

Evaluating a Portfolio System

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In the fall of 1988 we in the Composition Program at Kansas State University began to experiment with a portfolio system. We did so for reasons usually associated with the implementation of other portfolio systems (Elbow and Belanoff, "Portfolio" and "State"; Ford and Larkin, Burnham). We wanted to make our grading more consistent from section to section since each semester we have over 130 sections of Composition I and II taught by more than 60 instructors. In addition, we wanted to make our grading more rigorous. Although the average grade point for all students in our program has been about 2.5 (C+/B-) for the past four years—an average not unduly high considering that we offer our students a great deal of help in classes of about twenty-three—the general perception was that the abilities of our students had gone down in recent years and that we were passing students who could not write. Our failure rate varied from 3.6 to 5.3 per cent over the previous four years, but we had no way to judge whether these rates were too high, too low, or just right.

We also wanted to judge adequately the writing competence of our students; that is, we wanted a form of evaluation which allowed our students to submit a variety of writing written under "normal" or "naturalistic" conditions, one which allowed time for multiple drafts, consultation with other readers, and careful editing (Cooper). The standard proficiency exam which asks students to write on one topic for two or three hours was therefore out of the question.

Besides raising our standards and making our testing more effective, we wanted to improve our teaching. We wanted our instructors to consider themselves more as professional advisors or coaches than as graders or editors. We wanted to encourage them to use conferences and peer review and above all to talk to each other, to feel free to discuss their concerns and problems, to work on goals, assignments, and grades together, to be a community with common goals and standards.

Thus we adopted a portfolio system on an experimental basis for those instructors in our advisory groups, both regular instructors and graduate students who had been teaching in the program for three years or less. Our more experienced instructors, about one-third of the staff, did not participate in the experiment.

The portfolio system we adopted was based on the program at SUNY-Stony Brook (Elbow and Belanoff, "Portfolio" and "State"). In order to pass

Composition I and II, students must submit a portfolio of their work to one other instructor, an outside reader, who decides whether their work meets the standards of the program. If the outside reader decides that a student's portfolio fails, that student must fail the course.

The writing in each portfolio must be of a certain kind. The overall format of our program is based on the aims of writing in James Kinneavy's *Theory of Discourse*. In Composition I, students write to express themselves and to convey information, what Kinneavy calls expressive and referential discourse; in Composition II they write persuasively and in response to literature. Thus the portfolios for Composition I must contain three revised pieces: an expressive piece and two referential pieces. In order to give our students practice in writing under exam conditions, we also require that one piece, either expressive or referential, be written in class. For Composition II, the portfolios must contain two persuasive pieces and one critical analysis or other response to a poem, story, or play. All of these pieces of writing must be revised. And as in Composition I, one writing, either a persuasive piece or a response to literature, must be done in class.

To give students practice in submitting the final portfolio we hold a trial run at mid-term. For the trial run students submit one revised piece to an outside reader. If the writing in the trial run passes, the student knows that at least one piece of writing is already good enough to pass the final. If the writing in the trial run fails, the student has the rest of the semester to revise it or to work on another piece to submit in its place. Students suffer no other consequences for failing the trial run. We do not record the failures. The trial run is meant to be practice for submitting the final portfolio.

Students must submit their portfolios in a standard format: each piece of writing must be either typed or neatly handwritten in ink on unlined 8 1/2" X 11" paper. In order to discourage plagiarism and to help us decide borderline cases, we require that each paper be accompanied by a copy of the assignment and all previous notes, drafts, and reader-responses.

If the original instructor disagrees with the judgment of the outside reader, she may appeal to the Director of Composition, who assigns the portfolio to another experienced instructor for a second reading. In every case, the decision of the second reader is final.

After two semesters of the portfolio system on an experimental basis, we were faced with the decision of whether to adopt it throughout the program. During the first semester of the experiment we had faced a certain amount of confusion and hostility from students who either did not understand how the system worked or who felt threatened by it. Moreover, we had been forced to modify a number of our procedures, which did not help our cause with the disgruntled students or with the instructors who had harbored doubts about the new system in the first place. Although we were generally

pleased with our experiment, we felt we needed more information before making up our collective mind. We decided we needed four kinds of information: 1) comparative facts and figures about grades and rates of failure, not only from year to year but between sections that used the portfolio system and those that did not, 2) information about how often our instructors agreed and disagreed about their judgments, 3) a survey of what our instructors thought about the system and whether it seemed to have any effect on how they taught, and 4) a survey of selected students, both those who had been in sections which used portfolios and those in traditional classes, to determine what they thought of the new procedure.

I would like to share these evaluative procedures and their results in order to contribute to our knowledge of portfolio systems and how they work. The kinds of analyses we performed and the evaluative instruments we used—as well as our results—should be helpful to other programs thinking of implementing similar portfolio systems.

Facts and Figures about Grades

In our system students can pass the portfolio but still fail the course for other reasons, such as excessive absence or not doing other required work. Thus we needed to know not only the number of students whose portfolio failed but also the number who failed the class as a whole.

As I have already mentioned, in the previous four years the failure rates for our freshman composition courses as a whole had hovered between 3.6 and 5.3 per cent, a four-year average of 4.6 per cent. Students failed the portfolio alone just below this range: both semesters after appeals, 3.2 per cent of the portfolios failed. This rate was in keeping with the experience of SUNY-Stony Brook, which reported a failure rate, after a number of borderline portfolios were allowed to be revised, of under five per cent (Elbow and Belanoff, "State" 102). It seemed then that the portfolio system had not made our program any more rigorous.

But a quick review of final grades for the program as a whole indicated a startling discrepancy. The overall failure rates for composition classes as a whole—that is, for both portfolio and traditional sections—jumped to 7.2 per cent in the fall and 8.2 per cent in the spring. Clearly something was going on.

A comparison of the grade distributions of portfolio sections with traditional sections helped to explain the discrepancy (see Table 1).

Table 1
A Comparison of Grade Distributions for
Portfolio and Traditional Classes

Fall 1988	A	B	C	D	F	Inc	W
Portfolio Classes							
Totals	366	885	601	104	183	29	91
Percentage	16.2	39.2	26.6	4.6	8.1	1.3	4
Traditional Classes							
Totals	121	409	254	40	43	3	33
Percentage	13.4	45.3	28.1	4.4	4.8	.3	3
Totals:	487	1,294	855	144	226	32	124
Total Percentage:	15.4	40.9	27	4.6	7.2	1	3.9
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Spring 1989	A	B	C	D	F	Inc	W
Portfolio Classes							
Totals	355	716	464	89	185	33	98
Percentage	18.3	36.9	23.9	4.6	9.5	1.7	5.1
Traditional Classes							
Totals	77	273	118	18	17	1	17
Percentage	14.8	52.4	22.6	3.4	3.3	.2	3.3
Totals:	432	989	582	107	202	34	115
Total Percentage:	17.6	40.2	23.6	4.3	8.2	1.4	4.7

In the fall semester the failure rate for the course as a whole in portfolio sections was 3.3 percentage points higher than in regular sections; in the spring the failure rate for the course as a whole in portfolio sections was 6.2

percentage points higher. Using the rate of failure for the entire course as a standard, portfolio sections were significantly more rigorous. But why were they more rigorous if only 3.2 per cent of the portfolios were failing? We thought of a number of explanations, but the most obvious was that the effort required to assemble the portfolio—all the conferences and all the revising, which our instructors and the Writing Lab reported was unprecedented—had forced many students to fall along the wayside, to drop after the official day for dropping classes, which at K-State is recorded as an F, or to not submit a portfolio at all. We found this interpretation somewhat comforting. We surmised that in previous years many students had passed even though they had not completed all the assignments or even though they had not paid much attention to their final products. Such students could pass no longer. However, students who did work hard within the portfolio system, those who did all the major assignments and who worked at revision, had a slightly better chance of passing than in earlier years.

Other explanations did occur to us. During the year we implemented the portfolio system, K-State had an unusually large increase in enrollment, but preliminary indications were that the high school records and ACT scores of our latest class of freshman were not substantially different from those of previous years. In addition, the same year we implemented the portfolio exam, we also put into effect a new composition curriculum which introduced a research report into Composition I. According to our experienced instructors, the research report made Composition I much more difficult for borderline students than it had been in previous years. But neither of these explanations account for the discrepancy in grades between the portfolio and traditional sections. There is no apparent reason why more borderline students should have wound up in portfolio sections since students did not know which sections would participate in the portfolio system when they registered. And the new curriculum was used in both portfolio and traditional classes.

All in all, our grade distributions suggested that portfolio grading had indeed made our program more rigorous.

Information about Consistency in Grading

In order to make our grading of portfolios consistent, we held grading sessions once a semester for all instructors in the program. In addition, twice a semester instructors in the portfolio system met in small groups with an experienced instructor to read sample papers and discuss whether these papers should pass or fail.

We used very general criteria for evaluating papers in portfolios: each paper had to have a clear purpose, a form of organization which was easy

to follow, sufficient detail or evidence, a consistent tone appropriate to the purpose and audience of the paper, and careful editing. However, each piece of writing in the portfolio had to be accompanied by an assignment sheet, and we encouraged assignment sheets to be more specific. For example, a common assignment in Composition I asks students to tell a story about a significant event in their lives, a story which has sensory detail, dialogue, and a dramatized "key moment." Thus portfolio readers can use the general criteria as a framework for interpreting the more specific requirements of individual assignments.

In our discussions in both large and small groups we generally agreed about whether the sample papers should pass or fail, but there was always a significant minority who disagreed about whether the weakest papers should fail.

To see how well portfolio readers agreed in their judgments, we collected two kinds of information. At the midterm trial run we asked instructors to indicate how many of the outside readers' judgments were "surprises"; that is, how many of the judgments they strongly objected to. In the fall semester approximately five per cent were surprises. Because of an oversight we did not note the surprises in the trial run of the spring semester.

At the end of the semester we also noted the number of appeals which instructors submitted for portfolios which failed but which they thought should have passed. In the fall, 23 per cent of the failed portfolios—16 out of 70—were appealed. In the spring, 27 per cent—17 out of 63—were appealed. Although these numbers indicate that we disagreed over one-fourth of the failures, we also noted that these disagreements occurred among less than ten per cent of instructors and concerned less than one per cent of the total number of portfolios we read: in the fall we disagreed on 16 portfolios out of a total of over 1800, and in the spring we disagreed on 17 portfolios out of over 1600. We are exploring ways to increase our consistency, primarily by being more directive in our grading sessions, but we wonder if we will be able to do much better than we already have.

A Survey of Instructors

Our survey was based on the model offered by Barbara Gross Davis, Michael Scriven, and Susan Thomas (169-94). Besides asking about other matters such as our curriculum and our training program, we inquired about how often our instructors used those teaching techniques we associate with effective instruction in writing. If they had participated in the portfolio system, we also asked whether the system encouraged them to use particular techniques and whether the portfolio exam had other effects. The results are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

As Table 2 indicates, teachers who had participated in the portfolio system agreed overwhelmingly that it had helped to develop a sense of collegiality (69.2 per cent sometimes or more frequently), that it encouraged students to revise (92.3 per cent sometimes or more frequently), that it helped to develop an adequate minimum standard for the program (88.5 per cent sometimes or more frequently), encouraged conferences (96.2 per cent sometimes or more frequently), and encouraged instructors to think of themselves as coaches (80.8 per cent sometimes or more frequently). The instructors' responses also indicated that to a lesser extent the portfolio system encouraged students who needed the help to attend the Writing Lab (65.4 per cent sometimes or more frequently), but we could expect this lower number because attending our Writing Lab is entirely voluntary, and many students will not attend because of their tight schedules, their heavy work loads, or a misplaced sense of pride.

Table 2

Responses of Instructors to the Portfolio System

As a result of your participation in the portfolio evaluation this year, how would you rate the following about the portfolio system? (Results are stated in percentages. A total of 26 instructors responded. One instructor did not respond to questions a, e, and f.)

	Never	Infrequently	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
a. helped to develop a sense of collegiality among instructors	11.5	15.4	34.6	26.9	7.7
b. encouraged students to revise	3.8	3.8	11.5	38.5	42.3
c. helped to develop an adequate minimum standard for passing composition	3.8	7.7	38.5	30.8	19.2
d. encouraged you to confer with your students	0	3.8	19.2	46.2	30.8
e. encouraged students who needed to attend Writing Lab	3.8	26.9	42.3	15.4	7.7
f. encouraged you to think of yourself as a coach	0	15.4	38.5	15.4	26.9

In addition, our instructors indicated that they were likely to use those teaching strategies which the portfolio system was designed to encourage, although there were no significant differences between those who participated in the portfolio system and those who did not (see Table 3). Apparently, our staff had been using all along those teaching strategies we were trying to promote. We were, however, surprised that more of our instructors did not comment on first drafts or discuss student writing in class. These are two techniques we need to promote more actively in our training sessions.

In short, the survey showed that the instructors participating in the portfolio system used peer group workshops, conferred with their students, and encouraged revision—exactly what we had been hoping for. But our instructors may not have done these things primarily because of the portfolio system since the instructors who did not participate in the system used the same techniques. At best we can say that the portfolio system did not lessen our emphasis on peer groups, conferences, and revision.

A Survey of Students

We surveyed 375 students, slightly more than 10 per cent of all of those registered in Composition I and II. The classes we surveyed were roughly divided among the classes of first-year, second- and third-year, and more experienced instructors. They were also divided among the students of instructors who supported the portfolio system and those who had severe reservations about it.

Our first concern was whether the portfolio exam encouraged our students to confer with their instructors and revise their work and whether they received sufficient help in meeting the program's standards. Once again, the results were overwhelmingly supportive (see Table 4). Of the students surveyed, 87.2 per cent said that portfolios encouraged them to consult with their instructor, 93.5 per cent said that portfolios encouraged them to revise, and 82.4 per cent said that they received sufficient help in meeting our program's standards.

Table 3

A Comparison of Teaching Techniques Used by Beginning and Experienced Instructors (BI, EI)*

As a result of your participation in the Program, how often did you use any of the following techniques? (Results are shown in percentages, with 26 beginning instructors (BIs) and 14 experienced instructors (EIs) responding. Beginning instructors, all of whom participated in the portfolio system, are listed first.)

	Never	Infrequently	Sometimes	Frequently	Always
a. students work together in small groups to help each other with writing	BI: 7.7 EI: 0	7.7 7.1	11.5 28.6	65.4 57.1	7.7 7.1
b. students evaluate each others' writing	BI: 0 EI: 0	7.7 7.1	26.9 21.4	38.5 28.6	26.9 42.9
c. students engage in prewriting/invention activities	BI: 0 EI: 7.1	0 7.1	11.5 7.1	53.8 50	34.6 28.6
d. students are required to revise their writing	BI: 3.8 EI: 0	3.8 7.1	15.4 0	26.9 42.9	50 50
e. students submit first drafts for comments or grading	BI: 15.4 EI: 7.1	26.9 35.7	19.2 28.6	15.4 14.3	23.1 14.3
f. examples of student writing are discussed in class	BI: 7.7 EI: 0	50 14.3	15.4 28.6	19.2 42.9	7.7 14.3
g. you confer regularly with students about their writing	BI: 0 EI: 0	3.8 0	19.2 7.1	53.8 71.4	23.1 21.4

[* All of our beginning instructors participated in the portfolio system both semesters; during the second semester a number of experienced instructors voluntarily joined them. Thus, this comparison between beginning and experienced instructors does not neatly distinguish between instructors who participated in the portfolio system and those who did not.]

Table 4
Student Attitudes About the Portfolio System

As a result of your participation in the portfolio system this year, how would you rate the following about the Composition Program and your instructor in helping you deal with the portfolio system? (Results are stated in percentages. Between 335 and 337 students answered each question.)

	Yes	No	Not Sure/ Not Applicable
a. encouraged you to revise	93.5	3	3.6
b. encouraged you to consult with your instructor	87.2	6.8	6
c. encouraged you to attend the Writing Lab	39.4	37	23.6
d. gave you a good sense of what the Program's minimum standards are	75.3	16.4	8.3
e. helped you feel that your writing met the Program's minimum standards	77	12.8	10.1
f. gave you sufficient help in meeting the Program's standards	82.4	7.8	9.8

We had two additional concerns about using portfolios: that students would not recognize the standards implicit in the wide variety of writing we allowed them to submit and that the system simply put too much pressure on them. But our fears were allayed somewhat by these results: 75.3 per cent of the students said that the portfolio system gave them a good sense of the composition program's minimum standards, and 77 per cent said that they felt encouraged that their writing met the program's standards. Still 16.4 per cent responded that they did not have a sense of the program's standards, and 12.8 per cent said that they did not feel as if they had met the program's standards, with 8.3 per cent and 10.1 per cent respectively not sure. We need to improve these figures since they are considerably higher than our actual failure rates, which might indicate that the portfolio system does cause a

certain amount of uncertainty about whether portfolios will pass or fail, some of it perhaps unwarranted.

Asked point blank whether they preferred a portfolio evaluation to a regular final exam, the students preferred the portfolio by a margin of four to one (see Table 5). The only group that seemed to have reservations about the system was composed of students who had submitted portfolios in the fall but not in the spring. There the vote was evenly split 18 to 19, perhaps because during that first semester a certain amount of bad feeling was fueled by rumors and half-truths as we modified our procedures and "got the bugs out" of the system.

In general, I think our four-part evaluation was successful: it told us what we wanted to know and gave us some confidence that we were not confronting a host of problems we were not aware of. The four methods of evaluation we used were also important in building support for a procedure about which many people had reservations. On the basis of this information we decided to implement the portfolio system throughout the program during the 1989-90 academic year.

Table 5
Students' Choice of Evaluation

Given the choice between submitting a portfolio and taking a regular final examination, which would you prefer? You should assume that for the regular final examination you would have to write an essay for two hours during the final examination period and that the regular final would count for approximately 1/7 to 1/4 of your final grade. (Results are in raw numbers and then percentages. 335 students responded; on each of the questions marked with an asterisk, one student indicated he was not sure or that the choice of exam made no difference.)

When Student Participated in the Portfolio System	Choice of Evaluation:	
	Portfolio	Regular Exam
Fall Semester Only	18/ 48.6%	19/ 51.3% *
Spring Semester Only	120/ 77.9%	34/ 22.1% *
Both Spring and Fall Semesters	124/ 87.3%	18/ 12.7%
TOTALS:	262/ 78.2%	71/ 21.2%

Notes

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