

Part I



Writing Group One: *Creating Our Professional Identities*



Build It and They Will Learn: Portfolios Revisited

George Seaman
Kell High School

While taking a graduate level education course in the Spring of 1999, I was asked to select a topic for a teacher research project. Immediately, I knew the topic I wanted to address—student portfolios. Since most of my other classes in the graduate program involved writing and composition theory, I had been exposed frequently in my readings to the idea of using portfolios as a more authentic assessment tool to measure student achievement. Also, many of these classes incorporated portfolios as part of the assessment process. However, these limited experiences did not provide me with the knowledge or confidence I would need to implement a portfolio program in my own classroom. Thus, this assignment gave me the perfect opportunity to learn more about the portfolio movement.

As I started my research, one of the books on my reading list discussed the environment of a portfolio classroom. I remember being very much intrigued by the contents of the chapter, and more specifically, by the environment associated with a portfolio classroom: students who take responsibility for their learning, teachers who serve more as mentors than as authority figures, and learning that is meaningful and measurable in student terms. Perhaps I was a bit disappointed because the reading did not offer a convenient list of “how to’s” in starting a portfolio program; however, I was inspired by the idea that changing my practices and attitudes about assessment could also facilitate the development of a more academic and collegial atmosphere, that together, my students and I would work to build a portfolio classroom.

Which Came First, the Portfolio or the Environment?

I was ready to jump on the portfolio bandwagon, eager to see energized students engaged in dynamic learning activities that would be documented in our portfolios, but before I could start, I had one question: how do I begin to establish this environment that seemed a prerequisite to a portfolio classroom? It seemed that if I did not create a climate that placed students in the center of their learning, then the portfolio process itself would suffer. Instead, should I move forward first with the ideas I had developed about

student portfolios and hope that the environment would soon follow? Four years later, after experimenting with and modifying various approaches to student portfolios, I am able to appreciate the paradoxical nature of the question and the obvious answer. Which comes first, the environment or the portfolio? The answer is, of course, both. And neither. I realize now that it would have been impossible simply to alter the learning environment needed to build effective student portfolios unless I was able to develop a portfolio plan that gave students a greater sense of ownership of their learning. Similarly, students would not have invested the time, energy, and resources necessary to create meaningful portfolio entries unless the environment of the classroom reinforced the idea that they were in charge of their own learning. Over time, in implementing and refining a portfolio program, I discovered that the environment and the portfolio work together, each one improving the quality of the other. I also came to the realization that the word “portfolio,” when used in reference to an assessment tool, is as much about the process as it is the actual product. As I strove to identify the principles that characterized the classroom environment I was able to create with portfolios, three essential themes emerged that are central to this building process: student ownership, the student as individual, and reflection through writing. In essence, by implementing these principles in our day-to-day activities and interactions, I was able to use them as the cornerstones of the portfolio classroom.

Student Ownership

I realize now that if students are to have a genuine interest in their educational experience, they need to have a more active role in the process. If I expect my students to value and respect the time we spend in my class, then they need to believe that they are instrumental in building the environment that facilitates their learning and success. Therefore, a crucial component of the portfolio environment and my portfolio pedagogy is student ownership. One of the primary goals of my portfolio system is to get students more active in and aware of their learning processes and the activities we use to achieve and measure this learning. With portfolios, I came to realize that assessment is meaningless unless it communicates to students both their areas of growth and those areas that still need improvement. Like too many of my students, I believed that my assessment strategies were to be used primarily to compute a fair final grade. What I didn't realize, though, is that the final grade mattered little to students if they perceived that they had little or no control in deciding how this

learning could be demonstrated. I also figured out that too many of my students placed too much emphasis on this final grade instead of on the actual learning that takes place during the semester.

I recognized early in the development of my portfolio program that students should include essays from past classes that we could use as benchmarks. This practice was described in most of the research articles I had read earlier. Now when I ask my students at the beginning of the term to locate these essays, I am no longer surprised when most students tell me that they are unable to do this. "Where are they?" I ask. "We throw them away" is the common response. Thus, students believe that the primary function of their writing is the letter grade it receives from the teacher. It has no value to them after the grade is given because it has served its purpose. As I explain my portfolio system to students, I tell them that the many and diverse artifacts we will produce during the semester are records of their growth, and therefore, vital components to the assessment process. As students compile their final portfolios at term's end, they have the opportunity to tell me what they've learned as documented in their portfolios. I am also asking students to become more responsible in tracking their progress, and as this responsibility matures in my students, they begin to value more the learning that is taking place and to see their work as accomplishments of this learning. Carole Ackerson Bertisch also comments on this change that results from portfolios: "The responsibility, therefore, shifts from teacher to student so that by the end of the year, students should be able to evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses and write about them" (55).

Another shift that has occurred in an attempt to increase the level of student ownership is my diminished presence in the classroom *as an authority figure*. However, this shift does not diminish the important role that a teacher must play in a portfolio classroom. Chancer states, "It is the teacher who sets in place the conditions and the structures for what will eventually become a portfolio culture" (90). I try to serve more as a mentor, working together with my students to establish meaningful learning objectives and activities and helping them to recognize and celebrate their growth. Initially, I was concerned that this shift would bring about more behavioral problems, and indeed, I still have students who make poor choices when exercising greater freedom in my class. However, because the portfolios give my students a greater sense of ownership in the classroom, most will eventually learn to appreciate the vital role that they play in creating our learning community; as members of this community, they seem more concerned in creating and sustaining an environment that will allow all members to contribute to our learning. In other words, students become responsible when they learn how to accept responsibility.

This shift in my classroom environment has allowed me to put aside the old podium I once used to hold my lecture notes, and the overhead projector now sits dormant in the corner of the room collecting dust. Instead, our class discussions will typically find me squeezed into a student desk alongside my students, allowing our conversations to develop spontaneously, unrehearsed, and unscripted. With this new approach, I never know exactly how and when the discussion will end, but this slight bit of uncertainty is well worth the interest and engagement my students show as they actively contribute to the learning taking place during our discussions. Most students also seem to appreciate the quality of these discussions. One student, Ashley, commented in her end-of-semester reflection:

In the first few weeks of the semester, I was surprised at the lack of emphasis on the usual note taking many classes use to stamp the concepts into the student's head. Discussions, thought-provoking questions (that's right—not the questions that are copied out of the book), assignments on interpretation of the works, and personal reflections replaced those dull notes. I loved the way we were given the opportunity to draw our own conclusions about the meaning or significance of different works, and our ability to question our previous judgments and interpretations.

Certainly, Ashley is slightly advanced in her assessment of her learning experience; she focuses more on the process, and she has identified some of the key characteristics of the portfolio environment, namely an approach focused on student-centered activities and learning. She recognizes that there are multiple instructional models, and she has reflected on how the differences in those models affect her learning experience. Not all of my students are ready to assess the process of their learning, at least not as articulately as Ashley has—most focus primarily on what was learned—but giving them the opportunity to participate in student-centered learning activities prepares them to start making these observations.

The Student as an Individual

As I've tried to establish this sense of inclusive community in the class, I've also realized that students become more active in their learning when I get to know each of them as individuals. To be an effective mentor, I need to learn about the individual talents and interests of my students. As we learn about these individual strengths and abilities, we also learn that the classroom environment we are building is enriched by individuality and diverse points

of view. So compared to the one-size-fits-all approach to student assessment (i.e., unit tests, finals, etc.), the portfolio system allows me to acknowledge my students as individuals, each with a different set of life experiences, each with varying levels of skills and different interests. Thus, the portfolio allows me to see more closely how each of my students has progressed over the semester and how each one has internalized and applied the various concepts and lessons to his or her own understanding. Hopefully, the final portfolio also allows my students to witness for themselves the learning that has taken place during the semester.

One way that I have tried to individualize this form of assessment is to allow students to develop their own personal plans of improvement (PPI) for grammar, mechanics, and usage. Using the results from a pre-test that we take early in the semester, each student develops a plan that will allow him or her to show improvement on the post-test at the end of the semester. Between the tests, we have several resource days when students have the opportunity to work on their areas of weakness. We call them resource days because students have access to a number of resources—writing books, supplementary materials, one-on-one conferences with me—that will assist them in learning the skills that are covered on the post-test. In order for students to develop a sense of ownership and responsibility, it is important for them to set goals for themselves and then to work towards the completion of those goals. This objective, I have found, works better with skills that can be quantified, so we use this method in working to improve areas that are measurable with test results.

Our resource-day activities yield another benefit: they allow me to recognize individual effort and to reward those students who have demonstrated positive work habits throughout the semester. This recognition is possible because students collect the work samples and reflections that are produced during our resource days and then submit these with their final portfolios. Therefore, when I ask students to reflect on their present grammar skills and to consider their post-test scores as one output of their efforts, they can also see the notes and exercises that were produced during resource days. When I ask students at the end of the semester to write their reflections on the resource-day experience, many do have positive things to say. However, many also comment on the possibility that less motivated students will choose to be less-than-productive during this very student-centered activity. This possibility certainly exists; however, I believe that perhaps some students, before they are able to learn the specifics of standard English, need to learn responsibility and the ways in which decisions have consequences. Those students who choose not to be productive on our resource days are usually presented with an unsatisfactory grade on the post-test, and the contents of their portfolios

reveal to them, and to me, that they did not make good decisions on resource days. More important, perhaps, is that many of these students are willing to attribute their poor performances on the post-test to the bad decisions they made during resource days in their end-of-semester reflections.

On the other hand, there are students who enjoy the opportunity to establish goals for themselves and exercise the freedom given to them on our resource days. One student in my sophomore World Literature class, Janet, commented on this freedom in her last reflection: "It helps me feel more of an adult, sort of like my own boss." I want Janet, and all my students, to be in control when it comes to her learning. Janet's comment clearly shows that she has benefited from this shift in environment and that she appreciates the greater freedom and responsibility that results from my efforts to serve more as a mentor. Her statement also reinforces my belief that internal motivation serves as the best inspiration for authentic student learning.

Another component of my portfolio system that allows students to make the best of individual strengths and interests is the Self-Directed Inquiry (SDI). Prior to the shift in environment, I had assigned research activities to students, but typically I had provided a narrow range of curriculum-related topics. After completing my own self-directed study as part of my graduate studies, however, I realized that it was an effective learning experience because I was allowed to choose a topic that was meaningful to me—writing portfolios. Now when students complete their SDIs, *they* select a topic that relates somehow to our classroom studies, *they* become the "classroom expert" on the topic through research activities, and finally *they* present their information to the class in a student presentation. I stress to students that they should select a topic that is of interest to them already or a topic about which they would like to know more. Two topics that arose from our study of poetry last year included a look at the symbolic meanings of the components of the Korean flag, a topic selected by a Korean student, and an analysis of the emotional qualities associated with certain colors, a topic that worked well with our study of imagery. I could not have anticipated these two topics as areas of research before starting our poetry unit. However, these two topics had some special relevance for the student researchers, and consequently, all members of the class benefited from the knowledge each student added to the poetry unit and the enthusiasm present in each presentation.

For this assignment students are still engaged in activities that address traditional standards, such as research skills, oral delivery, and composition, but hopefully they are refining these skills in such a way that seems relevant and meaningful to them. Furthermore, this activity reinforces the notion that I am not the sole authority in the class and that each student possesses some

knowledge and experience that can enhance the learning environment of the class. During student presentations I become a student in the audience, a learner who is benefiting from the contributions made by someone else in our learning community. Again, by diminishing my presence in the classroom as teacher, I give students the sense that this is not my classroom, but our classroom, and they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership in their educational experience.

Reflection Through Writing

One day in class my students and I were discussing the nature of the learning process. I recall one student in particular questioning why we write so many reflections in my class. So our discussion continued with more student questions and comments until the dialogue led all of us to the final question that seemed to answer the initial question: if you learn something but you aren't fully aware that you learned it, did you truly learn anything? This dialogue helped me to understand the valuable role that reflection plays during the learning and assessment processes.

The artifacts that make up my student portfolios are certainly important because they help my students to communicate *what* they have learned during a particular lesson or activity. The reflections that are written about these artifacts, however, are just as essential because they allow my students to analyze *how* they learned. They are now able to recognize attitudes or practices that may have helped or hindered the learning process or the production of the artifact; they are now able to see the connections between the prior knowledge that they brought to the learning experience and the new lessons learned; and they are now able to predict how this knowledge might be applied to future situations or experiences.

These reflective essays are also important because they open up the dialogue that allows us, the teacher and student, to consider more closely the learning that has been achieved and to analyze the thought process that enabled this learning. This understanding has helped me to better appreciate the purpose of the margin notes that I place on student essays: they are to keep up my end of the conversation and to continue the learning process for my students. Consequently, the nature and quality of these comments have changed. I find myself asking students many more questions about the development of their thoughts, and as students respond to these inquiries, in writing or through internal reflection, hopefully the dialogue continues.

Finally, because the reflections in the portfolios become the voices of my students, communicating to me in clear and thoughtful language the

accomplishments of the semester, they generate another dialogue that allows me to reflect on the effectiveness of my teaching. As Galley suggests, "A reflective teacher needs many frames of reference to draw upon. By using multiple lenses, I see much more clearly what I have done for one student that I need to continue. But I also see what I need to do to make it even better" (7). Thus, the reflections and artifacts included in the portfolio provide important qualitative data on the learning experiences of the students. These reflections reveal to me how my students feel about the classroom environment we've built. I was thrilled to read the following comment in Theresa's end-of-semester reflection: "I have grown in writing by learning to be willing to make mistakes." Through this lens I received affirmation that our emphasis on brainstorming and revising and on our frequent workshop and peer editing sessions allowed Theresa to put the purpose of the grade in proper perspective. She realized that taking risks and making mistakes will inevitably lead to growth and progress. I also see that Theresa was willing to make mistakes because she no longer viewed me as the red-pen-wielding teacher ready to pounce on the first grammatical mistake I saw. The portfolio environment and my role as mentor allowed Theresa to take risks in her writing and to recognize the growth in her writing process.

Epilogue

I've come a long way since that research project four years ago. I now have a clearer picture of what I want to achieve through student portfolios, and I've developed many ideas and lessons that work to create a "portfolio environment" in my classroom. I now know that students not only need to be exposed to important writers and pieces of literature, but also to think about other seemingly peripheral factors (peripheral in the sense that they do not appear in curriculum guides) that will have as big an impact on the students' learning experience as the curriculum: the attitudes they hold about the institution of education, the inherent values that have shaped these attitudes, and the role they feel an education will play in their lives. As Callahan has noted, implementing portfolios, over time, can lead an instructor to "a portfolio-based philosophy of fostering literacy" that sets student learning in a larger educational context (120).

I've learned that students need to have trust in me as their teacher so that they are willing to attempt the challenges that I will present to them during the semester. Ironically, this trust does not result because they see me as an infallible authority on language and literature, but because they, or most anyway, come to realize that I care about their learning. The

learning journey we embark on will be an empowering experience for all of us, so long as I resist the temptation to adopt the “coverage” mentality that forsakes quality learning experiences. Student portfolios and the environment of a portfolio classroom make my resistance to this temptation much stronger. Dudley seems to agree: “Portfolios provide the opportunity for reflection that might otherwise be missing from my classroom, as we move busily through the hours and days of a school year, always trying to fit more reading and writing into every class period. The creation of portfolios makes us stop, think, choose, and reflect, activities for which my students and I need to take time” (3).

In essence, I’ve learned that the process is so much more important than the product. This notion can certainly be a hard sell to students who realize their college placement will be partly determined by their grade point averages. Further, most parents seem concerned mostly about the test scores that are published regularly in the media, test scores that are used to compare schools within a district, districts within a state, or states across the country. Admittedly, I’m not sure if emphasizing the process over the product is better preparing my students for these standardized tests. The real danger, though, in students’ placing too much emphasis on the product, or the grade, or the test score, is that they will never develop a true appreciation of learning for learning’s sake. What motivation will they have to learn if the reward is taken away? What motivation will my students have as adults to value learning, to continue to grow intellectually, if they believe the true output of the learning process is a number?

Even though my experiences with student portfolios have led me to a deeper understanding and appreciation for what can be accomplished through assessment, I also acknowledge that many questions and challenges remain. I know that once I feel that I’ve developed a portfolio plan that will serve all of my students every year, I will have violated the key principles that I’ve identified here that serve to make the portfolios worthwhile. Indeed, a concern I had at the onset of this writing was that some might perceive these reflections as offering a blueprint to be followed by others in developing a portfolio plan for their own classrooms. This plan works for me, but as I continue to learn from the reflections of my students and my own observations, this plan is always subject to change. Elizabeth A. Herbert, principal at Crow Island School, echoes this idea after using portfolios with her students for ten years: “we realize that there is no best notion of what goes into a portfolio; rather, portfolios serve as a metaphor for our continued belief in the idea that children can play a major role in the assessment of their own learning” (2). After ten years, Herbert and her colleagues still acknowledge that a portfolio

classroom must be dynamic so that it can meet the needs of all learners in the classroom. I've been using student portfolios only four years. And so, the process, the learning, the journey continues.

Reflection

Teaching and research are closely connected, especially for the reflective educator. Being reflective becomes more productive when you have the opportunity to share your thinking with other teachers, when research you are doing in your classroom has an audience eager to listen, respond, advise, and help refine your thinking.

As our writing group work got under way, I had just moved to a first-year school. I would be teaching in a new department, in a different room, with students from very different socioeconomic backgrounds. Also, I would be teaching a World Literature course for the first time. Trying to adjust to these changes would be challenging enough; writing about portfolios as I tried to transport this system from my old high school to a totally new setting would present another set of challenges.

I began my essay by discussing the importance of the environment in a portfolio classroom. As I worked through the early drafts of my chapter, I was using the word "environment" primarily to describe the intangible characteristics, or the atmosphere, of a learning site that creates a place where portfolios can be used to stimulate and enhance student achievement. As the school year and our project progressed, however, my writing group led me to see that "environment" also applies to the physical place that is the classroom. For example, in my old classroom I had file cabinets in the room to store student artifacts and a designated wall in the room to showcase student research projects. In other words, I was able to use this physical space of the classroom to help students achieve our portfolio goals. But now, in a new setting, these factors would be different. I was unable to secure a file cabinet for my student work, and the lack of technology in the new room made it more difficult for students to use Power Point for their research presentations.

As our small writing group began meeting, and when I was still trying to get acclimated to my new teaching situation, it seemed that these changes were having an adverse effect on me and my essay. "What is my focus?" I asked my peers. "Do I write about my experiences in my old school or the new school?" Dede, Carol, and Debby reminded me that the essay was not really about particular experiences or lessons, but about the larger philosophical objectives that were driving my portfolio program. This, they assured me, could be reinforced by the organizational plan of the essay. As I considered their feedback, I realized that three organizing principles which guided my portfolio program at my old school—student ownership, the student as individual, and reflection through writing—were transportable to my new context, because they are prerequisites for authentic student learning, regardless

of the setting. The lessons and the curricula would change, students would change, and yes, even my pedagogy would change with new experiences. One thing that didn't change, though, was my commitment to student learning and the belief that using portfolios as the centerpiece of assessment would facilitate this learning.

Another comment made by my peers also helped me to see more clearly the focus of my essay. After reading my draft, all group members agreed that an important piece was missing from the writing—my students. “We see you in this essay,” was the comment, “but we really don't see your students. You need to give them some voice. How does the portfolio experience affect them?” On the surface, this issue could be addressed easily enough. Since it was early December, I knew that I would be receiving my students' end-of-semester portfolios the next week. I had encouraged them to write about their learning experiences in the reflections that go into their portfolios, so I read these more closely, looking for those comments that addressed student portfolios or the classroom environment. I wouldn't have known to look for this material if my writing group hadn't suggested it.

The questions my colleagues asked about my students also allowed me to reconsider some of the more significant themes of the essay. They reminded me that this essay was not only about the portfolio system I had developed over the course of three years, but also about my students. They reminded me that the classroom environment I was trying to analyze in my writing is really a product of the interactions between me and my students. At my new school the student population was very different from the students at the old one. Thus, it was only natural that the classroom environment would also be different.

This realization helped me better to understand some of the frustrations I was encountering in the new school with my portfolio plan. In essence, I realized that some of my students were really struggling with the “student ownership” concept. As I reflected on the increased diversity of my student population and the lower socioeconomic area served by my new school, I realized why some of my students might be hesitant to accept some of this “ownership.” Perhaps experience had taught them that the institution of education does not always treat different students equally and equitably. Perhaps they had experienced firsthand an ESOL program that was understaffed and underfunded. Perhaps they had also seen reports in the media that criticize standardized tests because of possible biases. These are issues that I must confront in class partly because I do not want my students to use these claims as excuses to justify failure or even a lack of interest in school. “You need to give them some voice,” was the main comment I heard from my writing group. Now I see my portfolio system as an attempt to do just that—to give my students some voice in their educational experiences.

My group members' call to put my students more in the forefront of my writing certainly made the essay stronger. Having a group from such different backgrounds

responding positively to my work also provided great motivation to stay committed to the essay throughout the challenging writing process. Getting regular, positive feedback in a timely manner made it easier to stay on track, and it increased my confidence that I have something to offer the profession. Finding my thinking pushed also had an impact on my writing beyond this particular piece. I guess the word is "validated." I found my own professional writing voice.

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