

Using Portfolios to Increase Collaboration and Community in a Writing Program

Pat Belanoff and Peter Elbow

We began by asking how our system of evaluation by portfolio reflects our philosophy as writing program administrators. But we quickly realized that we had never really articulated our philosophy, so the question became more subtle and empirical: Looking back at the gradual development of our portfolio system, what can we learn about our philosophy? Trying to answer this second question, we came to realize how deeply *collaboration* and *community* lie at the heart of our system—and that we are even more indebted to the work of Ken Bruffee than we had realized (though we had always acknowledged indebtedness).

Before exploring collaboration and community in our portfolio evaluation system, we'll describe that system briefly. (For a fuller account, and some of the steps we took to develop it, see Elbow and Belanoff 1986.) In 1983, the Faculty Senate abolished the proficiency exam (a traditional exam calling for a persuasive essay) and directed proficiency in writing to be demonstrated by a grade of "C" or higher in our freshman composition course, EGC 101. The legislation also directed us to develop a system to try to increase uniformity of standards for "C"s given by different instructors in the forty-odd sections of EGC 101. The portfolio system is our way of trying to achieve this—though, in truth, it was our earlier success in using a portfolio experimentally which prompted us to push for the new legislation.

Every 101 student must now develop—out of all the writing done over the course of the semester—a portfolio of three revised papers: the first, a narrative or descriptive or expressive piece; the second, an essay of any sort—so long as it is conceptually organized (in a sense, a "formal essay," as opposed to an exploratory, digressive, personal "essai" in the Montaigne tradition); and the third, an analysis of a prose text. With each of these papers students must submit a brief informal cover sheet which explores their writing process for that paper and acknowledges help. The portfolio must also contain one piece of in-class writing done without benefit of feedback or revising.

Every 101 teacher is a member of a portfolio-reading group. Experienced teachers usually create their own small groups of four to six. First-time teachers work together as one large group (constituted by the Teaching Practicum which all are required to take their first semester).

Since students need a sense of portfolio standards—a warning, really, that this is for real—at mid-semester (or slightly later), they must submit one or two “dry-run” portfolio pieces for evaluation by portfolio groups. If a dry-run paper passes, that counts for one of the final portfolio pieces; if it fails, there is no penalty and the student can revise it and resubmit it with the final portfolio. Groups meet again at the end of the semester to judge completed portfolios. We have two meetings of all 101 teachers to discuss sample papers or portfolios: at mid-semester before dry-run evaluations and then at the end before final evaluations.

During evaluation sessions, a reader’s only obligation is to judge whether the work is passing (C or higher) or failing (C- or lower). Papers or portfolios are then returned to the student’s own teacher. If she agrees with the judgment, that settles the verdict. If she disagrees, she can ask for a second reading. This means that all portfolios get at least two readings; failing portfolios usually get three readings and sometimes more.

If a portfolio fails, a teacher may not give that student higher than a C- in the course and the student must repeat the course until she gets at least a C. If the portfolio passes, the teacher is not obliged to give the student a C or higher; she can give whatever grade she considers appropriate—in light of all his work in the class, including attendance and participation.

We believe the portfolio system fosters collaboration and community in various ways.

Collaboration and Community Among Students

Testing tends to emphasize solitary work. One of the main features of most testing situations is a set of safeguards to prevent students from helping each other. The physical setting for proficiency exams here highlighted the solitary nature of assessment: students being herded in large numbers into large lecture halls for a two-hour exam. The paradox was vivid: hundreds of students in the same room—breathing, grunting, and in the warmer months sweating and smelling—all working together yet none really working together at all.

Yet more and more research has shown that much if not most writing in the world has a significant collaborative dimension. In the sciences, business, industry and the professions, joint authorship is common—often even the norm. Drafts are always going around for collaborative kibbitzing. Often the “wrong person” even gets the by-line. (For example, no one seems to feel anything strange about judges publishing opinions as “theirs” which are really written by their clerks. Indeed, the judge tends to feel the “decision” or “opinion” is indeed his. Cultural

conventions determine much. The aristocratic dinner-party hostess feels that the dinner prepared by her cooks is “her” dinner.)

It is the traditional and romantic link between writing and literature that has given us the cultural model of writing as something produced by the lone toiler in the garret, suffering to get it perfect—and finally bringing it forth as wholly and jealously “his.” But even in the humanities and literature, we see, if we look closely, a strong collaborative dimension to most writing. It’s not just that most scholars share drafts for help from colleagues and editors. Even the lone artist in his garret—we see more and more—is writing out of a community. Bruffee points us to the theoretical work of people like Vygotsky and Bakhtin, inviting us to look at “solitary work” through a different lens and see an essentially communal and dialogic dimension in it. And the collaborative dimension of literature is palpable in certain flowerings such as in Elizabethan England or Paris in the ‘30s: writers often felt themselves consciously mining a single creative vein—overtly borrowing and responding to each others’ texts.

Thus we look for ways to foster student collaboration in courses in our program: not just sharing drafts and getting feedback from peers, teachers, and tutors in the Writing Center; but also a sense of a community of support. We believe that a sense of community helps students learn better and with more pleasure. (Unless students continue to write by choice after the course is over, they’ll never improve very much). And yet our students come to us deeply habituated to think of all school work as solitary and all evaluation as competitive. “My grade,” most students reason, “can only be better to the extent that my neighbor’s grade is worse.” Therefore, students are often reluctant to help their peers on important graded work because it feels as though they will be hurting themselves.

We were instinctively troubled, then, by a testing procedure that worked at cross purposes to our teaching—a proficiency exam that said to students, “Your real writing, your writing that counts, is writing that you do alone, with no time for real revision, without discussing the topic with others, without sharing drafts, without getting feedback, and without in any sense communicating with real readers.” Because it’s a slow, tough battle to change such individualistic attitudes, we sought a testing process that reinforces collaboration—that rewards students for learning to get help from others on their writing.¹

Many students do in fact have trouble producing papers that pass the portfolio without help. This is especially striking at the level of copy-editing: it’s not just the weak or non-native students who need help to remove all surface mistakes (indeed few of us can successfully copy-edit our own texts; we seldom publish without the help of an editor). But students need help at all stages of writing: generating ideas, clarifying

them, focusing, presenting them coherently, and so forth. We want them to walk out of our course and on to other courses—and out into the rest of their lives—with the experience of having had to get feedback from teachers, Writing Center tutors, friends, and relatives in order to get their papers good enough. To some this sounds like cheating, but we insist that it is what people need to learn if they're going to write effectively in a world in which collaborative writing is becoming the norm.

Cheating. The word needs to come up. Indeed "collaboration" itself is a word that can connote illicit connections (and not just in wartime France). Since we don't see a simple rule or abstract principle to distinguish between cheating and legitimate collaboration, we make the issue one of human judgment at the one-to-one level—rather than a matter of "test security." That is, the student's own teacher does not forward a piece to the portfolio process unless she is confident it is the student's "own work"—as she sees the matter in a context where collaboration is emphasized. Thus teachers insist on lots of draft writing and in-class writing from students; it is a program principle that students turn in drafts with final revisions; and students may not change topics at the last minute for revised papers. (We also stress cover sheets that ask students to acknowledge help.) This system will not catch a student who gets a roommate or a mother to do all his revising. Traditional proficiency tests prevent this kind of cheating, but at a price of undermining a good writing process.

We could guard against cheating more if we gave more weight to the in-class portfolio writing piece. We've tended not to penalize students for poor in-class writing in their portfolio. We could make the in-class piece serve as explicit practice for exam writing. Or we could allow students to revise their in-class writing over a number of classes—but with no collaboration. We could even allow students to get feedback before revising, but have all this activity take place in class. This is an intriguing possibility we hadn't articulated to ourselves till writing this essay: It wouldn't undercut collaboration or community—just make it function in a slightly different way.

Collaboration and Community Among Teachers

Too much teaching occurs in isolation (at all levels of education). Teachers go into their classrooms and close their doors. Among the many sad effects of this isolation is the "grading fallacy." Teachers working in isolation slip too easily into believing that they *know* what an A paper is and what an F paper is—that they are calling on grading standards made in heaven. A teacher who is uncertain or perplexed about her grades often feels flawed or inadequate in some way.

And yet of course there are enormous disparities among teachers' grades—especially on something as slippery as writing. And so, whereas isolated teachers often drift into having too much faith in their own grades, the students of isolated teachers often drift into skepticism or even cynicism: a sense that evaluation is nothing but an accident of teachers' personalities. Such students think that getting good grades is nothing but psyching out idiosyncracies—figuring out what particular teachers "like" or "want."

As an antidote to teacher isolation, our portfolio system brings teachers together to work as colleagues. All meet at the middle and end of the semester to discuss sample papers and try for agreement. And they come together at least twice more in the semester in smaller portfolio reading groups to evaluate dry-run papers and portfolios.

Some teachers who have always been troubled by grades experience great relief at discovering others who are also uncertain. They are even pleased to discover the striking disparity of standards that sometimes emerge. Other teachers, however, feel disturbed and adrift when we are at loggerheads in a large meeting over a particularly vexing borderline paper. They are disturbed to feel moving sand under the foundation—as though everything is arbitrary and anarchic. One powerful faction gives powerful arguments for failing the sample paper; someone even blurts out, "How can anyone who considers himself literate and professional possibly give this paper a C?" But another group gives strong arguments for passing it, and the blurter discovers that the defenders of the paper are not just the flakey wimps he suspected but also include a colleague he respects as more perceptive and learned than himself.

There can be painful moments in these meetings; hurtful words. ("It's not the paper that flunks; it's the assignment!") Yet as the semesters of experimenting and official use have passed, we as writing program administrators have gradually come to treasure these difficult moments. The other day when the heat was rising in the room, one of us couldn't resist saying: "We're sorry you are having a hard time, but we're having a ball!" It's such a relief to see all this disparity of judgment as interaction between people—as heads butting against other heads. When the disparity of standards is locked inside solitary heads, it's only visible to students who compare notes and to administrators looking at different teachers' grade sheets. When a newcomer complains, "Why do you encourage all this chaos and disagreement?" it's fun to be able to reply, "We're not making it, we're just getting it out in the open instead of leaving it swept under the rug."

We're getting better at chairing these meetings: trying to induce people to use the "believing game" with each others' perceptions; trying to keep people from prematurely digging in their heels and calling each other idiots. For we sense that the hurtful behavior often stems from anxiety:

understandable anxiety at the threat to their confidence in their own standards or their own teaching. ("Might I have let some of my students down?")

On some samples we actually reach consensus, but on others teachers remain divided. Here's where it's important for us to intervene, get a quick vote to show where the numbers lie (sometimes the discussion can fool you), and say, "Fine. We're split. Here's a picture of where our community disagrees; this is a paper that will pass in some groups and fail in others; nevertheless, this picture can give you some guidance when you go off to make your individual verdicts. We're gradually giving each other a sense of this community's standards." For even though it is the disagreement that is most obvious at such moments, we, from where we sit, see vividly that the discussion itself has produced much more agreement in grading and community standards than we used to have when all teachers graded alone.²

In short, the portfolio process is helping us move toward community, toward some commonality of standards—but only over a period of semesters and years. Theorists who talk about "communities of discourse" (who tend to work alone) like to assume that communities of discourse "always already" exist. Though in one sense they do, in another and important sense, they only exist to the extent that they are earned through time and turmoil.

This gradual movement toward some commonality is earned by teachers learning to understand and even give some credence to the perceptions and estimations of others. They learn that some teachers are not as disturbed by messed-up sentence structures as others are. They learn that some attend more to details than to the overall picture. Some are especially beguiled by particular topics or put off by particular approaches to topics. As teachers talk about all this among themselves, they learn from each other. They become a bit less disturbed about differences of judgment and even realize that there is some valuable balancing off of one person's standard against that of someone else who has a slightly different set of priorities. And then too, they alter their own standards a bit. Someone may discover, for example, that she's been paying too much (or too little) attention to slips in usage. Individuals know that their opinions and their standards will help form those of the group. They usually discover that each of them offers something special. If one person in the group is known to be the toughest, and she passes a paper, the others can feel comfortable about the rating. If a group member who has a particularly good sense of logic criticizes the logic of a paper, other group members accept the decision—and may even deliberately seek out that person if logic seems crucial. One of the nicest things is that when a perplexing portfolio fails, the student's teacher ends up with more to tell the student because the group has usually discussed the work.

These large and small group collaborative meetings, then, tend to chip away at the grading fallacy. Where grading-in-isolation invites teachers to be complacent about their own individual grading standards—and punishes them for being uncertain (since uncertainty is so paralyzing when you are trying grade in isolation)—these collaborative meetings invite teachers to be uncertain and open in making judgments and punishes dogmatism about grades.

Teachers tell us that they carry some of the power of this collaboration and community back into the classroom. As they teach (whether the door's open or closed), they don't feel so isolated. Sometimes the effect of collaboration is direct: as a teacher reads a paper or ponders a distinction, she relies on an insight from a small or large portfolio meeting; she has more experience than her own to fall back on. But even without such direct help, teachers know they are part of a larger group which in some way comes into the classroom with them; they speak in their own voices but the voices of their colleagues play a role in how they speak.

In portfolio groups we are not trying to agree on standards for all grade levels from A to F. We are just trying to agree on whether papers are good enough for a C or not: just trying to give ourselves a bit of a foundation for our subsequent solitary grading by trying to agree about that crucial line which divides papers we can affirm as "satisfactory college work" and those we call wanting. We don't even have to agree on reasons or diagnoses for turning thumbs up or down. Nevertheless, when a teacher on her own is trying to decide whether to give a B or a B+, she really isn't alone; somewhere in her mind the values of her portfolio group are at work. And if she has doubts, she knows these are appropriate, not a sign of some deficiency.

Of course, we also recognize the problems in all this. Some teachers have told us that when they work in small groups they sometimes know the teacher for the paper they are reading and therefore find themselves reluctant to fail it. The teacher is dogmatic and will badger; or the teacher is insecure and will complain and feel undermined by the failure of her student. Another problem is a possible difference of standards from group to group. A group has occasionally gotten a reputation for toughness or easiness.

To some extent, we can't overcome these problems no matter what our system is. Teachers will always be insecure, teachers will always differ in their standards. Our portfolio system doesn't create these difficulties—it merely brings them out in the open where we all must recognize them and cope with them in some way. We try to deal with the potential inequality of standards among groups by means of discussing samples in our large meetings before each evaluation period. And the portfolio system cannot easily become inbred because groups only stay intact for a year or so, because of changes in schedules and teaching assignments.

The nicest thing is that the problem of standards is no longer just ours as program administrators—the teachers themselves become concerned about it and feel a need to work toward progress.

We've debated with teachers the pros and cons of small vs. large portfolio reading groups. Large groups create an anonymity which reduces the chance that a particular reader will judge a particular paper on the basis of who the teacher is. But large groups tend to diminish the sense of community. Last year, we gave teachers the option of joining a large anonymous group or forming their own smaller groups. Most opted for the latter, valuing the feel of the small group. Here are comments from a couple of teachers when we asked them to write to us about this question:

I feel that if we only meet in larger semi-formal groups, the give and take which is needed to see that there are other ways to handle a topic will be lost.

When two of my students' papers failed and I felt they should have passed, I asked for second and third readings, and then got into a heated discussion with the other group members who read the papers. At the end of the discussion, both of the papers still failed, but I was satisfied with the failures. I learned some things in the discussion about my own standards (in certain ways they were too low) by explaining why I thought the papers should pass. In addition, we as a group got more clear on what our standards were.

Our colleague, Professor Sheryl Fontaine (whose field is research in composition), wrote, "I've worked in many anonymous readings and don't feel they were any more reliable than the [small] portfolio groups."

Collaboration Between Students and Teachers

In addition to collaboration among peers (that is, among students and among teachers), the portfolio system also promotes a more complex non-peer collaboration between teachers and students. It complicates the authority relationship and we think it promotes what might be called "collaborative leadership": the kind of collaboration one finds between player and coach or between writer and editor. Though some players hate their coach, both parties share the common goal of winning games. Writer and editor share a common goal: publication and success with readers. In these non-peer relationships, reality rewards both parties for working together—and punishes them for working at cross purposes.

The portfolio throws the teacher somewhat into the role of coach or editor because the crucial decision as to whether the student is eligible to get a C or obliged to repeat the course depends on someone other than the teacher. The teacher becomes someone who can help the student overcome an obstacle posed by a third party and is thus less likely to be seen by students as merely "the enemy."

This interesting dynamic ends up giving the teacher a kind of added power—psychologically speaking, anyway. That is, if a student doesn't cooperate—if he doesn't come in for a conference or if he tries to con the teacher or hide his weaknesses—he won't get as much help. The teacher, on the other hand, can remove herself from the role of enemy and decrease the chances of a student's getting mad at her for all the work he has to do to bring his writing up to snuff. The portfolio system permits the teacher to say things like this:

You have made enormous progress here, I'm excited at how much better your writing is than at the beginning of the semester. I know how hard you've worked. But I have to tell you that I fear your piece will not get a C from the portfolio readers.

This piece of yours works for me. When I read it I hear you, I feel the force of your concerns, I am won over. But I suspect some of your success depends on my having gotten to know you and your concerns and my having read some of your drafts and exploratory writing. I suspect your piece won't work so well for a reader who is a stranger to you.

The leverage here is sometimes ascribed to the "good cop/bad cop" game ("I'd like to give you a break but my buddy is a mean son of a bitch"); but it isn't just a game with the portfolio system. The "bad cop" is really there in the person of the anonymous portfolio reader. The teacher is communicating the real situation.

But because the portfolio system complicates the authority relationship, it also turns out to give the teacher less power. That is, in addition to playing the "good cop/bad cop" game, the teacher must also play the "cop-handcuffed-to-the-prisoner" game. Virtually every teacher who has worked with the portfolio has gotten burned once. It hurts to have to come back to a student and say, "I'm sorry, but I seem to have misled you. Your portfolio didn't pass." (Even after going back for third and fourth readings!) Thus teachers learn to say, "I think this is good work, I like it, I would give it a C. But we'll have to see what portfolio readers think."

We like what this does to the use of grades in a writing course. Teachers retain almost complete power over grades. (They can give any grade they wish on papers; they can give any course grade they wish to students who pass the portfolio; they can give any grade below a C to students who do not pass.) But the portfolio makes teachers a bit less likely to give grades on weekly papers—and instead concentrates their energies on useful comments. We like this because students often ignore comments when there is a grade; and teachers often write better comments when they're not having to justify a grade. Comments under the portfolio system are more likely to be experienced as real communication: something the teacher wants the student to act on and something the student has a need to understand.

We recognize that many students don't like not getting those weekly grades—at first, anyway: "I have the right to know exactly where I stand!" But the portfolio system finally provides the answer we've all been waiting for: "I'm sorry but I don't know exactly where you stand. Where you stand depends partly on unknown and not fully predictable readers. The best I can do is give you honest feedback and advice." This is finally a writerly answer: The answer that all writers must face. Students have always known that their English teachers' standards varied from teacher to teacher—but they thought that meant we weren't any good at our job. We can make them understand that we don't have to agree exactly on standards or on taste in order to make communal decisions. We think this is an important lesson for students to learn. It helps free them to develop their own personal standards—without which they'll never care about writing or write really well.

Notice how this complex authority relationship, ("Who's in charge here, anyway!") helps students understand more about the complex reality of *audience* in writing. People seldom write just for one reader whom they know and who has been teaching and helping them all along; people must usually write for multiple readers—some of whom they don't know and who don't know them and who will differ from each other in their tastes and standards. The portfolio forces this situation on students in a serious way: Those unknown and not fully predictable readers count.

But there is also a problem with this invisible handcuff between teachers' and students' wrists. Teachers sometimes begin to feel so identified with their students that they feel they've failed when their student fails. Indeed, the portfolio system can suck teachers into feeling too responsible—especially in the first semester they teach in the system—and giving too much help. In such cases, that failing paper hurts all the more because in some sense it really is the teacher's paper. Failing papers can make teachers angry at their group members—or so hurt that they begin to distrust themselves as teachers. Such reactions test critically the sense of community among the teachers. Still, we think the price is payable. Too often, in today's schools and colleges, students look on the teacher as the enemy (and vice versa). It would be a big gain if students could begin to see teachers as helpful—as people who lead, prod, stimulate, and otherwise ease them into their adult lives—not just as people who constantly mark them down for their mistakes. (Because the portfolio system can trick teachers into feeling that they are responsible for their students' texts, it is a powerful force for teaching teachers not to appropriate student texts.)

Collaboration Between Writing Program Administrators and Teachers

We think the portfolio helps us deal with an essential conflict in program administration: Is it our program or the teachers'? On the one hand it's

ours and we want it that way. We want to maintain control and impose coherence and uniformity. We can't give the reins entirely to teachers because we have a commitment to students and to the teaching of writing—and a hankering for our own agenda too. On the other hand, we need to give the reins to teachers too. If teachers don't experience their courses as wholly theirs—and even to some degree the program as theirs—they will not invest themselves or do their best teaching. (And they'll be more likely to fight us about everything.) The portfolio permits genuine collaboration between us and our teachers.

On the one hand, the portfolio permits us to invade teachers' classrooms. The portfolio more or less forces them to emphasize drafts and revisions—and almost forces them to use peer feedback. It also obliges them to work on three kinds of writing. (Our categories are enormously broad, but nevertheless a few teachers would otherwise skip expressive/imaginative writing or analyses of a prose text.) And the portfolio takes away the teacher's control over that crucial "gateway" C/C-decision. But on the other hand, everything else is up for grabs: assignments, method of teaching, books, order of treatment, and more. The portfolio leaves so much free—or at least we are gradually learning to make it function so—that most teachers feel little constraint. Indeed, we've gradually realized that the best measure for whether the portfolio is working is whether teachers stop feeling they are "teaching a portfolio course" and instead just feel they are teaching "their" course—within its framework.

Besides, although the impetus to have a portfolio came from us, the evolution of it has depended largely on suggestions and complaints from teachers:

- We started out with no dry-run papers, but teachers in the first small experimental semester realized students didn't understand—or really believe—the standards required of them.
- Till this year, we insisted that one paper be submitted at mid-semester. But teachers said that sometimes they and their students became too preoccupied with the portfolio too early in the semester and they'd rather ask for two papers two-thirds of the way through the semester. We allow groups to make their own decisions on timing.
- We started out insisting on four revised papers but reactions from teachers led us to reduce the number to three.
- When we first turned to an analysis paper, some teachers used a literary text. This turned out to create problems for teachers (weaker student papers; greater disagreement about verdict). We reacted by going to the other extreme (from poetics to rhetoric) and insisting on an analysis of an argument. That (frankly, to our surprise) was quite a problem for most teachers, so now we've agreed to broaden the category: analysis of any prose text. Some teachers use argument and some literary texts.

- We started out with portfolio decisions as final. But teachers pointed to unjust outcomes because of a student getting bad advice from them, and this led to a policy more in keeping with a mastery approach: If a portfolio fails because of only one weak paper, the student can revise it once more and resubmit.

At least once a semester we have a meeting for all teachers specifically to talk about how the system is working and how it could be improved.

We are “imposing our will” by pushing teachers toward some commonality of standards, but we are inviting standards to emerge from them. We probably couldn’t impose standards on the community if we tried. We sometimes refer to our large meetings as “calibration sessions,” but that is really a misnomer. For in a true holistic scoring session, the leaders impose their standards: They choose the “anchor papers” and readers must leave their own standards and criteria at the door. The impressive speed and validity in careful holistic scoring depends on this imposed authority. But we’re not trying for impressive validity. (We’re not trying for speed in our large discussion meetings: We just treat a couple of papers in a session; we do want speed in the actual judging of portfolios, however—which is why readers judge portfolios as a whole and just make a crude binary Yes/No decision). But we think that these more collaboratively achieved standards—however slow and limited—permeate people’s teaching more than the standards in holistic scoring with authorized “anchor papers” or “range finders” laid on. Besides, we’re not tempted to set standards ourselves since we doubt they exist apart from actual papers in an actual community of readers. Once the community has judged papers, we can say to those who press us: “Here’s a record of the community’s judgment: here are passing papers and here are failing ones.” Our standards are embedded in those decisions—but it’s not just us speaking when we say that; it’s the whole group.

Concluding Thoughts: The Importance of Experimenting

We are committed to experimenting because we insist on treating perplexity as a virtue. And we feel indebted to WPA and the National Testing Network for, in a sense, sanctioning our perplexity—by telling us, in effect, that there may be a lot of wisdom and scholarship about evaluation and writing program administration, but no one has really figured out how to do it right. There’s no single right way to do it. There’s room for plenty of experimentation and new knowledge. Therefore we better give ourselves permission to experiment—and in the naughty sense of the word too, that is, to fool around. There are so few “perks” or advantages to our job, there’s so much we can’t do because of human recalcitrance or financial lack; why not give ourselves permission to try things different ways because it seems interesting—well before we can

know whether they will work. The very fact that so much of our program is collaborative, that so much of what we do aims toward creating community, makes us feel somewhat safer in indulging our impulses to experiment.

We suspect this process of experimenting will continue. Now that the portfolio has finally become an official part of the University’s writing requirement, and now that we are writing to a national audience about how important it seems to us—and some people are interested in trying it out elsewhere—we’ll probably wake up one of these mornings and find that it doesn’t work for us or that the teachers we work with have to make a major change. What is most likely is that some other writing program, in adapting it to their setting, will work out some deft but powerful transformation so that it comes out completely different and much better. We know it can be better, and we know too that any system which remains in place very long begins to be perceived as something to outwit—an obstacle rather than a doorway.

We hope, therefore, that our experiments can encourage writing program administrators to feel that they are in one of the best positions for conducting research and developing new knowledge—rather than one of the worst, as we’d feared. WPAs can be braver about experimenting if we provide courage to one another by collaborating as members of an even larger community than the ones each of us can build on our own campus.

Notes

¹One of the important reasons why students see school as an arena for individual, solitary, and competitive endeavor is the deep “norm referencing” assumption in assessment and measurement: the assumption that trustworthy assessment should always distribute the population along a bell-shaped curve. It’s worth consciously shaking ourselves loose from this assumption. The work in competence-based education, mastery learning, and criterion-referenced testing showed the value of tests built on a completely different model: The goal is not to rank students into finely discriminated degrees of success, but to make a simple binary judgment as to whether something has been mastered or not; and the goal is not just to measure, but in fact to intervene and increase the chance that the student will learn. Our portfolio could be described as a mechanism for trying to goose as many of our 101 students as possible into writing well enough to get a C (not only for their own good but so we don’t have to teach them again).

²We wonder whether this whole complex process of negotiation about interpretation and judgment might not be an argument for keeping writing programs in English Departments: places where people are concerned with interpreting and evaluating texts, where disagreement about interpretation is viewed as healthy and productive, and most of all where priority is given as much to imagination as to reason in accounts of the reading and the writing process.

Works Cited

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