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# Writing portfolios in a first grade classroom

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# Writing portfolios in a first grade classroom

## **Abstract**

Much attention has been given to the authentic assessment of children's involvement in the writing process. Such assessment entails descriptive, or qualitative techniques. One descriptive technique is portfolios. In developing portfolios, students can become actively involved in their own learning and in establishing goals for future learning. Thus, instruction can be more closely related to assessment.

How writing portfolios were implemented in a first grade classroom is discussed. Two reluctant writers were particularly focused on as they developed their writing portfolios. These children selected exhibits for their portfolios with support from their teacher. As they developed their collections, the students began to examine their progress and instructional needs and then to reflect on setting future goals for writing.

Writing Portfolios  
in a First Grade Classroom

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## Abstract

Much attention has been given to the authentic assessment of children's involvement in the writing process. Such assessment entails descriptive, or qualitative techniques. One descriptive technique is portfolios. In developing portfolios, students can become actively involved in their own learning and in establishing goals for future learning. Thus, instruction can be more closely related to assessment.

How writing portfolios were implemented in a first grade classroom is discussed. Two reluctant writers were particularly focused on as they developed their writing portfolios. These children selected exhibits for their portfolios with support from their teacher. As they developed their collections, the students began to examine their progress and instructional needs and then to reflect on setting future goals for writing.

A strong trend in language arts programs is to view writing as a process to create meaning. As children are involved in the writing process, their thinking-language abilities are enhanced (Valencia, 1990).

In order to assess children's involvement in the writing process, qualitative assessment techniques need to be used to describe their progress and instructional needs. Such measures can connect instruction and assessment more closely (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991). As a result, many school districts are moving away from the traditional way of assessment through standardized tests. These tests assess fragments of knowledge and tasks instead of showing what a student understands and can apply and how effective the school programs are.

Portfolios, a qualitative technique, can provide for an ongoing assessment of writing and can make a closer connection between instruction and assessment because they represent children's learning experiences. They are collections of individual children's work that demonstrate progress over time (Mundell & DeLario, 1994).

After a review of professional literature, I will describe how I implemented writing portfolios as an assessment technique into my first grade writing program. I studied two reluctant writers in particular throughout this implementation period as they collaborated with me in reflecting on their progress and

instructional needs in writing and then in setting goals for future writing activity.

### Portfolios as an Assessment Technique

#### Value of Portfolios

Portfolios are collections of information representing many types of samples that show students' continual progress. Collections of writing exhibits can become powerful educational tools for encouraging students to take charge of their own learning, for they foster active engagement in self-evaluation (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991; Valencia, 1990). They are collaboratively selected over time by students and their teachers and then used to measure growth and to guide instructional programs (Batzle, 1992; Valencia, 1990). According to Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer (1991), "A collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit and evidence of student self-reflection" (p. 60).

Students are the sole owners of their portfolios. They are responsible for choosing the pieces from the different areas of the school program for their portfolios. Whenever students feel involved in an activity, they usually invest greater energy to do the task well (DeFina, 1992). Through portfolio collection, students can come face to face with their thoughts, feelings, and strengths. As writers, they can justify each selection and can

understand their gains in writing ability (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991). Portfolios work well in classrooms in which teachers provide real audiences, such as small peer groups, book buddies, and parents, to whom children can share their collections (Lamme & Hysmith, 1991).

### Implementation of Writing Portfolios

Traditionally, portfolios have been used by artists to demonstrate their skills and achievements through different samples of work (Valencia, 1990). When introducing the concept of portfolio collection to students, teachers need to show models of either the teacher's or other children's writing collections (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991; Frank, 1994). Examples of the different types of writing that can be placed in the writing portfolio need to be shown. These pieces can be imaginative and realistic stories, poems, responses to reading, writing across the curriculum, unit projects, letters as well as pieces representing the components of the writing process (Valencia, 1990). Each child's collection will represent his/her interests, experiences, and involvement in the writing process throughout the school year (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991).

Students can keep two writing collections throughout the school year--a folder containing their writing pieces that represent the different components of the writing process and a portfolio housing works selected from the writing folder. As each

writing exhibit is added to the portfolio, a label explaining the reason for its selection can be attached to it. The form for the label should include the reason for the selection, the piece's strengths, and the instructional goal for future writing (Frank, 1994). Labels can include such comments as "The story has a great ending," "the report includes lots of important details," or "the story was fun to write" (Five, 1993). As students reflect on their portfolio selections, they will need teacher support. The labeling of their work will progressively show reflections more closely related to their writing goals and their involvement in the writing process (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991).

Portfolios should be kept in a location in the classroom that is easily accessible to the students and the teacher. Valencia (1990) states, "Unlike the secretive grade book or the untouchable permanent records stored in the office, these are working folders. Their location must invite students and teacher to contribute to them on an ongoing basis and to reflect on their contents to plan the next learning steps" (p. 339). Portfolios can be housed in many types of containers, such as cardboard boxes, scrapbooks, three-ring binders, a file folder, or an accordion-type folder (Batzle, 1992).

Several assessment techniques can support portfolio assessment. Journals can help students identify topics to develop into writing pieces and can extend their perspective on the

writing process (Clemmons, Lasse, Cooper, Areglado, & Dill, 1993). Teachers can note pertinent information in a log book that has a section for each child. Checklists, which can be part of a log book, can assist teachers in making note of each child's use of writing conventions (Batzle, 1992).

Conferences with individual students can assist them in reflecting on their progress and instructional needs. Batzle (1992) emphasizes the importance of letting the children talk about their written samples and listening to what they say about them--what their intentions and goals are. The scheduling of student-teacher writing conferences can be determined by the students' progress and needs and by the time the teacher has to give to them. Also, conferences can occur at the end of scheduled intervals to aid portfolio collection (Graves, 1994; Valencia, 1990). Teachers need to keep a running record of conferences. Conferences should end with students stating their future goals. From these conferences, individual or small-group instruction can be conducted on the elements of the writing process (Frank, 1994).

At the end of the school year, the collection of exhibits in the working portfolio can be surveyed. With the support of the teacher, each student can select pieces that represent his/her writing activity and progress during the year. These exhibits can be sent on to the next grade level. The remaining writing pieces

can be boxed or bound and sent home with the child (DeFina, 1992).

### Implementation of Portfolio Assessment in a First Grade Writing Program

As a classroom teacher, I implemented for the first time writing portfolios in my first grade. Because my instructional program focused on writing as a process to create meaning, portfolios as an instruction-assessment technique were appropriate.

When I began the year, I realized that this class had several members who exhibited social behavior more typical of younger children. Many of these children hesitated to take risks in writing chiefly because they had had little opportunity to write. During the first month of school no matter how much I reassured them and supported them in their efforts, these students made little progress in becoming involved in the writing process.

Each morning we began with a student dictating a story to me. The story was written on chart paper with the other children helping me spell the words. Each day I modeled writing: how to touch and set letters from the headline to the baseline, space words, form complete sentences, and use capitalization and punctuation. We also established word lists from theme and unit

studies and used dictionaries which represented important concepts emerging in the school experience.

A writing center was established with supplies for the students' writing experiences. Such items as pencils, crayons, markers, erasers, stencils, date stamps, staplers, and a variety of sizes of paper, both lined and unlined, were located in an easily accessible area. The teacher modeled for the children how to keep this area organized so they then could be responsible for maintaining it.

I explained the elements of the writing process through mini-lessons to the whole group in which I modeled from my own writing. Then, as the children progressed in their writing, I used their works. The first mini-lesson focused on how to develop a topic list which they could keep in their work folder and add to throughout the year. Then, they always had ideas for starting a new piece.

To support my students' writing experiences, I read aloud four or five picture books each day and conducted discussions about them. These experiences provided models of language from the different genres and content for the students' stories.

Each child was given a pocket folder in which to keep writing pieces. These containers were kept in the children's desks. I explained that their works in progress could be

collected in the folders and that eventually they could work on publishing a story.

These activities established the groundwork for writers workshop which was a daily scheduled time for individual writing. At 10:30 each day, the children were to write for 10-15 minutes. Each child was given a notebook pad to use as a journal for responding to this experience. They were free to choose any topic to write or draw about.

I also wrote at this time and I circulated around the classroom keeping anecdotal records of students' progress and instructional needs on a clipboard and visiting with individual students. The children might share with me what they were working on, or they might just want some assistance spelling a word. Sometimes, they read the start of their piece for me. I observed many stages of writing in their pieces during this time.

The first few weeks of school I met with each child every day or every other day about his/her writing. At that point, the children could not recall what they had written after two days had passed. Their pieces were short enough that I could conference with 22 students in 30-40 minutes. As the year progressed, the writing period was extended to thirty minutes.

During this thirty-minute block of writing time, the children were emerged in many aspects of the writing process: sometimes, starting new pieces, finishing a piece, sharing a

piece with a friend for ideas, or conferencing with the teacher. I assisted my reluctant writers in selecting writing topics and in using the word lists from theme and unit studies, the leader stories on the chart, and the dictionaries in the room.

During the conferences, we discussed the piece the child was working on and what the student saw as his/her own strengths and weaknesses. We then focused on setting goals for future writing. As the children saw their own growth, they became more interested in writing.

Each quarter my first grade students chose pieces for their working portfolios. They usually chose between two to four pieces each time to include in their portfolio. The first two quarters of school I had the students dictate to me as they labeled their best work pieces. After two quarters, the children were able to reflect on their selections and write their own labels. Even my most reluctant writers asked for little support in doing this task. As the year progressed, the writing portfolio provided opportunities for the students to see what progress they had made and what goals needed to be set for future learning.

The writers workshop and portfolios were also introduced to parents at the beginning of the school year. During Parent Night in September, the teacher showed examples of the writing portfolios to the parents and explained the purpose of them. They were told there would be opportunities to view these portfolios

at the first-quarter conference time and again at Open House Night in January. They were also told that the third-quarter conferences would be student-led. The students would share their work and explain their learning through their portfolios. Also, time could be set aside for just the teacher and parent to conference if the parents requested it. They were also welcome to examine the portfolios at any time throughout the year. At the third-quarter conferences, parents were asked to fill out questionnaires to ascertain their responses to their child's learning as reflected in the portfolios.

#### Portfolio Assessment with Reluctant Writers in Grade One

During the school year, I particularly studied two reluctant writers as they developed their portfolio collections. I wanted to know more about their involvement in the writing process and how they progressed in gaining writing abilities.

#### Student A

This boy was socially immature and did not readily take risks. He had delayed speech. His mother, a primary grade teacher, valued literature and had exposed her child to many quality books. She, too, was concerned about his lack of language progress. The child had difficulty selecting topics for writing throughout the year and did not see writing as an important part of learning until the third quarter of the school year.

First quarter. Student A's first contribution to his portfolio in September was a journal entry to his mom and dad for Parent Night (see Figure 1). It was difficult for him to express ideas through writing. He needed much encouragement from the teacher.

Figure 1

First-Quarter Selection

9-9-96  
 MOM DAD  
 I I S  
 STR  
 I I K G

I like school.  
 centers

I like gym.

In the selection, Student A knew how to spell "Mom" and "Dad." He produced beginning sounds--"I l s"--for "I like school." He demonstrated knowledge of beginning, middle and end sounds--"STR"--for the word "centers." In writing "I like gym," he wrote beginning and some medial sounds. He capitalized "I" perhaps because he had seen the word in a child's story on a chart which had been dictated to the teacher.

Second quarter. After conferencing at the end of October, Student A noticed progress in his own work. When I asked him what

he could do in writing that he could not do at the beginning of the year, he said that he was putting in periods, writing sentences, and spelling more words correctly (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Second-Quarter Selection

We Had Comandski it  
 We had Community circle  
 way was Fun. fun we Have  
 music and gym  
 we mi- night Hav a happy gram  
 In Comandski I said  
 I ran in to the wds  
 Mrs. Friday. Can you  
 rit Bak.

Reflecting on the second quarter, Student A began to have fun writing. Expressing ideas through writing seemed easier for him. Upon examining his selected exhibit, he did not focus much on the correct spelling of words or the beginning of his piece. He had some understanding of capital letters, periods, spacing between words and sentences and added vowels to words.

During this portfolio conference, Student A decided he wanted to make his writing pieces longer. When looking at previous work in his writing folder, we concluded that his writing pieces had become longer during this period. His future goals for extending his pieces could be met by using more details and lengthening his beginning, middle, and ending of his stories.

Third quarter. Student A began writing stories with characters, settings, and plots during the third quarter after hearing the story, *Frosty, the Snowman* (Bedford, 1989). After reading aloud the story, the teacher asked for suggestions of other ways the story could have ended. The next day during writers workshop, Student A began writing in response to the discussion of the ending of *Frosty, the Snowman*. When the teacher approached his desk and asked about his piece, he said he was writing about *Frosty* with a new ending. His ideas flowed in a sequential order. He was writing complete sentences with capitalization, punctuation and using more conventional spelling. This piece showed how far the student had come from the beginning of the school year. He chose the story as an exhibit in his writing portfolio (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Third-Quarter Selection

The kids were making  
 a snowman and he came  
 alive. He danced all over  
 town. (In town he led everyone  
 into a traffic line. Then  
 a blizzard would blow Frosty's  
 hat. It blew right in front of a  
 car. Frosty ran in front of  
 a car and he ran into it.

On his label, Student A reflected on what he liked about this piece and what he had learned. After examining his work, he decided that his future goal was to write longer pieces. When we discussed how he could do this, he concluded that by adding more details to his stories they would be more developed. Following this conference in January, the teacher made notes about his understanding of story structure and its elements. He now had a

story with a beginning, middle, and ending; characters; a setting; and a more developed plot. His self-reflection label is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Self-reflection on Third-Quarter Selection

What I Like About This Piece: it is my Best Wrk!

What I Learned: I Learned that I  
no door when wall.  
when and not a store.  
 My Future Goals: rit door.

Fourth quarter. During the fourth-quarter portfolio conference, Student A expressed how proud he was of his growth in writing. He noted how much he enjoyed writing as compared to the beginning of the school year. We compared his first journal entry with recent ones as we discussed his progress.

Student A was highly interested in the rainforest unit presented in the fourth quarter. He wrote a story about a tree frog during this unit. This piece of writing was his final contribution to his portfolio. His piece showed imagination and character dialogue as well as some awareness of capital letters,



Figure 6

Self-reflection on Fourth-Quarter Selection

What I Like About This Piece:

win I pretend  
they win taking.

What I Learned:

how to rite.

My Future Goals:

is to use Qutashin ~~words~~.Student B

Student B had some instruction in the Resource Room for reading and language disabilities. He was delayed linguistically yet was full of energy and enthusiasm about learning. In his kindergarten year, he was enrolled in six schools. He comes from a family of six children. Reading and writing are used infrequently and are viewed as unimportant in the home. His writing showed much improvement over the four quarters of the school year.

At the beginning of the school year, Student B could identify only half the letters of the alphabet and had trouble associating sounds with letters. He lacked confidence in his

ability to write. He would not begin writing until I was by his side giving him guidance on how to select an idea for writing and how to spell words. I assisted him in making an ongoing list of his interests and experiences that could be developed into stories. I made suggestions on how to spell words by guiding him to use the picture dictionary and words on charts and labels in the classroom.

First quarter. At this point, writing was difficult and frustrating for this child. His first journal entry which took twenty-five minutes to write was an incomplete sentence. The sentence was written to his parents for Parent Night the second week of school. The children wrote a note to their parents about some of their favorite things to do at school. He selected this note for his first portfolio entry. It reads, "Mom and Dad activities centers" (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

First-Quarter Selection

9-9-96 Mom and  
 Dad <sup>activities</sup> + ivity is  
 ce nters.

In this piece, Student B was not leaving spaces between words and did not write a complete thought. The teacher assisted him in spelling "Mom" and "Dad." She encouraged him to use the different references for words in the classroom. The word "activity" had been written on the board prior to the beginning of the writing period so he successfully found that word.

Second quarter. For many more weeks in the first semester, Student B needed my support in initiating writing. By the second quarter, he was beginning to rely on himself to spell words by copying words from the sources in the room. He chose the sample shown in Figure 8 for the second portfolio exhibit. Once again he was writing to his parents about Halloween. He copied the term, "overhead projector," from the label on the overhead projector cart. He copied Halloween words from the dictionary--"haunted house," "witch," and "giant." From the lessons on letter writing, he had learned how to open and close a letter and how to punctuate a greeting. He was beginning to leave spaces between words. The child did not compose complete sentences or a story.

Figure 8

Second-Quarter Selection

10-29-96  
Dear mom, Oln d ad,  
Over h e dd projector  
haunted house witch  
giant

Third quarter. By the end of the third quarter, Student B had begun to write stories. He enjoyed the story Frosty, the Snowman. After listening to some options for endings, he selected one for his story. For the first time, I did not have to encourage him to write. He worked daily for at least two weeks on this story. His story had a beginning, middle, and ending. He made many references to the spelling resources in the room. In his story he used complete sentences, capital letters, and punctuation.

For the third quarter conference, Student B selected this story (see Figure 9) for his portfolio. As we examined the selections chosen for his first quarter and second quarter portfolio exhibits, I asked him what progress he saw in his work. He thought his writing was baby writing at the beginning. When I asked him to explain his response, he said he did not leave spaces between the words or write sentences. He was proud to have

written a story. He also was pleased with how much time he spent working on the piece and looking for the correct spelling of words. His goal for his future work was to write more stories, maybe longer ones with speaking parts.

Figure 9

Third-Quarter Selection

~~It was~~ a snowman ~~was~~ <sup>wake</sup> up time. Then we play  
 we put on our coats for ~~the~~ raze. Then we played tag.  
~~the~~ Then we put on <sup>button</sup> a ~~shirt~~ We played tag. Then we  
~~the~~ <sup>coat</sup> Then we put on <sup>button</sup> a ~~shirt~~ <sup>basketball</sup> Then we played <sup>so</sup> ~~tag~~  
 Then we put on a <sup>scarf</sup> Then ~~we~~ played <sup>basketball</sup> Then  
~~we~~ on earmuffs. Then when ~~we~~ came up and he melted  
~~we~~ <sup>on</sup> the earmuffs made him ~~go~~  
~~we~~ alive. Then we rode a bike.  
 it was <sup>night</sup> ~~it~~ time. Then it

To my surprise when he filled out the self-reflection sheet, he asked for little help. I wondered at the beginning of the year if he would ever feel free to write (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

Self-reflection on Third-Quarter Selection

What I Like About This Piece: I liked  
That I did it by myself.

What I Learned: how to rit a  
store.

My Future Goals: to rit loner  
stores.

Fourth quarter. By the fourth quarter, Student B was making much progress in writing. Since the conferences at the end of January, the children began to listen to one another read their completed stories and share ideas with one another. Student B smiled profusely because other students complimented him on how far he had come with his writing.

The final piece selected for his portfolio at the end of the year was a fanciful piece about catching a leprechaun (see Figure 11). This story was written without assistance from the teacher. It shows a sense of story and has complete sentences,

capital letters, and punctuation. As we edited this story together, he appeared proud to note that I had few suggestions for editing.

Figure 11

Fourth-Quarter Selection

One day I caught a leprechaun. He showed  
 his gold and his gold is hid in  
 tree. I climbed the tree to get  
 the gold. I put the gold in  
 bucket. I took the gold home  
 I put it in my room.  
 I was happy!

Student B filled out the self-reflection on the exhibit's label without much assistance from the teacher. As we reviewed the sheet, he knew what he wanted to write for the three statements. At the end of grade one, he was writing more mature comments (see Figure 12).

Figure 12

Self-reflection on Fourth-Quarter Selection

What I Like About This Piece: I was smart.

---

What I Learned: to use punyouashun.

---

My Future Goals: to rit with  
talking marcs.

## Conclusions

Using writing portfolios for the first time in a first grade classroom was a positive experience for the students and their teacher. The students in the classroom were able to assess their own work and grow from their reflections and then set future goals. Other support (journaling, mini-lessons, and conferencing with peers and the teacher) also facilitated these students' growth in the writing process.

I saw portfolios as an authentic way to provide evidence of growth in the writing process to the students and their parents. I was able to connect more closely instruction and assessment, therefore assisting individual writers with their instructional needs. Through assisting my first graders in developing their

portfolios, I grew in my understanding of young children's emerging literacy.

When reflecting on the writing growth of Student A and Student B, they made much progress over the school year! At the beginning of the school year, they both lacked confidence to begin writing and understanding of sentence and story structures and elements of form. As the year progressed, both students became risk-takers. The students began writing sentences and developing stories with beginnings, middles, and endings. Also, they gained in spelling, using references to assist them, and used capitalization and punctuation appropriately.

The parents responded positively to the writing portfolios. They said that they could see their child's progress more clearly by examining the portfolio pieces than by reading the marks on a report card. During the student-led parent conferences, at the end of the third quarter, the parents were given a comment sheet to fill out and to share with their child about the conference and their progress in writing. These sheets which were returned to school were placed in the portfolios. The positive comments reflected what the student had learned.

Examples of parent responses were: "In your writing I noticed that you are writing longer stories and your spelling is improving. Keep up the hard work." Another responses was, "We are amazed with all that you have learned. Your stories have grown

and you are adding details. Nice job using capitals and punctuation."

As a further extension of this project, I will share with my teammates my experiences in studying and implementing portfolios in grade one. Next year I look forward with more confidence and enthusiasm to improving what I have learned and implemented. It will be easier to know how to incorporate mini-lessons, and time for conferencing will go smoother having learned from experience. It is exciting to see the growth of children through the year.

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