Portfolios That Make a Difference

A Four-Year Journey

JUDITH RUHANA

The following article is a chapter from the soon-to-be-released National Writing Project title, The Whole Story: Teachers Talk About Portfolios. The book, edited by Mary Ann Smith and Jane Juska, will be released in November 2001. In this piece, an Illinois middle-school teacher recounts her history with classroom portfolios and talks about how her students' portfolio work continues to impress and humble her.

What do you know about portfolios?" This question came from the human services director interviewing me for the job I now have. "Absolutely nothing!" I thought.

But I wanted the job so I made something up—quickly. I knew that in art, a portfolio is a collection gathered together to show off the artist's best work, so I transferred this definition to language arts: "It's a collection of writing gathered together to show the student's ability," I said.

My stab at an explanation must have been good enough because I got the job; however, that question "What do you know about portfolios?" did not go away. Rather, it started me on a year-long quest to find out as much as I could. I read everything I could get my hands on.

In the end, I decided that portfolios had nothing to do with me. I convinced myself that all those classrooms using portfolios were not full of normal kids, were not public schools, did not have heterogeneous groupings, did not have minorities, did not have English language learners or bilingual students, did not have 33 percent of the population on free and reduced lunches, did not have normal teachers. Teaching in the "real world" made the very thought of portfolios seem overwhelming. I had no idea how to get started.

I teach in Nichols Middle School in Evanston, Illinois, a public, urban, multicultural school with many disadvantaged students. I have six classes of language arts—writing only—and about 125 students. How could I deal with portfolio assessment? The sheer volume of papers required to carry out this process with all these students seemed daunting. I wouldn't even be able to store all that paper.

But events overtook my objections. I wanted to put out an end-of-the-year student literary magazine, and for this project I needed to collect and store student work. I managed the logistics of this undertaking with enough ease that I began again to consider portfolios for my classroom.

Year One

During the summer, I figured out a system. Every student would have a large plastic folder for the storage of his or her work, and each class would place these folders in six different colored milk crates—one crate per period. With this class management problem solved, I could now think about the "what," "how," and "why" of portfolio assessment. I soon realized that my problem had never been with the "why." From the time I started my investigation, I was convinced that portfolios were a form of good practice that led to authentic assessment. My concerns had been the "how." I needed a model.

The model I chose came from the Kentucky Department of Education (figure 1). Kentucky requires that eighth-graders select five pieces of work from their year's worth of writing. Although any of the entries may come from study areas other
Portfolios That Make a Difference

than English/language arts, a minimum of one piece must come from another study area. The portfolio requirement includes: one personal narrative, one piece of fiction, and one personal selection. In addition, two pieces of the portfolio should contain writing that achieves one or more of the following purposes: predicts an outcome; defends a position; analyzes a situation, person, place, or thing; solves a problem; explains a process or concept; draws a conclusion; or creates a model.

Each student is also required to write a letter reflecting on his or her growth as a writer and on the pieces in the portfolio. Good. A letter I could handle. Compared to the formal research paper students write in the spring as part of a huge interdisciplinary unit, a letter would be easier to evaluate and more interesting for me to read.

I had the program in place in September. I showed the students the portfolio requirements the first month of school and encouraged but did not demand that they save all their work—both good and not so good—in their classroom portfolios.

At the end of the year, students enjoyed writing the reflective letter to me, their last say on what they did that year in my class. I liked the letter format because students already had experience with letter writing, and even the students who found writing difficult felt secure in writing a letter to their teacher.

What I didn’t realize or expect was the ease with which my students looked at their own work, what they already knew about their writing, and how their perspectives helped my understanding of them. Portfolio assessment opened channels of communication with them that were both real and profound. This experiment gave students their own voice in my classroom, and I found myself listening.

Students were helping me better understand the connection between their topic and the quality of their writing.

Writing about something that was very personal and emotional to me made my writing more effective. When your heart is really part of something, I think you can write about it better because you really understand and feel the emotions you are trying to express.

—Lyesha

I chose this narrative essay... because I really hated it and I didn’t get a good grade on it. This essay was really hard for me to write about because I don’t like the topic and it wasn’t really true because I made up a lot of it. Another reason why I didn’t like writing this was because I don’t like writing things that really happened. If I have to tell about things that really happened I never tell them so that they sound as good as they were. I feel like what’s the point if it doesn’t sound as good as it really was? —Martha

KIRIS Writing Portfolio Assessment

Contents of the Grade 8 Portfolio

Any of the following portfolio entries may come from study areas other than English/Language Arts, but a minimum of one piece of writing must come from another study area.

Table of Contents: Include the title or descriptor of each portfolio entry, the study area for which the piece was written, and the page number in the portfolio.

1. A Letter to the Reviewer: A letter written by the student discussing his/her growth as a writer and reflecting on the pieces in the portfolio.

2. One Personal Narrative

3–4. Two Pieces of Writing, each of which achieves any one or more of the following purposes:

   a. Predict an Outcome
   b. Defend a Position
   c. Analyze or Evaluate a Situation, Person, Place, or Thing
   d. Solve a Problem
   e. Explain a Process or Concept
   f. Draw a Conclusion
   g. Create a Model

5. One Short Story, Poem, Play/Script, or other piece of Fiction

6. A Personal Selection: One additional piece of writing that the student wishes to include.

Used with permission of the Kentucky Department of Education, Frankfort, Kentucky 40601.

Figure 1
Portfolios That Make a Difference

Some wrote confessions that they might have had trouble making face-to-face:

I am sorry to say that I rushed this assignment, putting no effort into it whatsoever. . . . I had no intention of doing a good job. There was not enough information and it was very brief for a report. . . . I chose this writing so that it could remind me to devote more time and effort to my assignments. —Jose

Another weakness of this paper was I didn't have very much time to write it because I had to go to Florida the next day. This is the reason I had to turn it in early and didn't have time to think about it. —Martha

But other students complained, and, as is true for many teachers, the complaints were what grabbed my attention.

How can you expect me to remember what I did writing this piece when all I can remember is that I got an F! —Ben

I couldn't find anything in my portfolio that was from another subject and the teachers were mad at me when I asked them for old work! —Julia

I don't have enough work to choose from so why are you making us do this? —Anne

I don't know how to reflect on my own work. Isn't that your job? —Chad

Ben was right. What was the point of asking students to reflect on some piece they had composed several months ago and hardly remembered writing?

Julia and Anne were right. My directions had been vague. I “encourage” students to save their work, but this kind of mild suggestion often washes right by middle school students, who have plenty of other things on their minds.

And, finally, Chad was right. I had never taught students how to reflect, and even if I did not agree with Chad that reflecting on student work was entirely my responsibility and not theirs, if I expected students to think about their writing and themselves as writers, I needed to teach them how and why to do this work.

I realized that these student reflections went beyond insights into their writing; they were also comments on my teaching practices. To the extent that these practices reflected my poor planning, I vowed to change.

Year Two

Having Enough Work to Choose from: Learning from Julia and Anne

Before the next school year began, I persuaded the other team teachers for our grade level to cooperate in gathering writing pieces for my students. Sometimes these teachers gave me written pieces, sometimes I copied the pieces and they kept them, and sometimes they gave the work to the students to put in their language-arts portfolios. We core teachers—literature, language arts, social studies, science—began to communicate more on writing across the curriculum, and the students began to apply what they learned in language arts to their other subjects. The students would often moan, “Oh, no you’re looking at our writing in the other subjects, too,” and “That’s terrible!” What they meant was, “Oh, no, we have to write effectively in all the subjects now!”

Another simple change I made at the onset of the second year was to tell students that they could never take their portfolios out of the classroom, not even to their lockers. The portfolio envelopes remained in my classroom all year; students could borrow work to take home and show off to parents, but they had to return it. Team members also kept work that students might need for their portfolios. The watchwords for both students and teachers became “Never throw anything away.”

Knowing How to Reflect on Your Work: Learning from Chad

Early in September of the second year, I refined the reflection process. The students and I spent one entire class brainstorming a list of questions that students could use to look at their own work reflectively. The students kept the list in their portfolios throughout the year:

- How did you grow as a writer?
- What was hard? Easy?
- What did you enjoy the most? The least?
- Why and how did you make the changes you made in this piece?
- Looking at this piece now, what would you change?
- What piece would you do over and why?

Remembering the Process for Each Document: Learning from Ben

Every six or eight weeks, we had two or three “portfolio days” devoted to finding writing pieces and doing mini-assessments on them. On these portfolio days, students took index cards, jotted responses to some of the reflection questions, and stapled the cards to their work.

By the end of the year, in May, when I assigned students the formal evaluation letter, they were really ready to look at their work. Their portfolio collection included
Portfolios That Make a Difference

work in all subjects. Their notations on index cards helped them remember the process and problems involved with each piece. They had pieces they loved and pieces they hated. They could learn from both their successes and their failures. Particularly, students seemed aware of the forms and subject matter that led to their best writing.

So far, poetry has been the best outlet for my real emotions. Poetry has helped me grow as a writer very much. … I do my best writing when I have strong feelings—especially negative feelings—about my subject. Most other kinds of writing are about a topic or assignment that is given to you. Teachers can’t really tell you what to write about in a poem. Poetry comes from the heart; no research is needed. —Graham

I do best in big projects, like the Civil War Project, because I am good at organizing things over a long period of time. It’s the essays that I stink at because I can’t get organized that fast. Maybe I need to give myself more time to outline or something. —Ellen

However, one reflection question students consistently avoided: “How have you grown as a writer?” Those who tried to answer had little notion of how to respond. There were a great many “My grades got better” (or worse) and “I did more things this year.” A couple of sentences in Brandon’s reflection gave a clue as to why this was happening:

I can never figure out the categories we have to choose for this letter. I didn’t really know how to write it.
—Brandon

So even though we had developed the prompts to help students reflect, the concept of “growing” as a writer was still difficult for them to grasp.

Year Three
How to Write the Letter: Learning from Brandon

I reasoned that if students were to analyze their growth as writers they would need to keep the evidence of this growth as it was occurring. I began by insisting that students save all drafts and prewriting to turn in with final copies. Their ever-growing portfolios now contained work in all stages of progress to help them trace their change and growth. I also asked students to write a letter at the beginning of the year as well as at the end—another demonstration of growth.

This early letter had four requirements: a short autobiography of their writing habits and projects, a paragraph on their strengths and weaknesses as writers, their goals in writing for the year, and their comments on the curriculum, a copy of which had been posted on the wall. These letters were written in tones that reflected anticipation as well as some dread:

I can’t wait to get to the science fiction unit. I heard about how great it was from last year’s class, and I have already started my story. —Erika

I have no idea what a writing workshop is but I hope it’s not poetry. I can never seem to relate to poems let alone write them! —Laura

Now in the third year of my portfolio immersion, I began to realize that some of the problems students were having with reflection came from the fact that I was allowing them to skim the surface. For instance, some would state their reasons for choosing a particular piece and let it go at that, without analyzing those reasons. So during one class, just before students began writing their letters, I modeled the process for them by writing reflective comments on my own work. Choosing three questions from our list, I wrote my thoughts on an overhead projector so students could comment on the results as they saw them unfold. The students were all too happy to evaluate my writing. My first draft reflection read:

I chose this piece because I was struck by three things. First, and most importantly, I chose nonfiction. Second, writing is for me an exercise in memory; and lastly, I really love my piece. —Me

The students enjoyed telling me that this paragraph was really ineffective. They had me rewrite it several times so that it began to look much different:

As I gathered work for this portfolio I looked at this poem that was a big hit with the students. I realized how much I loved writing nonfiction because it was an exercise in memory. I found myself remembering my father all over again as I wrote about our Saturday nights together. “Daddy’s Saturday Nights” is my first portfolio choice because it made me cry. I revised it four times and it changed dramatically as it went through these revisions. —Me

However, both the students and I remained dissatisfied with this still-skeochy analysis. As students continued to probe the reason I liked this piece so much, I found I could best respond by quoting the work.

“He came in with the apron in a bag—ready for the wash—and with fatigue pulling at the corners of his mouth and eyes, making his steps drag and his body loose with the kind of
tiredness that numbs.” This image of my dad just seemed to flow out of my pen while I was writing this piece and I felt like he was here again. Maybe that’s why I love nonfiction writing so much. —Me

Once I modeled the technique of referring to the text, students had no trouble using this device in their own letters.

I loved my short story written for Writers’ Workshop. “People always left David alone because he pushed them away. He did this because he was plagued by his own guilt. David saw right through himself not liking what he saw. David masked himself under many layers of false identities. Not knowing where the real him was anymore, David stopped trying to find himself.” That was one of my favorite parts. I chose this because it shows what some people are really like: they don’t (know) what is the real them.

—Alissa

The descriptive elements, such as similes and metaphors in this observational essay make the event come alive. However, my favorite line of this essay is when I said, “She had black hair French braided down the middle of her head and was waiting impatiently for the show to start like a small kindergartner waiting for her milk.” This piece of writing intrigues me every time I read it, which makes this one of my best pieces. —Bess

During this third year in May, I gave students the assessment rubric (figure2) before they started their letters. They evaluated their work using the rubric, and then I evaluated the work on the same sheet of paper they used: side-by-side evaluations. I found that if they evaluated their work first, they found things they had overlooked and changed them before they turned in the final copy. I also set aside time for them to use the rubric in class two days prior to the letter due date so that it would be done thoughtfully. They often worked in teams to revise their work, and some comments from these peer reviews made students revise their letters so that their work was more thoughtful and exceeded the standard. Some sample peer comments:

This paragraph doesn’t answer questions—for example, “How did you grow?”

Tell what the writing is, and explain by using the text.

Put in what you accomplished this year and what you didn’t as your second-to-last paragraph.

This year, in contrast to former years, students had more tools to help them reflect on their work. They took out their September letters as examples of their own process of growth and change and as the rubric by which they would be assessed. Then they worked in groups to edit their letters prior to handing them in.

Students were reflecting on their work and discovering new things about it and themselves in a way they had not been doing in earlier years. Some of their reflections and the works they refer to are amazingly insightful, even poetic:

Another piece that I really enjoyed writing and probably out of all the works I have created was the one that meant the most to me was “Sunset.” I remembered taking walks on the

---

Call for manuscripts

Writing About the Unfamiliar

The Winter 2002 issue of The Quarterly will feature writing that fits the theme “Writing About the Unfamiliar.” Through this theme, we hope to discover examples such as that of a professor of English who traveled with a group of his students to England to explore the world of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Brontës. Delving into an environment that they had previously experienced only in literature, the students’ explorations inspired their writing.

Writing covered by this theme need not be anything as exotic as a trip to the English moors; however. “Writing About the Unfamiliar” may grow out of a workshop experimenting with different writing genres, a writer investigating a challenging subject matter, or even an exploration of the familiar with eyes that are trying to see more. And while we want to see student writing, we also want to learn about the techniques teachers use to push students to greater perception and reflection.

Articles to be considered for this special issue must be received by November 16, 2001. Please email your submissions to editors@writingproject.org or mail them to:

Editors, The Quarterly
National Writing Project
University of California
2105 Bancroft Way #1042
Berkeley, CA 94720-1042
beach in the late afternoon when the
sun was just getting ready to sink
beneath the waves. I remembered
watching as the colors mixed and
changed into a heavenly daze as the
dusk dug into the horizon. I
remembered watching for the green
flash of light that would fan out across
the horizon in a final moment of glory
as if to say farewell before it dove into
the quiet waters of the Gulf.

Sunset
Sunset is beautiful. Rich and
enchanting. Parading across the sky.
The colors ripple across with deep
motion, digging into the bottom of
your soul and finding your old favorite
memories.

Then as they(y) slide into the ocean,
dripping wet they drown into a pool of
blue. The finale is about to begin as the
last delicate stroke of fine color slips
into the sea.
—Pat

I know for a fact that this will be a
powerful letter because I usually keep
personal things to myself and the first
letter I wrote was not that personal
and this time I am going to get
personal. The pieces I have chosen are
works that help people know how I see
the world and how I see myself.
—Martin

Students reported growth not only in the
way they were coming to know about and
use rhetorical tools but also in their
willingness to open up to topics, forms,
and audiences they would not always have
been willing or able to approach:

The piece that speaks my true voice is
the poem "Hate" because it was a
combination of what I had seen in real
life, on television, and what I was
thinking about. . . . Sometimes I even
start to cry for no reason at all because
I am thinking about something related
to hate. I like that I finally wrote how I
feel about this topic and that I can
share my feelings without being
criticized. . . . This piece defines my
contribution to the genre by showing
that you can write anything in poetry.
—Dean

I don’t think I have to introduce
myself. I did that in September. I’m the
one who can never meet a deadline, I
can’t spell, and I always had trouble
getting things formatted from my
computer to the ones at school. Death
to Macs! Somehow I actually met my
goals for the year; I got at least two

things in the Lit Mag, I won a contest,
and I found my true voice! —Susan

And many students were able to step back
and take the long view of where they once
were as writers and where they are now.

Frankly I think that over the past two
years, I have become a writer. The fall
of seventh grade I came in having no
idea how to write a good essay, short
story or term paper. I felt that I was
required to write what I thought you
would like. As I wrote more and more,
I learned to be creative, to write from
my heart and take my chance.
—Chris

I used to get scared when you gave us
writers workshop. I never had any
ideas at the beginning of the year. I

Rubric for Portfolio Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does the reader of the portfolio get a sense of how you have changed as a writer?</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the reader understand why you chose each piece?</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the portfolio explain what you have learned about yourself as a writer?</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has your portfolio been shared with someone else for a response?</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the form correct?</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the writing clear and error free?</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the reflection honest and does your voice come through?</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neatness</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completeness</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On time</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total | 100 |

Reprinted from The Portfolio As a Learning Strategy by Porter and Cleland. Copyright © 1995. Published by Heinemann, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc., Portsmouth, NH. All rights reserved.

Figure 2
Portfolios That Make a Difference

even thought poetry was my favorite kind of writing because it seemed so easy. Now, I've grown as a writer and realize that I am a short story kind of gal, especially sci-fi. —Amy

Reflecting on my own growth as a teacher, at the end of three years, I could hold up pieces such as these as evidence that my students were now much more enthusiastic participants in the portfolio process. However, as anyone who has taught may have anticipated, there were still rumbles of discontent—mostly about grades:

At the start of every school year, I try my hardest to do an excellent job on every paper to give teachers the idea that I have excellent work habits. But for some reason this year I am getting the lowest grades I have ever received in my whole school career. I hate portfolio days because I have to look at all those bad grades. Can you help me about this? Thanks for letting me bab in this paragraph. —John

Why didn't you tell me I was doing this bad? I would have changed. —Max

I really think I am a really good poet when I am not pressured into things like due dates and that kind of stuff. So all I am saying is that I would have gotten a better grade if I had a little more time to think about things.

—Christa

Once again these critical comments inspired change for the coming year.

Year Four

What could I do about these concerns? I decided I needed a more fluid approach to grading. Students needed to be able to revise their writing to raise their grades.

The biggest change was that after “portfolio days,” which occurred every six to eight weeks and were devoted to finding and assessing writing pieces, students had a week for revision. Many students did not like their work or their grades and were not aware of how badly they were doing until we set aside those few days to review all their writing. They could change their grades or evaluations by redoing, rethinking, revising, or just editing their work. When I gave them this time, I found that they were happier about writing and felt more in control of their own grades and their own growth.

Every year as I make my plans, I make sure to specify times and dates for portfolio assessment and for portfolio rewrite days. I make sure that I have days and times when students can discuss their reflections with me before I evaluate the portfolios. Students experience their own voices, and I hear them in a whole new way. When I read their letters, I am often humbled and moved by what students discover about themselves and their writing.

I had this piece forming in my head all summer. . . . When we were assigned to write in any genre we wanted, I set out, determined to write down my story and pull it off. About one hundred revisions later, I had a garbage full of crumpled paper, a notebook damaged from being hurled across the room in frustration, and my story. While writing this letter, I learned that if I pick a creative way to do an assignment or a good topic to do it on, I will enjoy the process of writing it and the final product will be better.

—Charles

Throughout the year, we have accomplished writing many different types of papers. But I believe that my best and most effective piece of writing was at the beginning of the year, which was about my grandmother living with me and later her stay at the hospital. The reason why this was effective was that it brought out feelings about that time that I had never expressed. . . . I learned that if you have experienced something, you can write about it and make it seem more real. For example, the descriptions of my grandmother were good because I could see her in my mind so clearly, and it was therefore easy to write an accurate description. Also, because I was writing about my grandmother, I made an extra effort to make this paper good. It was almost as if I was writing a memorial to her, and I wanted her to be proud of me . . . Writing this piece made me feel like a real author. —Daniel

In the three years since its inception, portfolio assessment in May has become my favorite time of the school year because during the two weeks this process takes, students talk to me on a level that amazes both me and them. They enjoy the process of choosing work for reflection, and they are able to see things in their work and their writing that I missed and they missed the first time around. Most wonderful, they see their own growth as writers, as students, as people, and they realize that education is a journey. They learn that reflection matters.

Judith Rubana recently left teaching language arts at the middle school level to become the chair of the English department of Evanston Township High School in Evanston, Illinois. She continues her contact with the Chicago Area Writing Project and has begun to write a novel—as all English teachers are inclined to do—titled The Bone China Luncheon.