

On the Running Board of the Portfolio Bandwagon

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In what follows, I wish to express some doubts and skepticism, rather than opposition, toward the widespread enthusiasm for portfolio assessment. I use portfolios in my own courses; I have proposed a portfolio system for our English majors. Nevertheless, as a Writing Program Administrator, I have located myself on the running board because it is relatively easy to jump off.

The portfolio bandwagon got underway at Stony Brook in 1986, primarily as a reaction against timed, impromptu writing assessments, with Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff as bandmasters. Interest in portfolio assessment has steadily increased, publications on the topic have multiplied, and although it has not achieved the status of nation-wide *status quo*, there was a conference at Miami University of Ohio last fall offering new directions.

What bothers me about this is the orchestration of shallow arguments and confused purposes. For example, in opposing impromptu assessments, Elbow and Belanoff worried that proficiency exams would undermine good teaching by *sending the message* "that proficient writing means having a serious topic sprung on you . . . and writing one draft . . ." (336). I will treat the relationship between teaching and testing later; I emphasize the business of "sending a message" because the phrase continues to surface in recent publications and because the response is so obvious. If we're worried about people getting wrong messages, then we should try to communicate clearly.

As to the message itself, the predatory metaphor is simply exaggerated. Impromptu assessments should, and usually do, employ general interest topics, offer a variety from which students may choose, and encourage students to draw from personal experience for supporting detail. Assessment designers do not lurk behind bushes or in trees waiting to spring on children.

The concern over the single draft which is merely a concern over time constraints or deadlines *per se*, seems valid only insofar as evaluators' expectations or scoring criteria are unreasonable. Reliable assessment criteria and readers take time limitations into account and score accordingly. At any rate, time for drafting and revising impromptu writing can

always be increased, and foolish criteria and unreliable readers will undermine even the most conscientiously constructed portfolio.

Portfolio promoters also argue that timed exams can't give a valid picture of students' proficiency in writing, that more writing is better than less, and that a variety of samples are preferable to a single one. There are risks in sampling anything, as test makers and portfolio promoters well know, and again nothing prevents us from simply increasing the number and variety of impromptu assignments even if we accept this objection. More to the point, however, no one has yet identified or explained what quantity and variety of writing *will* provide a valid picture.

The last most common objection to impromptu, timed assessments is that they contradict writing process theory and practices; that is, they ignore the value of discussion and collaboration, the importance of genuine, extensive revision, and a cluster of other activities that portfolio advocates claim are inherent in process theory.

First of all, there is no reason why learning the process precludes or contradicts rapid applications of it. Presumably, process theorists hope students will internalize process methods of composing so thoroughly that they become almost habitual and will use those methods whenever rapid application is required. I am speaking here not only of the most obvious requirements--timed essay examinations in content-oriented courses, or memos, reports, and other writing samples expected by real-world bosses yesterday--but also of the connection between written and oral composing. I suggest that impromptu writing may help students improve their impromptu listening and speaking skills, as well as their reading and writing, and therefore may even promote the kind of genuine, authentic voice that process theorists applaud. Surely there is time in the process-based classroom for making such connections.

Second, as Edward White noted at the Four C's in 1992, we are strong in the context of national accountability pressures on matters of assessment validity but weak on reliability, and here portfolio advocates fall especially wide of the mark. Apart from the question of reader reliability, portfolios pose two basic reliability problems. The first stems from portfolio advocates' desire to assess "best writing" samples. This approach sets the bandwagon ahead of the horses; that is, it sets an abstract notion of best writing ahead of purpose and criteria. If our purpose is to assess competency, for example, we must first establish appropriate criteria; students then meet those or they don't, with either their best or less-than-best writing. The question of a student's "best" writing is irrelevant. If, however, we're assessing for placement purposes, then we wish not only to exempt some students from unnecessary course work but also to direct others toward needed courses and services; hence, *representative*, rather than

"best" samples, are crucial. In other words, we cannot assume that best writing samples meet either our purposes or our students' needs reliably.

The second and more important reliability problem is this: Do we wish to assess students' unaided performances? Teaching tools, such as discussion, peer review, conferencing, and the like, are essential to students' learning and improvement; however, any assessment of individuals that allows assistance from others is simply a contradiction in terms and purposes and a nightmare of variables for those concerned with reliability.

Further, surely the goal of these methods is to help students become independent and personally empowered, that is, to become their own best critics; thus, an assessment instrument that allows for assisted writing appears to contradict that goal as well. A colleague argued at the WPA national conference last summer that all of her writing was "aided," at least by colleagues, and that she wouldn't think of writing anything without some form of assistance, indeed, that writing is inherently collaborative. That's a popular tune in some circles these days. But if we sing or play it, then we must eschew individualized assessments of any kind—even portfolios—and we had better stop the hypocrisy of presenting and publishing melodies and lyrics under our names alone.

In sum, there is no inherent reason why teaching methods ought to be reflected in either assessment instruments or in products generated by them. Surely we would not reject a good portfolio or a good impromptu piece of writing simply because a student's teacher used methods out of step with process theory. Moreover, pedagogical preferences of any kind should not preclude educational goals that must be based in clearly understood purposes and valid/reliable methods of assessing their accomplishment.

Let me now address the problem of purpose in three assessment circumstances—placement, course-exit, and extra-curricular—by using three specific programs as reference points.

Placement

Would portfolios prove useful for placement purposes? Here, problems of purpose and valid/reliable assessment surface in the term itself. For example, students who choose to transfer credits from one institution to another may be exempted from certain requirements or otherwise credited with equivalent instruction and learning. Are they therefore "placed"? In one sense they are, but usually we do not say so. Rather, we apply traditional placement instruments (ACT/SAT scores, locally administered assessments) to all members of an entry population because 1) other

assessment tools (transcripts, GPAs, and diplomas) have proven unreliable in predicting "college preparedness" and 2) the meaning of "college preparedness" varies from campus to campus, proving the other tools invalid as well (a given high school curriculum and grading standards may not be applicable to my institution). Indeed, one could theoretically assume that even the highest high-school standards would by definition be lower than those of colleges. Thus, colleges need representative indicators of students' instruction and learning, both for placement purposes and in the interest of entering students.

Miami University of Ohio recently adopted a voluntary "advanced placement" portfolio system, specifically geared to Miami's two-course sequence of composition and composition/literature (they offer no basic/developmental courses). According to Laurel Black in *The Composition Chronicle* (Feb., 1992), the program is working well. High-school students submit portfolios to Miami's faculty, who review them and place the students in the sequence. This process offers an interesting slant on the issues, but I believe it is somewhat misnamed.

Miami faculty and secondary teachers worked together to align portfolio guidelines and requirements with Miami's course sequence. Presumably, students' portfolios include only their best work, but the close connections between secondary teachers and University faculty assure that "best" also represents the instruction and learning that occurred. Indeed, Miami's faculty have been quite satisfied with performances of portfolio-exempted students in the second course of the sequence. Thus, the program deserves high marks for validity (direct connections to Miami's definition of preparedness) and reliability (the portfolios accurately reflect student abilities). Therein lies the fallacy of calling this a placement program; the close curricular and performance connections between the high schools and the University, as well as its voluntary nature, define this more as an equivalency program. This is not to disparage Miami's efforts but merely to show the potential for confusion in assessment language and purposes.

In short, it is hard to imagine how portfolios might be used by various institutions for traditional placement purposes, that is, applied to all entering students coming from schools across the country and especially at those institutions where first-year classes number in the thousands.

Course-exit

Other problems involving purpose and reliability surface with course-exit assessments. In "Portfolios and the Process of Change," Roemer, Schultz, and Durst of the University of Cincinnati describe their efforts to replace

a traditional course-exit examination with portfolios. They established three different pilot projects to aid their goals, which apparently were somewhat confused from the beginning. The authors note that portfolios "served the purposes for which the Exit Exam was initially instituted: they promoted high standards and consistency among teachers" (467). These instructional or program goals, laudable as they may be, are mistakenly linked directly to student performances.

The mistake has plagued public school teachers for years: "Because students didn't learn, you didn't teach." Or, to extend the coaching metaphor so appropriate to writing instruction, "The kid struck out; therefore, fire the coach." Such seemingly foolish statements gain validity when the product assessed has been developed directly under the guidance of the instructor/coach, especially if that coach has led students to believe that their work is satisfactory, for example, if students have received satisfactory grades on papers throughout the course.

Different pilot groups at Cincinnati addressed these problems in different ways. One group chose not to assign grades to papers while portfolios were in progress. Hence, the problem of an external reviewer who might possibly contradict an instructor's judgment and advice was eliminated. Because of the burden of multiple-section teaching assignments, a second group simply drew sample portfolios from each teacher that reflected the grade range and criteria for the program. Although expediencies may have been the cause of this alteration, the result was theoretically sound. Program improvement goals—consistency in grading, program cohesion, staff morale, as well as instructional benefits from the process of composing portfolios—were achieved without misleading students or jeopardizing final grades. From an outsider's point of view, the initial confusion over assessment purposes (program vs. student performance) seems to have been resolved, at least insofar as faculty performance now appears to be the center of the program, appropriately linked to its primary goals.

Certainly, course-exit assessments and their attendant problems, most notably the relationship between assessments and students' final course grades, are not new. Ironically, however, our experience with the lengthy, frustrating, and stressful faculty meetings that they tend to generate may have prepared us well for the higher-education accountability movement and extracurricular assessments begun in the mid-eighties.

Extracurricular

The faculty senate of the University of Northern Colorado established the English Essay Exam as a graduation requirement in 1983 in hopes that

writing would be an on-going enterprise (not limited to first-year composition courses), a University-wide responsibility, and a matter of public credibility. Students could take the exam as often as necessary, but they would not receive diplomas until they passed. The senate asked the English department to develop and administer an appropriate exam.

That the exam may be retaken indefinitely helps clarify the definition and purpose of this monitoring device, which does not claim to test the full range of students' writing abilities; rather, it attempts to alert students to weaknesses that may characterize their writing generally. The exam offers students a choice among three different topics, normally involving three different rhetorical strategies. Students need write only four hundred words in two hours. Scoring guides derive from grading standards in freshman composition, with "C" or better required to pass. After three failures, students may appeal results to an interdisciplinary Appeals Board.

Approximately 64% of the students pass the exam on first take; second-exam pass rates jump to nearly 90%, and third-takes rise to 95%. My experience with students who have failed three or more times convinces me that they should not, in fact, graduate from any college.

Although we urge students to take the exam for the first time early in their junior year, many procrastinate, even until their graduating semester. As one might expect, I often confer with angry, failing students who claim to be good writers, or at any rate, point to their GPAs as evidence that they should graduate. I regularly ask for other samples of their writing, but often I need not ask; they come to my office already armed with papers graded by professors in their major fields. The types, frequency, and significance of weaknesses that surfaced in the essay exam also appear in this work. The "A" paper typed for Professor X is replete with grammar and spelling errors; the "B" for Professor Y is littered with vague, unsupported generalities and awkward, even incoherent, constructions. On two occasions (both graduating seniors), the exams suggested dyslexia, whereas the students' typed papers did not; both students said they relied on others to type their papers. I suggested that they visit our center for learning disabilities, and both were diagnosed as dyslexic.

The exam, then, seems to fulfill its purpose; however, results, appeals, and protests point toward serious disparities in grading standards and faculty practices across campus. As with course-exit assessments, students (and angry parents) understandably ask, "How can someone come this far only now to discover inadequate skills in writing?" Or "Hasn't the University been misleading its students about their writing abilities?" Such questions might have some merit, if students had tested early and sought help for improvement; certainly they would have even more questions if

the work at issue (performance on the exam) had been guided and/or previously approved by professors. A genuinely extra-curricular assessment, however, places responsibility more directly on students, in the same way that comprehensive exams at the graduate level do. That goal, of course, could be achieved by portfolios of new material, composed under controlled, unaided conditions.

The bottom lines in all three assessment circumstances are 1) whom are we assessing (individual students, peer groups, faculty?) and 2) why are we assessing them (for placement or other instructional purposes, for program cohesion, for compliance with external mandates?). Once the answers to these questions become clear, we can then ask what instruments and what criteria are appropriate, and who shall administer them?

Conclusion

Let me summarize to this point. Apparently, and I stress the apparent nature of things, the portfolio bandwagon got started on spurious grounds, namely, a series of unexamined assertions against existing practices. Portfolios seemed an attractive alternative to impromptu writing assessments, but early in the parade we began to lose sight of fundamental questions and of our purposes. This tendency was no doubt reinforced by the political pressures of the nation-wide accountability movement.

In 1990, Pat Hutchings accurately summarized the political advantages and problems in portfolio assessment by noting administrators' mounting fears about misuse of the standardized testing date by external agencies. According to Hutchings, "Portfolios are one way around this problem. A ranking of institutions based on portfolios? It's hard to imagine how that would happen" (p. 8). However, Hutchings also noted that "there's a flip side here: the challenge is to find ways of turning . . . portfolios into something with utility and credibility for 'other audiences,' be they at the institutional level or beyond that"; she then suggested "promising tactics" (p. 8) for doing so. Of course, viewed from a legislator's or Board member's point of view, such remarks may seem to "send messages" of fear over information being misused, ways around problems rather than ways of solving them, and concern over promising tactics rather than with substantive issues.

Thus, our challenge is not to turn portfolios into something useful and credible. Our challenge first of all is to develop valid and reliable methods of assessing student writing, based on clearly defined purposes. When portfolios meet the criteria, certainly they should be used.

Second, our challenge is to educate our various publics about the complexities of the first task. The problem here is to inform without appearing to obfuscate. Most people, including college faculties, seem to believe that knowledge once acquired becomes a fixed, static part of the brain, problems of retention notwithstanding. They compound that error by applying it to performance-based learning; if students can remember what happened in 1492, they should remember how to write well. If they learn to write well, they still should be able to do so (the ride-a-bike fallacy); hence, if students write poorly as seniors, the fault must lie in freshman composition. But riding a bike doesn't equate to riding it well, and we must teach that lesson as well as dispel the fallacies without seeming to avoid accountability.

Likewise, we must teach the most fundamental paradox in writing assessment; namely, the more we standardize the assessment, the less we assess genuine writing ability. "Originality" in writing assessment is not a fuzzy, cotton-candy term. For example, if we find the same sentence in two student compositions, we grow suspicious; if two identical sentences, we will probably charge the students with cheating. By extension, the more we standardize--the more we specify topics, strategies, and audiences--the more we diminish originality and narrow the range of "writing ability" tested.

The corollary is that the greater the latitude we allow, the more we undermine the purpose of common (let alone "standardized") assessments, and when that latitude allows "assistance," we become hard-pressed to define "cheating." Assessing writing is a complicated business, and it's probably a good idea to sort matters out carefully before we begin to explain them to others.

So I remain on the running board, a precarious but interesting position, given our penchant for buzz lyrics and professionally popular melodies.

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