing ability, writing portfolios can be a valuable tool in promoting student involvement in their own learning. They encourage students to become involved not only in each piece of writing, but also in the selection of materials for the portfolio and in how they are assessed. This student empowerment can lead to greater student autonomy and motivation. Writing portfolios

can also promote the development of critical thinking skills by having students analyze their own work and their ability as writers through self-reflections and reviewing previous work. Finally, writing portfolios are a more valid means of assessment than a one-off writing test because they examine a collection of work, chart a student's growth as a writer over time, and cover a range of assignments. The model presented in this paper offers one example of how portfolios can be implemented into a writing curriculum or into a writing classroom in order to take advantage of the many benefits portfolios can bring to both students and teachers.

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Appendix A

Portfolio Checklist

Student Name:

Student Number:

Choose four of the projects below to include in your portfolio.

Introducing a classmate Outline Rough draft Final draft Reflection	Why did you decide to include this in your portfolio?
Narration: Telling a story Outline Rough draft Final draft Reflection	Why did you decide to include this in your portfolio?
Describing a favorite place Outline Rough draft Final draft Reflection	Why did you decide to include this in your portfolio?
Describing a process Outline Rough draft Final draft Reflection	Why did you decide to include this in your portfolio?
Comparison and contrast Outline Rough draft Final draft Reflection	Why did you decide to include this in your portfolio?

Appendix B

Final Portfolio Reflection

Answer each of the questions below.

1. Which assignments were the easiest and most difficult? Why?

2. Which assignment was the most enjoyable? Why?

3. What improvements have you made in your writing this semester?

4. What do you want to improve upon for next semester?

5. Which assignment do you think is your best work? Why?

6. How do you feel about sharing your work with your classmates?
Why?

Appendix C

Final Portfolio Evaluation

Student Name:	Student Response	Teacher Response
1. Is the portfolio neat in appearance?		
2. Does it contain all the final drafts and rough drafts?		
3. Does the portfolio include the final reflection?		
4. Does the portfolio contain three assignments that received a passing grade?		
5. Does the portfolio demonstrate a well-organized and developed essay?		
6. Does the portfolio demonstrate creativity and/or uniqueness?		
7. Does the portfolio demonstrate writing improvement and/or hard work?		
8. Does the portfolio demonstrate the process approach to writing?		
9. Does the portfolio demonstrate the proper formatting and typing conventions?		

What grade do you feel you deserve for this class and why?

Teacher Comments:

Appendix D

Self-reflection: Interviewing and introducing a classmate

Your Name:

Student Number:

What did you think about this assignment?

How did you feel about typing the final draft?

What interesting things did you learn about your partner?

What question(s) would you still like to ask them if you had had more time?

What type of errors did your teacher mark on your rough draft?

What did you add to your paper when you rewrote it for the final draft?

What was the most difficult thing about this assignment?

Are you satisfied with your effort and the final product? Why?