

1993

Writing portfolios in the language arts classroom

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Writing portfolios in the language arts classroom

Abstract

With the implementation of the whole language concept into language arts programs, the focus is on creating meaning through the language processes. In such a learning environment, children while involved in whole units are active participants in relevant activities that foster their thinking-language abilities (Goodman, 1986).

Writing Portfolios in the Language Arts Classroom

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
Lori L. Kleppe
June 1993

This Research Paper by: Lori L. Kleppe

Entitled: Writing Portfolios in the Language Arts Classroom

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for
the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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With the implementation of the whole language concept into language arts programs, the focus is on creating meaning through the language processes. In such a learning environment, children while involved in whole units are active participants in relevant activities that foster their thinking-language abilities (Goodman, 1986).

With the implementation of the whole language concept into an instructional program, changes need to be made in assessment. Qualitative measures are needed to describe children's language learning while they are involved in the language processes. Cambourne and Turbill (1990) emphasize the importance of matching the system of evaluation with that of instruction. The traditional quantitative evaluation program of standardized tests is oriented toward a program that focuses on skills, or fragments of language. Conversely, tests have no relationship to the goal of whole language instruction, which is to create avid readers and writers with the desire and the knowledge to become lifelong learners.

Anthony (1991) relates that assessment programs must be consistent with what is known about human learning and need to be repeated in curricular goals. To benefit learners, the assessment procedures need to be multifaceted; qualitative as well as quantitative; reflective of the constructive nature of language; inclusive of the learners, parents, and teachers;

noncompetitive, positive and helpful in leading to student growth; and adaptive.

Graves and Sunstein (1992) explain that if the instructional goals are to encourage students to become involved in the language processes, thereby gaining control of language, they must nurture self-evaluation. Portfolios offer a framework for assessment that facilitates student reflection and also a partnership between students, parents, and teachers. This partnership is centered on empowering students to assess themselves.

Purposes of the Paper

The paper presents portfolios as a part of classroom-based assessment that involves teachers collaborating with individual students to describe their emerging thinking-language abilities. This qualitative assessment approach is offered as an alternative to standardized tests. Besides describing the value and use of portfolios in a classroom, suggestions for implementing them as a part of a writing program will be discussed.

Classroom-Based Assessment

as an Alternative to Standardized Tests

According to The Commission on Testing and Public Policy (O'Neal, 1991), tests are imperfect and misleading as single measures of individual performance; therefore, no test can accurately determine how a child will perform in the workplace.

Some tests result in unfair treatment of individuals and groups because test content tends to be oriented to the culture of the majority group. Unfortunately, tests have become instruments of public policy without sufficient public accountability.

Tierney, Carter, and Desai (1991) write that standardized tests consume enormous amounts of instructional time that cannot be justified in terms of furthering students' learning. They continue to explain the limitations of standardized tests by stating that most do not reflect the nature of literacy and that students are viewed as a subject of testing rather than a partner in the process.

Teachers who must administer standardized tests are faced with a dilemma of how to prepare their students to take a test that is different from the instructional focus in the classroom. Teachers often teach directly for the test by providing daily instruction in formats that resemble the test. Then, the scores do not represent broad student learning, only the knowledge of content and format of the test (Herman, 1992).

Unfortunately, standardized tests do not reflect how teachers teach, the effects of their teaching on children, or how they adapt instruction to individual learners. Tests separate learning, testing, and teaching and control the curriculum as teachers teach to the test (Hebert, 1992).

New theories of learning and instruction point to the importance of considering the close connection among teaching, learning, and assessment (Au, Scheu, Kawakami, & Herman, 1990). According to cognitive researchers, meaningful learning is reflective, constructive, and self-regulated (Herman, 1992). Then, assessment needs to focus on describing students' behavior while engaged in the learning process. Such assessment provides teachers with the means to make instructional decisions that will benefit learners (Tierney et al., 1991).

Portfolios in Classroom-Based Assessment

As teachers implement the whole language concept, they can gather data generated in authentic learning situations to place in student portfolios as evidence of children's emerging literacy (Herman, 1992). A portfolio can also support children in demonstrating their abilities in activities taking place outside of the school day.

Valencia (1990) relates that portfolios have validity that no other type of assessment can offer. She explains how four aspects of sound assessment are associated with portfolios. These include the authenticity of tasks that are captured by the portfolio, the ongoing nature of the portfolio process, the multidimensionality of the data, and finally, the opportunity for teachers and students to be involved in reflection.

A portfolio is a container filled with artifacts that show a child's learning, such as reading logs, attitude surveys, journal entries, all drafts of a piece of writing, and other forms of self-evaluations. It may be a file folder, a notebook, a three-ring binder, or anything else that is acceptable to the teacher (Graves & Sunstein, 1992).

While decisions need to be made about the storage qualities of a portfolio, Tierney et al. (1991) remind teachers that portfolios are not objects. They are vehicles for ongoing assessment by students and teachers that represent students' responses within the language processes, such as self-evaluation and goal-setting.

Teachers are also beginning to use technology, such as the Grady Profile, to manage their students' portfolios. The Grady Profile is a Hypercard stack that allows teachers to create records for all aspects of the curriculum. It has the ability to record voice samples, video clips, and scanned images of a child's art work or portions of written work. It is made up of fifteen different student index cards that can be tailored to meet an individual teacher's needs (Hetterscheidt, Pott, Russell, & Tchang, 1992).

The real value of portfolios is not with their physical appearance, location, or organization, but with the mindset that they instill in the students and teachers who have developed and

used them. Such assessment is consistent with what is happening in classrooms in which the whole language concept is being extended (Valencia, 1990).

In a writing program, portfolios benefit students by empowering them to become self-evaluators and to develop lifelong learning habits. Children develop a fuller understanding of their abilities, a greater appreciation of themselves, and a stronger commitment to learning (Tierney et al., 1991). Students as writers are encouraged to focus on organization, purpose, and attitudes rather than handwriting, spelling, grammar, and usage (Lamme & Hysmith, 1991).

Portfolios that include drafts at all stages of development have been found to reinforce writing as a process. The process of keeping a portfolio can encourage children to be risk-takers because the fear of having their grade lowered is nonexistent, increases the amount of student writing without substantially increasing teacher workload, provides audiences other than the teacher for the children, and allows the students to grow as learners as they set their own goals based on their strengths and weaknesses (Yancey, 1992).

Valencia (1990) has identified several characteristics of a well-developed writing portfolio assessment system. First, portfolio assessment focuses on the best each student has to offer, rather than criticizing or finding error. Second,

assessment becomes an ongoing part of instruction, and time is not lost to administer tests. Third, portfolio assessment allows for the process of learning to be described as well as the product. Fourth, artifacts in a portfolio explain the cognitive, affective, and social processes of a learner. Fifth, portfolio assessment allows for collaborative reflection by both the teacher and the learner. Sixth, portfolio assessment is authentic as children are assessed while they are actually involved in the writing process. According to Tierney et al. (1991), portfolios provide a multidimensional view of each child's composition development. Students' strengths, weaknesses, attitudes, and strategies are recorded, which in turn, provide educators with information that helps them improve their teaching of writing.

Portfolios offer benefits to everyone involved with them. They provide a rich source of authentic information that serves as documentation of children's growth in writing and the teachers' knowledge of the composition process. Portfolios can have a tremendous impact on the teaching staff. For example, Hebert (1992) found that in Crow Island Elementary School in Winnetka, Illinois the implementation of portfolios had a positive effect on teachers' self-esteem and resulted in a greater feeling of professionalism throughout the entire school.

As with students who use portfolios, these teachers became more empowered.

Suggestions for Implementing Portfolios to Assess Writing

Yancey (1992) offers these suggestions for the implementation of portfolios: (1) Portfolio programs seem to work best when teacher participation is voluntary. (2) Teachers need the freedom to design their own portfolio projects that meet the needs of their class. (3) Teachers should expect to revise their approach to portfolio assessment continually on the basis of their experience with them. Varvus (1990) recommends that teachers determine what portfolios will look like, what to put in, how and when to select the contents, how to evaluate them, and finally, if they are to be passed on to the student's next language arts teacher. De Fina (1992) reminds teachers to create time in their schedules to complete student conferences and the other management tasks that go along with portfolio assessment.

Determining the Purposes of Portfolios

Teachers implementing portfolio assessment in their classrooms must begin the process by determining the purposes of portfolios for assessing writing. If the purpose of portfolios is to examine students' writing across the curriculum, the teacher can ask them to select works on several bases: the best piece of writing, a piece in which something was learned, samples

from various genres, and written reflections. If the purpose is to show students' engagement in the process of writing, the entries in the portfolios can include process entries with all drafts of a piece included, written reflections of the process involved in writing the pieces, and works in process with the author's plans for revision. If the purpose of the portfolio is to examine growth over time, samples of work should be selected at intervals. Original drafts with revisions should be included, dated papers should be organized chronologically, and written reflections about the progress and the contents can be organized from most to least effective. If the purpose is to show in-depth exploration in an area of concentration, the student can include a series of pieces focused on a theme, genre, purpose, or audience (Murphy, 1991).

Once the purposes of portfolios have been established, they must be communicated to the students and their parents prior to their implementation into the classroom. Showing a sample of a portfolio and role-playing a student-led conference would be beneficial (Tierney et al., 1991).

Teaching Students to Self-Assess

Students need to know what good writing is before they can be asked to reflect meaningfully on their own writing. To help children become better readers of their own work, Graves and Sunstein (1992) suggest that while children are writing, the

teacher circulates around the room and offers invitations for them to be risk-takers by using a "nudge" paper. The nudge paper is a half sheet of paper on which children experiment in their writing after having a short discussion with the teacher about their writing. For example, it might involve developing a character. The child can feel more secure experimenting because the writing is not occurring on their original copy but rather on the "nudge" paper.

To help children in selecting pieces of writing for their portfolios, Graves and Sunstein (1992) suggest that they label their compositions with single phrases such as "hard," "learned something," "funny," or "didn't finish." This allows students to focus on one idea while they look over all of the contents housed in their writing folder.

Students can be given guidelines to use in reflecting upon their writing and discussing their involvement in the writing process with others: (1) Describe the process you used in writing this piece. (2) Tell about the part of the process that was the hardest for you. (3) Explain how you knew you were done with the piece. (4) Discuss the part that was the most difficult to write. Children should move from reflecting on one piece of writing to comparing two pieces of writing and finally should move on to assessing the entire contents of the writing portfolio (Murphy, 1991).

Through mini-lessons and conferences, teachers can help students learn the important task of self-evaluation. Children can be encouraged to reflect on something new they have learned through the writing process and on something they would like to learn to become better writers (Hansen, 1992). Objectives of a portfolio conference can be: (1) to help students reflect about themselves as learners, (2) to build on students' successes, (3) to assist students in setting goals and (4) to help the teacher learn about students' ability, progress, needs, interests, and habits (Kingore, 1993).

These guidelines for conferences with students developed by Tierney et al. (1991, p. 120) can assist teachers in facilitation of self-assessment:

Guidelines for Conferencing

Do's	Don'ts
Give the writer feedback about what you like about the selection.	Criticize the selection.
Comment on things that are the same and different.	Be negative.
Ask: Why certain pieces were chosen; What the writer learned about him/herself; What the writer plans to do next.	Interrogate.
Encourage comparisons and contrasts with other strategies.	
Let the writer do most of the talking.	
Have the writer discuss areas of improvement.	
Enjoy the fact that different people will like different things.	

Maintaining the Contents of Portfolios

Students need to take responsibility for managing their portfolios. Ownership of their portfolios can be facilitated by allowing children to have a major say in what goes into the portfolio. During the course of the year, students can continually revise the contents of their portfolios. They can maintain a table of contents for their exhibits. As a result, children develop organizational skills and a sense of ownership (Tierney et al., 1991).

While student ownership is strengthened through self-selection of portfolio contents, specific criteria may be determined by the teacher. For example, Brian Cambourne's Have-A-Go sheet (Routman, 1991) illustrates a student's spelling abilities. It is a record of the words a child has misspelled and the attempt to determine the standard spelling by trying various spellings for each word. A writing log and a list of goals and accomplishments might also be requested by the teacher. These examples of the teacher's criteria need not diminish student ownership of the portfolio.

A collection of student work and ease of accessibility are important to the portfolio process. Students will need access to their writing folder and their portfolio on a daily basis. Because the teacher may want immediate access to a student's

work, the writing folder and the portfolio are stored in the classroom.

Documenting Student Growth

One way to document student growth is through the use of captions. Captions are brief written statements that students attach to their writing that indicate why a piece was selected for the portfolio. This type of documentation allows for immediate reflection on a piece of work, and summarizes the composition skills a student used without requiring the reader to study an entire piece of writing. The disadvantage of using captions is the time it takes to teach students how to use them and become proficient in their use. (See Appendix A.)

Checklists can also be used by teachers to document student growth. They can provide lists of activities, behaviors, or steps that the teacher looks for when monitoring student performance. Checklists can focus on a single activity or an accumulation of abilities over time. The information on a checklist must be clearly understandable by everyone viewing the portfolio. While checklists are easy to use and can be completed while the teacher is interacting with other students, they are difficult to translate into clear and meaningful statements concerning students' involvement in the writing process (Szymczuk & Staplin, 1991).

Anecdotal records can provide a factual description of students' allowing the teacher to document the process students engage in while writing as opposed to the product. Anecdotal records can direct a teacher's attention to a single student and allows information to be gathered as the student works in a natural setting. Anecdotal records are time consuming and may not provide objective information (Szymczuk & Staplin, 1991).

Conferencing with Parents

Parents can review their child's writing portfolio at a student-led conference supported by the teacher. Tierney et al. (1991) suggest that these conferences be held two times during the school year. Because work will not be sent home on a regular basis, an invitation should be extended to parents to visit school to study their child's portfolio as often as they like. Teachers can assist parents in studying their child's portfolio by providing some guidelines. (See Appendix B.)

Summary

Many components are involved in implementing the whole language concept into the school program. This instructional concept focuses on children creating their own meaning through the language processes, thus extending their thinking-language abilities. Inherent in this focus is a need to reconsider the school program's assessment strategies. If learning through involvement in the language processes is emphasized rather than

product, qualitative assessment that is descriptive, ongoing, and readily available to children, teachers, and parents needs to be considered as part of the instructional program.

In assessing children's progress in developing writing abilities, a portfolio for each student can provide an ongoing collection of writing pieces reflecting behavior in the writing process. Developed collaboratively by each student with the teacher, portfolios can present valuable information about the individual child, direction for goal-setting for further instruction, and a means of carrying out long-term assessment.

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Appendix A

Product Caption

Date	Goal
Assignment	
Criteria - Standards of Success	
Teacher Reflections What can I say about the student's work? *positives relating to the standards of success suggestions	
Student Reflections What I did well? or What was hard for me? or What I need to work on.	

Note: Szymczuk and Staplin (1991). "Assessing and Documenting Student Growth." Unpublished.

Appendix B

Parent Folder Review And Reflection

Student _____

Reader _____

Date _____

Please read everything in your child's writing folder, including drafts and commentary. Each piece is set up in back -to-front order, from rough draft to final copy. Further, each piece is accompanied by both student and teacher comments on the piece and the writing process. Finally, the folders also include written questionnaires where students write about their strengths and weaknesses as writers.

We believe that the best assessment of student writing begins with the students themselves, but it must be broadened to include the widest possible audience. We encourage you to become part of the audience.

When you have read the folders, please talk to your children about their writing. In addition, please take a few minutes to respond to these questions.

- Which piece of writing in the folders tells you most about your child's writing?
- What does it tell you?
- What do you see as the strengths in your child's writing?
- What do you see as needs to be addressed in your child's growth and development as a writer?
- What suggestions do you have which might aid the class's growth as writers?
- Other comments, suggestions?

Thank you so much for investing this time in your child's writing.

Note: From: Portfolio Assessment in the Reading-Writing Classroom (p.117-118) by R. Tierney, M. Carter, and L. Desai, 1991, Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.