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Writing portfolios in a third grade classroom -- A collaborative learning environment

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Writing portfolios in a third grade classroom – A collaborative learning environment

Abstract

Many teachers through the years have requested that students keep folders of writing samples. More recently, teachers have come to understand that a folder of selected samples, or a portfolio, has much potential for qualitative assessment. Keeping writing portfolios allows children and teachers to view their writing continually and to describe strengths and weaknesses. As children reflect on their writing exhibits, their literacy is extended. Instruction becomes a natural extension of assessment as students and teachers build portfolios. This paper describes how a teacher collaborated with students in grade three as they engaged in the writing process and exhibited their writing as a portfolio collection. As a result, they had evidence of progress and instructional needs and had opportunities to develop goals for further learning. This collaboration was a meaningful record to share with parents and to contribute to an ongoing exhibit to be passed on in future years of schooling.

Writing Portfolios in a Third Grade
Classroom--A Collaborative Learning Environment

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
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of Master of Arts in Education.

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Abstract

Many teachers through the years have requested that students keep folders of writing samples. More recently, teachers have come to understand that a folder of selected samples, or a portfolio, has much potential for qualitative assessment. Keeping writing portfolios allows children and teachers to view their writing continually and to describe strengths and weaknesses. As children reflect on their writing exhibits, their literacy is extended. Instruction becomes a natural extension of assessment as students and teachers build portfolios.

This paper describes how a teacher collaborated with students in grade three as they engaged in the writing process and exhibited their writing as a portfolio collection. As a result, they had evidence of progress and instructional needs and had opportunities to develop goals for further learning. This collaboration was a meaningful record to share with parents and to contribute to an ongoing exhibit to be passed on in future years of schooling.

Writing is a process that allows children to make sense of their world. It is a way of creating meaning and expressing thought. Through this process, children can develop an understanding of themselves and their place in the world as well as learning that they can exercise some control over their destiny.

Portfolios as Qualitative Assessment of Writing

Writing is learned by engaging in the process within the functions of language as well as observing its use in many social situations, asking questions about how and why the language is used, and receiving confirmations of effective use (Cambourne, 1988). When viewing writing as a process, schools need to provide qualitative means to describe children's progress as well as their instructional needs (Cambourne, 1988). One qualitative technique is the writing portfolio (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991).

Portfolios can be used to describe children's involvement in the writing process and to reflect on their growth. The writing portfolio is a collection of writings that children choose to demonstrate the kinds of writing they are engaged in and their writing abilities. It displays for children, teachers, and parents how the child is developing as a writer.

A portfolio system can include more than one collection: A writing folder contains pieces representative of the components of the writing process--a list of topics for pieces, drafting, redrafting, revising, and publishing. A working portfolio contains writing selected periodically to show the children's involvement in the writing process. A showcase portfolio is a selected collection of pieces from the working portfolio that shows the child's involvement in writing throughout the year (Harp, 1993). This collection can be ongoing, passed on from one year to the next (Tierney et al., 1991; Wolf, 1989).

Selecting Exhibits for the Portfolio

In developing a working portfolio, several important aspects need to be considered. One is the selection of exhibits. Many kinds of writing can be included, such as poems, stories, invitations, and responses to literature. The contents of the writing portfolio will vary from student to student, thus showcasing individual students' involvement in the writing process. As a result, portfolios can assist students in developing feelings of pride and accomplishment in creating something (Wolf, 1989).

The number of selections chosen for a portfolio collection will depend upon the individual student's need for representation of accomplishments and the range of written responses. Teachers can help beginning writers make selections by offering

suggestions of categories, such as most enjoyable, or shows growth (Tierney et al., 1991; Hill & Ruptic, 1994).

Teacher-student conferences are an important part of the selection process as well as supporting literacy development. During this time, teachers can support children in selecting exhibits for their collections while promoting a sense of ownership of their writing (Tierney et al., 1991). Students can learn more about their writing, and teachers can give children feedback that will allow them to move forward in using the process (Harp, 1993). This selection process allows for students to continuously monitor their own growth and to come to know themselves as writers (Valencia, 1990).

Conferences offer the teacher an opportunity to reflect on students' progress and then to set instructional goals. The discussions with students during conferences bring to light specific needs of individual children (Calkins, 1986; Tierney et al., 1991; Hill & Ruptic, 1994).

Organization, an important feature of a portfolio, belongs to each student; it helps them manage the contents independently and also provides easy access to them. During conferences, teachers can assist students in developing a systematic way to date and label pieces. Such documentation provides evidence of growth over time, information about each piece and why it was selected (Burke, Fogarty, & Belgrad, 1994).

Other assessment techniques can be part of the portfolio collection. Written summaries of conferences collaboratively compiled by students and the teacher can be included (Calkins, 1986; Tierney et al., 1991; Hill & Ruptic, 1994). Checklists of elements of form, such as capitalization, punctuation, and spelling, can also be stored in the portfolio (Tierney et al., 1991; Hill & Ruptic, 1994).

Housing Portfolios

The most important suggestion for housing portfolio collections is that students find them easily accessible. The contents of working portfolios can be housed in a folder, cereal box, expandable folders, or a file drawer with hanging files. Whatever container is considered, it should be sturdy enough to last a year, take up the least amount of space in a crowded classroom, and be affordable for the classroom budget (Kingore, 1993). Housing should encourage frequent visits for self-reflections and comparisons of first pieces with later ones that are being included in the portfolio (Hill & Ruptic, 1994). The portfolio then becomes a part of the daily program.

Introducing Portfolios

Introducing the portfolio concept to children is much easier if real portfolios are used as examples. An author or other professionals in the community can be asked to share the contents of their portfolios with students. If the teacher is

keeping a portfolio, it can capture the interest of students as well as serve as a model (Tierney et al., 1991).

Portfolio Assessment in Grade Three

The writer as a teacher in a self-contained third grade classroom initiated writing portfolios as a means of describing her students' involvement in the writing process. Portfolio assessment facilitated the goals of the writing program. The major goals were to nurture children's concept of themselves as authors and their sense of ownership of the writing process.

Providing a Setting for the Writing Process

This year, I became the learner. I began to learn about my students' writing abilities from the first day of class. From their first writing samples, I learned about my students as writers. This knowledge of the students' writing abilities and instructional needs was addressed in teacher-directed sessions, peer workshops, and conferences. Also, students were encouraged to present their writing during sharing time.

The classroom was a print rich environment. Centers around the room contained quality literature works representative of the different genres. These works provided models of language and content that could prompt children's stories from their life's experience.

The writing process was extended by journal writing. The children had an opportunity to write whatever they wished in their journals each day. Writing folders were provided to house the components of the writing process--topics for writing, drafts, redrafts, revisions, and completed pieces. Whole-group literature periods provided ideas for writing. Sharing times offered children opportunities to present their writing. As experiences emerged in the classroom, the different functions of language were noted. With the assistance of the teacher, an ongoing list of functions was compiled: letters, poetry, recipes, plays, reports, and charts.

Introducing Portfolios to Students

Students were given opportunities to write each day. At the end of the first month of school, students were choosing their own topics to write about; some were exploring different genres.

After a month of the school year had passed, portfolio collections were introduced. I shared my own writing portfolio with the class and told them that I would be adding to it this year. From my portfolio, I read a poem that I had written about what it feels like to be a student. When I finished, the children clapped. I asked them why they clapped; they gave different answers.

I explained to the children that I had found a special file cabinet for their working portfolios. I distributed a folder for

each child's writing to be stored in this hanging file drawer. As the children selected pieces from time to time to exhibit their writing progress, they were placed in these folders. From this collection, they would eventually choose pieces for a showcase portfolio that would be sent on to the next grade.

Maintaining Writing Portfolio Collections

Portfolio collection was maintained through writers workshops and teacher-student conferences.

Writers workshops. The children were organized into workshops, or small heterogeneous groups. Each week the children selected one or two pieces, finished or unfinished, from their writing folders, or the working portfolios, to share with their small group. The students were enthusiastic about the small group activity because they had time to share and discuss their writing. With guidance from the teacher, children learned to give constructive responses to their peers' writing and to allow the authors of the pieces to make decisions about their writing--to redraft aspects of the content, to revise elements of form, and to choose the mode for publication. Within the peer group, the children frequently discussed pieces that should be placed in the working portfolio.

Teacher-student conferences. Both peer group and individual conferences were held on a regular basis. During small group conferences, I recorded student-sharing on a form. This sheet

included sections on the topic selected, the reason the child chose the topic, application of previous instruction, and instructional needs.

At least once a week, I conferenced with each child about his/her involvement in the writing process. Even though conferences take much time, they are valuable periods for modeling the components of writing, providing diagnostic teaching, assisting children in establishing goals for future involvement in the writing process, and determining instructional needs.

Approximately once a month writing exhibits for the portfolios were chosen during conferences. The teacher and each student collaborated in recording the conference on a form that was kept in the working portfolio. This assessment sheet included these sections: type of writing (e.g., story, poem, report), reason for selection, teacher response, and future goals for writing and instruction (see Figure 1). This form assisted the children in selecting pieces that represented their writing activity and progress in gaining writing ability for the working portfolios and later the showcase portfolio. During the conference, the pieces selected for the portfolio were labeled with the date and comments by the student and teacher. A sheet attached to the working portfolios kept a running record of the

Figure 1 Portfolio Conference Record

Portfolio Conference Record

Name: Student B

YEAR: 95-96

Date / Selection	Parent/Student Response	Teacher Response/Suggestion	Goal/Feature to include	Instruction / Practice
Aug. 30 First write A bird in my wood burning stove.			put priorities and put more detail.	
Sept. 12 When I was invited to a slumber party	I picked it because it was fun, weird, a little scary, and funny.	I like your beginning telling how excited you were about going - you shared feelings. m.l.		
Oct. 6 when I had my best friend over.	I learned how to do, beginning, middle, and I put priorities detail and a interesting word	nice printing 😊 m.l.	I want to put more describing words.	use a dictionary!
Nov. 13 were lost!	nice ideas like a adventure story almost like a mystery	what would you change? m.l.	put more detail! → write less action put in more explaining.	on not making it so complicated easier to read

Portfolio Conference Record

Name: Student D

YEAR: 95-96

Date / Selection	Parent/Student Response	Teacher Response/Suggestion	Goal/Feature to include	Instruction / Practice
August 30 first selection High school and Hot Air Balloons.	I think I should have took more time on this piece.	Would you like to ride in a hot air balloon? m.l.		Use Hot Air Ballooning by Barry Wells
September 26 fishing	I picked this story because it was fun fishing with my dad.	Beth, I could see the baby frogs trying to follow the big frog. You did a wonderful job of telling what your dad told you. I agree with him about seeing little fish so you and your children I will have more. m.l.	more complete sentences	Are you going to write about hunting? m.l.
October 27 Catching Fish	In this story I worked really hard, I put a lot of effort good handwriting It was a neat story.			
November 17 Early's Balloon Company	I think I put a lot of effort and I used com- plete sentences, but I could write a little harder on it.		use a dictionary more with hard words instead of guessing or asking the teacher like: anxious or bought.	

titles of the selected pieces and the date they were placed in the portfolio.

Including Parents as Part of the Learning Community

Parents are an important part of the learning community. When they are informed, they can contribute a great deal of support to their children's learning. Therefore, parents should be included in the assessment process (Kingore, 1993).

With these important ideas in mind, I introduced writing portfolios to my students' parents at the parent meeting at the beginning of the year. I showed them several portfolios of students from other teachers and explained how valuable they were in portraying the actual progress and instructional needs of students. I told the parents that the children would also be selecting pieces to share with them at home. The parents' responses would be included in the assessment process. I explained that most of the students' work would be kept in a working portfolio. Also, I described how students would select pieces for the working portfolio. At the end of the year, a few pieces of the children's work representing writing activities and growth throughout the year would be compiled into a showcase portfolio to be part of an ongoing collection of exhibits to be passed on year after year. The rest of the writing pieces would be sent home.

Later, I wrote a newsletter to the parents further explaining the portfolio assessment system as it related to the writing process. Before the fall parent-teacher conference, I sent a second newsletter to inform the parents that their children would be sharing samples of their work at the conferences from their portfolios and that the parents at this time could share their observations of their children's writing.

Celebrating Portfolios

Our culminating activity for the portfolio assessment program will be a special event, End of the Year Portfolio Celebration. We will be sending out invitations, planning refreshments, and getting the showcase portfolios ready to show the progress made by each student this year. The selections dated and organized in a chronological order for a clearer view on the writers' growth over time will be exhibited. Also, the students in revolving small groups will select pieces from their portfolios to read to parents. The pieces not selected for the showcase portfolio will be packaged and given to the parents.

Conclusions

Our classroom has evolved into what I would like to call a learner friendly environment. We have learned how to respect each other as individual thinkers and writers but most of all as collaborators with each other's learning. For example, I recall a student who at the beginning of the year was reluctant to share

his writing. Later in the year, I received a birthday gift from him after sending home a note praising him for a piece he wrote and shared with the class. The gift was a rubber stamp and pad that said, "My best work yet."

The writing portfolio program that I developed in my classroom this year was a valuable learning experience for myself, the students, and the students' parents. The freedom that students had in making choices opened up opportunities to reflect on progress and instructional needs. As a result, they have a portfolio with exhibits that show growth over this past year.

Conferencing and viewing the contents of each individual working portfolio gave me more accurate direction in providing for the children's instructional needs. Each day I was actively involved with students, and therefore, I could listen, respond, and instruct individual students from this immediate feedback.

Students came to expect that the teacher would support them in the writing process, yet they knew they could make choices in their portfolio development. Earlier in the school year, they depended upon the teacher to tell them what to write and where to place their pieces. As time passed, they visited and revisited their working portfolios as they made their own decisions about writing.

Students who had not used portfolios before this year became enthusiastic about keeping their work in a special folder.

One student wrote about being happy developing a collection and surveying it from time to time. At the school this child previously attended, they turned in writing and never saw it again.

The students enjoyed reading their selections and giving responses to others in workshops. It soon became apparent not only were their writing pieces important to them, but others' responses to them were equally important. Each day as I moved around the classroom I heard students offering positive and constructive remarks in the writers workshops. Students responded with questions and even suggestions to clarify meaning, such as adding more details, clarifying an idea, and suggesting a book to read that might give the writer more background.

Also, recording the students' responses during the writers workshops helped me support students during conferences as they made the selections for their portfolios. The teacher observed and recorded how students worked through their problems or struggled to reach a goal. The writing conference sheet was revised several times by the teacher, and each time the focus was how to gather important information to help students through the process.

As time passed, students were selecting pieces from the working portfolio for publication at the Madison Mustang Press, the school printing center. These published stories were bound

with a cover, endpapers, a copyright page, a title page, a dedication, and a page with information about the author-illustrator. Students could celebrate their authorship by reading their book to the class before taking it home.

Parents were eager to be a part of the assessment program and responded enthusiastically to their children's writing. The student-led parent conferences in March were an opportunity for students to share their portfolio with writing exhibits that demonstrated what they learned in all areas of the curriculum. Parents were asked to write a response. The students practiced for this conference by sharing in the peer workshop.

The last Friday of each month an Author's Breakfast is held at Madison School. This occasion gives students the opportunity to select a piece from their working portfolio to share with students from other grades as well as parents and relatives. Students can select stories, reports, letters, poems or other kinds of writing to share. Several students share each month, and their stories are bound into a book. Parents, students, and teachers eat delicious cinnamon rolls while students from grades one through five appear on stage to read their selections and receive applause from an eager audience.

Portfolios collection development will be continued in the coming year, extending it to other areas of the curriculum. It has allowed children to more fully own their learning

experiences. Instruction and assessment have been more closely connected.

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