

The Writing Portfolio as Exit Evaluation: A Brief Argument against Anti-Pluralistic Approaches to Teaching and Learning

Jason De Polo

North Carolina A&T State University
United States

Abstract

All too often American students' learning is measured by the quantitative expedience of standardized testing. Ultimately, these tests fail to demonstrate how much a student has learned and at what level, the student has engaged with the material. Standardized testing or single-sample approaches become particularly problematic when used to assess writing. In this brief argument, I position the writing portfolio as a more pluralistic approach to assessing student writing. The purpose of this discussion is to evaluate the benefits of portfolio-based instruction and how portfolios can be used for evaluation.

Key Words: Writing; Assessment; Portfolios; Standardized Testing.

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For the past thirty years, assessment and evaluation have been at the forefront of issues affecting the composition classroom. Administrators in both public and private universities and schools have reacted to state mandated testing. These tests are not only geared toward assessing student abilities but are also a measure of teacher and school accountability. The decline of student writing achievement was rooted in poor pedagogical practices and curriculum design. State and university administrations began to look into testing methods by which to determine if programs were fulfilling their academic responsibilities. Of course, the bureaucratic idea of how the testing was to be done only compounded the problem. The mandates have placed enormous pressures on students to learn “the test” and teachers to “teach the test.” Ultimately, these evaluations raise a lot of questions concerning the compromise of professional judgment and student learning for the sake of satisfying some objective criteria. The responsibility of assessment and evaluation needs to be returned to teachers and students. The purpose of this discussion is to evaluate the benefits of portfolio-based instruction and how portfolios can be used for evaluation.

The question of accountability is always raised when teachers of students in higher level courses remark that students still haven't grasped basic writing skills. The bulk of the responsibility naturally lies with the writing curriculum and how that curriculum both prepares and evaluates student writers. In my experience, curriculums generally require students to write several different “types” of essays, such as expository, argumentative, process, personal, and so on. The essays are assigned, drafts are created, revisions are made, and the product is turned-in. Students experience little if any feedback from peers or the instructor. The pieces become very singular and detached writing occasions.

Therefore, if the program has any exit writing assessment, it generally is a single, on-demand prompt. Both the writing experiences in the course, and the methods, by which the students are evaluated, are singular events. This singularity of writing conflicts with what students are taught. On one hand, the teacher explains writing in terms of a well thought out process, while on the other, the system suggests that true writing should occur spontaneously (Holt & Baker, 1991). Regardless of how accurately the piece of writing is assessed, the accuracy is sacrificed when a student's proficiency in writing is evaluated from a single sample (Elbow & Belanoff, 1991). The students should be given every possibility to demonstrate their best work. A portfolio system represents the idea that writing isn't just one thing (Elbow, 1991). There exists a great need for a student's work to be presented in a large body of writing, consisting of different genres, which reflects the growth of the writer.

Portfolios are a much more plural means of writing assessment. The portfolio reflects progress, encourages imagination, and nurtures the teacher and learner relationship (Calfee, 2000). This way the test becomes an instrument of learning as opposed to destruction. Imagine toiling for an entire semester writing essays with no motivation or interest only to sit in a room with one blind shot that will eventually come down to a “parole board” of educators. We cannot place students in a position of fear, catching them off guard, and expect them to perform. Of course, there are situations like this in the “real” world, but they succeed no better at getting people to identify with their writing. The simple task of allowing students to design the cover of their portfolios will create a strong sense of ownership, producing more exciting writing (Hewitt, 2001). Not only will students produce more writing, but also they may relieve some of the negative attitudes they have against writing and grading. A study (Baker, 1993) established that portfolios can have positive effects on students. Baker compared portfolio-based instruction and a standard process-centered approach to determine if any differences in student achievement existed as determined by exit exam and final grade scores. More telling, however, were the comments the students made about the portfolio experience:

Students in the portfolio-based classrooms were overwhelmingly positive when evaluating the portfolio as an instructional and evaluative tool. When specifically asked if instructors should continue to use the portfolio in future composition courses, over 90% of students emphatically replied yes. (Baker, 1993, p. 167)

These results suggest that portfolios are not only a challenging means of evaluation for students, but also that students are driven by writing, not grades. The stress on multiple drafts to be included in the portfolio enables the teacher to decode the errors and develop an understanding of the student’s purpose and what can be suggested to improve it (Soles, 2001). The student is able to respond to the errors by justifying what appeared to be an error, or revising the essay without worry of penalty. The student develops the understanding that writing is not a one-shot deal, but rather a progressive development. The pressure of perform or perish is alleviated because the student can allow her ideas to flow naturally onto the page with the foreknowledge that it will later be polished. The portfolio reflects this process in that the drafts are retained in the portfolio to demonstrate the progress the student has made. Evaluation based on process gives students the opportunity to put the “activities” of writing together into the most “productive” form for them (Elbow & Belanoff, 1991). Along with the idea of writing as process, the student develops an understanding of audience.

The student is no longer writing for a single teacher, but a panel of faculty who will be involved in the evaluation. The essays are evaluated by a group of teachers that vote on each of the portfolios. Generally, sometime around mid-semester the evaluation teams meet and do preliminary evaluations of the students’ progress by assessing one or two of the students’ pieces. The mid-term evaluation has no direct bearing on the students’ grades; however, other factors such as attendance and participation have direct bearing on the final assessment. The final portfolio requires the student to create a table of contents and also cover sheets for each piece submitted. The cover sheets can function as an introduction to each of the pieces or as a reflection on the writing process involved. The cover sheets also achieve a form of meta-cognitive writing that allows the student to self-evaluate their progress as a writer (Huot & Schendel, 2002). Furthermore, it raises student awareness to the needs of multiple readers.

The exit portfolio emphasizes that multiple readers who do not know us often read our writing (Elbow & Belanoff, 1991). This stresses the need for students to clarify and exemplify in writing, specifically, to show, and not merely tell. Students often identify with the single teacher in the classroom and write toward her. Often I received essays that contained statements directed toward me, or in some cases, use of my name. The teacher-directed essay demonstrates how little experience students have had with writing for multiple audiences, or “transitive” writing (Berryman & Russell, 2001). Process and audience could be two of the most significant elements of writing a student can exit a course understanding. The singular assign-write-grade approach to composition instruction cannot possibly develop writers this way. Moreover, the weighty decision of whether or not a piece of writing is going to stand in the way of a student’s academic goals cannot rest upon the evaluation of a single instrument. The decision should inevitably come down to the student’s best work crafted during the semester. Students work on essays throughout the course and choose anywhere from three (Elbow & Belanoff, 1991) to six (Berryman & Russell, 2001) polished pieces to include for exit evaluation. The pieces represent multiple genres consisting of narratives, personal/expressive, argumentative, an analysis of an article in the student’s intended field, among a variety of other possibilities.

As alluded to earlier, all stages of the writing process are retained with the pieces, such as planning notes, outlines, drafts, and peer and teacher comments. This practice not only reinforces the process of writing for the student, but it also demonstrates to administration the considerable amount of work and progress involved in the course, which are two critical outcomes a single score on a printout could not possibly reveal. The benefits of a portfolio system for classroom instruction and exit evaluation are numerous. Students learn to practice writing as process and develop a keen awareness of writing for an audience. The portfolio provides a plural experience. It replaces the static single teacher, single essay experience with a nurturing student-directed demonstration of quality work. Writing is a very dynamic and complex human activity. The instruction and evaluation of writing should be no less.

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