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# Portfolios Across the Curriculum

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In 1985, as a graduate student and therefore composition instructor at a large, state university, I participated in a panel of composition professors and instructors trying to persuade the Arts and Sciences faculty to adopt a Writing Across the Curriculum program. It was, to say the least, an eye-opening experience for a naive graduate student who believed that what we were doing in our writing classrooms benefitted and was understood by faculty in other areas. But as I listened to what faculty in areas such as history, philosophy, political science, biology, psychology, classics, and physics had to say about student writing and writing instruction, I realized that assumptions I took for granted about pedagogical strategies and results were not necessarily shared by faculty from other disciplines. While some faculty supported the concept of writing across the curriculum, others were decidedly hostile to the idea. Some objected that it was not their responsibility to teach students how to write; we were to do that in two semesters of required composition. An historian exclaimed, "All I ask is that you teach students how to construct a decent sentence and where to put commas. Is that too much to ask? I mean, what else are you doing for two semesters of required freshman comp?"

Looking back on this experience ten years later and from the perspective of a professor and administrator in a composition program, I realize that the comments that surprised me so were actually not unusual in faculty discussions of writing across the curriculum programs. Both the resistance and the support are clearly demonstrated in the profiles of successful programs and the concluding survey of "the enemies of writing across the curriculum" in Toby Fulwiler's and Art Young's *Programs That Work: Models and Methods for Writing Across the Curriculum*.<sup>1</sup>

In "Reconsidering Faculty Resistance to Writing Reform," Jody Swilky observes that Fulwiler and Young, as well as others like David R. Russell and Susan H. McLeod, assume that resistance to writing across the curriculum is necessarily negative and obstructionist. Swilky points out, however, that "resistance can signify something other or more than 'negative' behavior. Although faculty resistance to cross-curricular writing instruction can be a conscious or unconscious attempt to preserve the status quo, such response can also represent a critical interrogation of the purposes of reform or uncertainty about the objectives of educational change" (50-51). Any faculty attempting to establish and then foster community standards for student writing will encounter resistance and disagreement; discussions of writing's place in a college curriculum often raise more questions than answers. How does an academic community achieve consensus about what constitutes quality writing? Compe-

tent writing? Who should be responsible for the development and quality of student writing? What ought to be the relationship between the roles and perceptions of writing in other disciplines and what we do in our composition classrooms? What effect should writing assessment have on students' writing?

Such questions about writing in the academy became the subject of much debate among faculty, administrators, and students when, in 1988, Eckerd College (a private, liberal arts college in St. Petersburg, Florida with 96 full-time faculty and approximately 1400 students) made the transition from timed, proficiency writing exams to a campus-wide portfolio-based mode of writing assessment. Our seven years of portfolio assessment demonstrate the success of portfolios at a small college<sup>2</sup> and illustrate the potential cross-curricular benefits of portfolio assessment.

The institutional answer to the question of who is responsible for writing instruction at Eckerd College is that all faculty share this responsibility and that writing shall be an integral part of the program of all majors. This institutional commitment to cross-curricular writing was reaffirmed in 1988 when the faculty, after much discussion and debate, unanimously passed legislation to replace a system of timed proficiency writing exams and required composition courses with a portfolio-based writing competency graduation requirement. Designed by George Meese, Director of the writing program, in response to the Southern Association of Colleges and School's requirement that we develop reliable methods of assessing our students' writing, our program was a college-wide adaptation of the Elbow/Belanoff program within the English department at SUNY/Stony Brook. Rather than administering this requirement within the context of a particular course, however, our portfolio is a graduation requirement. We ask students in the junior year to submit a portfolio of four papers *from any of their college classes*.<sup>3</sup> We encourage students to revise these papers in light of feedback from the original professors or through consultations in the Writing Center, and we ask that the portfolio copies *not* include the classroom professor's comments. Students cannot register for required senior comprehensive exams, thesis credits, or project credits until they have passed this competency requirement. Students whose portfolios do not pass are required to enroll in a writing course before submitting another portfolio. We have one spring and one fall deadline for portfolio submissions, and each semester the portfolios are evaluated by a committee of interdisciplinary faculty who have volunteered to participate in the review. The faculty reviewers follow procedures based on holistic scoring methods. To date, more than forty percent of the whole faculty have participated on an evaluation team.

Our portfolio instructions ask students to include compositions from four categories: 1. "a descriptive, narrative, or expressive piece that is primarily the result of the author's own 'making sense' of experience"; 2. "an argumentative or persuasive piece in which the author takes a stand on a topic or issue"; 3. "a piece of interpretation, evaluation, criticism, or analysis in which the focus is on the ideas of others" (usually a research paper); 4. "an in-class essay or essay

examination written under timed conditions." Students may also include a fifth, optional piece of their own choosing. We require that one of the submissions (usually the argumentative or the interpretive/analytical) be a fully documented, academic research paper that demonstrates the student's ability to incorporate source material into her or his writing. Students are also asked to annotate each paper in their portfolios with a description of the circumstances of the writing, including the course assignment, the amount of time and number of drafts, and any assistance they received in writing; we also ask them to annotate the portfolio as a whole with a reflective piece calling readers' attention to the strengths of the portfolio.

In "Portfolios and Literacy: Why?" (1994), Pat Belanoff comments, "One of the outcomes of introducing portfolios into a classroom as an assessment system—as almost everyone who uses them discovers happily or unhappily—is that they restructure everything" (17). The restructuring that results from the introduction of portfolios into a college-wide assessment program has implications for the entire curriculum. While the shift from timed, proficiency writing exams to portfolio assessment does not resolve all of the issues surrounding the place of writing in the college curriculum, the implementation of a college-wide portfolio assessment system raises these issues to the level of cross-disciplinary community discussion and negotiation, a shift that has, I believe, great significance for how students learn about and perceive writing and how an academic community thinks about the role of writing in the process of learning.

## How does an academic community achieve some sort of consensus about what constitutes good writing? Competent writing?

Too often discussions of assessment, testing, scoring validity, and measurement in composition and rhetoric<sup>4</sup> seek to reduce "good writing" to a set of qualities that can be easily measured, in a worst case scenario, by multiple choice, standardized tests that don't include a writing sample. The CCCC Committee on Assessment outlines the dangers of "externally imposed writing assessments" in their May 1992 "Selected Bibliography on Postsecondary Writing Assessment, 1979-91": "They may," the authors caution,

undermine the instructor's autonomy in the classroom, they may have a narrowing effect on the curriculum, and they may continue to invite the student to see writing when it matters—on the test—as filling in the blanks. Equally important, such measures of writing competency can depress the development of new paradigms for writing assessment. (244)

To this list of dangers, I would add one more. Such assessment methods suggest that an absolute notion of "good writing" exists outside of a rhetorical context, outside of a discourse community of readers and writers. I would argue instead that definitions of good writing change often, from decade to decade, from discipline to discipline, from one rhetorical situation to another, and are constructed and continuously reconstructed within the context of a community.

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In fact, as Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff note, even composition professionals can't agree on any absolute notion of good writing: "Our profession lacks any firm, theoretical, discipline-wide, basis for deciding the right interpretation or evaluation of a text" (Portfolios 338). They continue, speaking of their own "in-house" portfolio system at SUNY-Stony Brook, "The only way to bring a bit of trust-worthiness to grading is to get teachers negotiating together in a community to make some collaborative judgements. That the portfolio promotes collaboration and works against isolation may be, in the end, its main advantage" (338). In "The Myths of Assessment" Belanoff goes further to celebrate this lack of agreement, arguing that "our inability to agree on standards and their applications . . . is a sign of strength, of the life and vitality of words and the exchange of words" (62). Karen L. Greenberg also stresses portfolio assessment's contextual, collaborative qualities in "Validity and Reliability Issues in the Direct Assessment of Writing." Greenberg notes that the finding of a College Board "attempt to provide evidence for construct validity of multiple-choice tests of writing" actually "calls into question the practice of assessing writing ability with a single writing sample and also echoes recent evidence that writing ability is not a single construct but rather is a composite of several situation-specific constructs" (14-15). She goes on to praise the development of portfolio writing assessments that engage faculty in a collaborative development of an assessment tool "that is grounded in their theories, curricula, and classroom practices" (15).<sup>5</sup>

It is this sort of community negotiation of writing standards that a portfolio system has created for Eckerd College on a college-wide level. The process of designing the portfolio system, considering the proposal, discussing it in faculty and departmental meetings, and then voting on it, started an on-going discussion of the role of writing in our overall educational program. We began to ask questions about writing's importance in our general education curriculum as well as our majors, and we began a debate about the skills students should possess and the standards they ought to achieve.

These discussions did not end, however, once the faculty voted to implement the portfolio assessment system. Our portfolio submissions are evaluated by an interdisciplinary group of faculty, and the composition of this group changes for each evaluation. Every semester a new committee (with representatives from all departments and as many diverse disciplines as possible) engages in a fresh discussion of what constitutes good writing. Reading and discussing sample portfolios from the previous year, the committee struggles with difficult questions about our expectations of student writing and the standards we will apply as we evaluate that semester's submissions. What features do we consider crucial to competent writing? How important is appropriate use and documentation of source material? How do we evaluate "voice," "communicative quality," or "rhetorical sophistication"? One colleague from a social science discipline comments, "The lack of clear, 'absolute' standards—clearly impossible to devise—made it difficult in a few cases. How do we evaluate students for whom English is a *second* language?"

Our answers to such questions often vary. For instance, two faculty from the same evaluation committee can come away with different impressions of the portfolios. One remarks, "It was reassuring to see that our students *can* write," while another expresses disappointment, "The experience was very worthwhile. I especially enjoyed seeing the variety of writing assignments. I also discovered that Eckerd students do not yet write as well as I wish they did." Such conversations remind us of the complexity of writing, of the connections between writing and thinking, of the social nature of writing, and of the complexity of our roles as readers. It is through talking about these variations, about our different goals and desires for our students' learning, that an academic community negotiates its way toward shared standards of writing competency.

## Who should be responsible for the development and quality of student writing?

It must be obvious at this point that the answer to this question in the context of Eckerd's portfolio assessment program is that the responsibility for student writing is shared by faculty across the curriculum. Participating in the preliminary training session gives faculty a conscious sense of ownership and investment in the quality of student writing, which is, according to Edward White, the point of such training: "The training of readers, or 'calibration,' as it is sometimes called, is not indoctrination into standards determined by those who know best (as it is too often imagined to be) but, rather, the formation of an assenting community that feels a sense of ownership of the standards and the process" (215). Every semester a group of faculty leaves the evaluation committee having reached greater agreement about writing standards than I would previously have supposed possible and with a commitment to applying those standards in their classrooms. The agreement is never complete, however. In "Portfolio Scoring: A Contradiction in Terms," Robert L. Broad stresses the importance of "[reconsidering] the meanings and merits of evaluative disagreement" and "[transforming] our notions of consensus and difference in the context of communal writing assessment" (264). We have found our differences to be as valuable as our consensus, often revealing the contradictory and conflicting assumptions about writing that form faultlines in the geography of academic discourse. Such differences instruct us in the complexity of the rhetorical constructions in which we require students to participate.

Enhancing this sense of ownership and responsibility is the fact that the portfolio papers can come from course work in any field, assigned by any professor. Thus the pressure to hold students to agreed-upon standards of writing is not confined to the writing classroom. Indeed, the portfolio system assesses faculty in an indirect manner. As faculty read student writing from other disciplines and classes, we are motivated to re-evaluate our own students' writing and our grading. We have, of course, encountered some problems. What happens when a failing portfolio includes papers that received A's in the context of courses? What happens when a portfolio reviewer finds evidence of plagia-

rism that the original classroom professor missed? What happens when patterns of portfolio success and failure over time begin to suggest “writing problems” in specific majors? We don’t have any pat answers to such questions and challenges, but we do not ignore them; these issues are all part of the larger negotiation of community writing standards (and, of course, institutional politics), and we thrash them out as they occur.

For the most part this cross-disciplinary responsibility for student writing has resulted in a valuable critical interrogation of our own pedagogical assumptions and practices rather than in embarrassment and anger. Because the students’ annotations of their papers often include a description of the assignment that originally prompted an essay, interdisciplinary discussions and exchanges of writing assignments have begun; we now share with one another prompts that resulted in papers that pleased us and seek suggestions for revising assignments that didn’t work well.

Faculty standards for writing assignments are not the only standards that have risen since we implemented the portfolio system. As Jan Ross, one of my colleagues in composition, observed, “We have, in fact, seen an evolution of standards over the past two years. Readers this fall demanded greater variety in the writing, more development of ideas, greater success in using sources correctly and effectively, and more careful proofreading or editing than a semester or year ago.” Again, faculty carry these greater demands into their own classrooms. One colleague commented after reading portfolios the first time, “It prepared me for a higher level of expectation when it comes to my own students’ writing abilities.” Thus our method of assessing student writing has become a tool for improving student writing in all fields.

## What ought to be the relationship between the roles and perceptions of writing in other disciplines and what we teach in our composition classrooms?

In *Teaching and Assessing Writing*, Edward M. White claims that “At its best, assessment can improve our teaching, make our jobs easier and more rewarding, and demonstrate the value of what we do” (8). His observation is an apt description of our composition faculty’s experience with a portfolio system. The opportunity to read writing assignments and student papers from other courses has been a valuable part of the composition faculty’s involvement in the portfolio process. We have developed a sense of the remarkable range and variety of cognitive and rhetorical tasks that students encounter in their courses throughout the curriculum. We now have the option of designing our composition courses in light of this knowledge, rethinking our pedagogy, creating new writing prompts and designing new rhetorical contexts to which students can respond with writing.

At the same time, faculty from other disciplines have developed an increased interest in how we teach writing. Writes one, “I would like to have

more information about what is taught in the [one hundred-level] writing courses. For example, copies of the syllabi and texts used. I believe that material might also be helpful to Western Heritage faculty.”<sup>6</sup> Writing faculty have become resources for faculty in other fields as they look for new ideas for incorporating more and better writing into their classes. Suddenly we have the chance to explain process pedagogy, revision strategies, peer writing groups, and discourse communities to colleagues in disparate disciplines.

The current challenge for the writing faculty is to assist our colleagues in various disciplines to develop students’ abilities to write in the discourse of their fields and to translate the concepts of their field for a lay audience. For example, a workshop for faculty in Human Development focused on composing process-oriented writing assignments, providing students with accurate models of writing in the field, and incorporating writing instruction into their courses. Composition faculty are currently collaborating with faculty in Management to coordinate writing presentations in their upper-level courses. In several other majors we arrange for Writing Center peer consultants to work with specific classes, arranging writing groups, or tutoring students on prewriting and revision strategies, etc. We have developed a writing-within-the-sciences course to be team taught by composition and natural science faculty. In place of the programmatic approach of traditional writing-across-the-curriculum programs, the portfolio system has led us to develop different strategies for assisting colleagues in differing disciplines with varied writing needs and paradigms. Resistance to the goals of writing across the curriculum is reduced significantly when faculty in various disciplines first assess their own writing needs and then collaborate with faculty in composition and rhetoric to develop strategies to meet those needs. In the language of Edward White, writing assessment is then perceived in terms of promise rather than threat.

## What effect does our portfolio assessment method have on our students’ perceptions of writing?

Has the portfolio system changed our students’ thinking about writing? I believe it has. Our portfolio assessment method invites students to engage in learning on a variety of levels. Students are invited to extend their view of writing beyond the closure of “term papers” and the artificial boundaries of semesters, to see writing as involving recursive processes of critical thinking, expression, rethinking, and revision. The portfolio encourages students to consider the responses of various readers—the professor in the original course, a Writing Center peer consultant, the portfolio evaluation committee—in their revision processes; writing becomes collaborative and interactive, a dialogue with the ideas and voices of others. Students are encouraged to demonstrate the range and variety of “voices,” of social and ideological languages that they have learned to manipulate. As James A. Berlin observes, “The portfolio in a postmodern context enables the exploration of subject formation. As students begin to understand through writing the cultural codes that shaped their

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development, they are prepared to occupy different subject positions, different perspectives on the person and society" (65). The annotations students write invite them to engage in a complex process of metacognition and metadiscourse, to situate their discourse for a specific audience, engendering the "self-reflexiveness about writing" that Kathleen Blake Yancy identifies (104). Most important, the portfolio requirement invites students to claim ownership and authority over their writing, to review the papers they have written in college, to decide which ones they think are best, and to articulate their writing strengths. In Karen Greenberg's words, portfolio assessment "sends the message that the construct of 'writing' means developing and revising extended pieces of discourse, not filling in blanks in multiple-choice exercises or on computer screens. It communicates to everyone involved—students, teachers, parents, and legislators—our profession's beliefs about the nature of writing and about how writing is taught and learned" (16).

In our composition classrooms the change is obvious. We face a more willing and engaged audience because, instead of being required courses, writing courses at Eckerd are now electives; they are perceived as valuable opportunities for developing the writing skills that the college as a whole demands and will evaluate in the portfolio. Our courses have been growing in popularity since we made them elective. Before portfolios, about forty-eight percent of all students took at least one composition course; now about fifty-seven percent take at least one, and three new, advanced courses have been added to our curriculum. Writing is understood as a college-wide concern rather than one relegated to something called "freshman comp." Elbow and Belanoff identify a benefit of their portfolio program that we have observed as well: "It makes teachers allies of their students—allies who work with them to help them pass. Teachers become more like the coach of the team than the umpire who enforces and punishes infractions" (State 104).

What more could an assessment method offer? Let me, in closing, describe the most unexpected benefit I've observed: pleasure, in our students' writing and in our own. We enjoy the pleasure of collegiality, of discussing with colleagues issues important to us. One evaluator explains, "I liked the opportunity to read two different portfolios with the group and then discuss our reactions and questions." We also enjoy the pleasure of reading our students' best writing, of seeing what they have achieved. "It never seems we have enough time," complains one professor, "to read and re-read the good work." We also read writing more often, as faculty from disparate fields come in contact with writing. Seven years of college-wide portfolio writing assessment has changed the campus community's attitude toward writing. This is an institutional transformation that no other assessment method I know of can foster.

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## Notes

1. I agree with David Russell's contention that "the fundamental problem of WAC is not so much pedagogical as political, not how to create a sound program (that has been possible for decades), but rather how to administer it, how to place it firmly in the complex organizational structure of the university" (191).
2. The development and implementation of campus-wide portfolio assessment at a large, public institution involves difficulties that are (thankfully) beyond the scope of this article. Chris M. Anson and Robert L. Brown, Jr. describe some of the problems faced by large institutions in "Large-Scale Portfolio Assessment." In "Introducing a Portfolio-Based Writing Assessment: Progress through Problems," William Condon and Liz Hamp-Lyons trace their difficulties in designing a system for the University of Michigan. More recently, Richard Haswell, Lisa Johnson-Shull and Susan Wyche-Smith describe their "daredevil" (45) implementation of a general-education portfolio assessment program at Washington State University in "Shooting Niagara: Making Portfolio Assessment Serve Instruction at a State University." Despite the authors' harrowing (and humorous) representation of putting together a workable large-scale portfolio program as a ride over Niagara Falls in a barrel, WSU's portfolio assessment process is thus far a success, and their article offers valuable advice for other large institutions.
3. Transfer students may include two papers from a previous institution, but we ask that they accompany each paper with a letter from the course professor to certify their work's authenticity.
4. See Alan Purves, "Reflections on Research and Assessment in Written Composition," Thomas McKendry, "Locally Developed Writing Tests and the Validity of Holistic Scoring," LaRené Despain and Thomas L. Hilgers, "Readers' Responses to the Rating of Non-Uniform Portfolios: Are There Limits on Portfolios' Utility?" and David W. Smit, "Evaluating a Portfolio System."
5. With support from the Council of Writing Program Administrators, we are currently assessing the reliability of our portfolio evaluation procedures through a review by writing program administrators at other institutions. This review is part of the ongoing Portnet Project under the direction of Michael Allen at Ohio State University.
6. Western Heritage is a one-year, freshman, humanities-based general education course that is taught in rotation by all faculty at the college. It is supposed to include a strong writing component, but the forms of written work required are not specified and are left up to the individual professor's discretion.

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