

Richard L. Larson

A "portfolio," as used in this article, is a collection of writings by a single author—writings of the same or different kinds gathered over a period of time, or from roughly the same time. This essay argues that for purposes of assessment portfolios are superior to multiple-choice tests and to time-limited essay tests. The essay also discusses the possible contents for a portfolio (which can include evaluative comments by the student on his/her own work); ways of gathering a portfolio; ways of reading portfolios; and precautions that faculty need to observe before using portfolios for assessment.

# Portfolios

## *A New—and Better—Way to Assess Writing and Other Learning*

Each spring for the last three years every student admitted to Miami University (in Ohio) has been invited to apply for advanced placement in, or exemption from, the University's required first-year writing course. To earn exemption, the student is told to submit to the Department of English a collection of his or her writings, including an autobiographical piece, an essay on literature, and an argumentative composition.

Faculty volunteers evaluate each collection according to criteria they have agreed upon, and make one of three possible judgments on the student's work: regular placement, placement in the second semester of writing, and exemption from required writing. The first two readers agree in their judgments of the vast majority of collections; if they disagree, a third reader records a judgment. The entire process of evaluation requires four or five days at most. The collections of students' writings are called "portfolios," and Miami's plan is just one of the latest to use portfolios in the assessment of writing and in the improvement of instruction in writing.

As a tool for assessment, particularly (but not exclusively) the assessment of writing, the portfolio is probably the "hottest" single concept being tried out in American universities, and in the schools, today. Teachers and administrators are finding increasing numbers of new uses for portfolios, both for assessment and for teaching. In this essay I will explain the concept, suggest how it works in the assessment of writing and in other aspects of learning that get displayed through writing, illustrate how portfolios can be "read," and give potential users some advice about using them.

## The Nature of Portfolios

A portfolio is nothing more complex than an ordered collection of documents designed primarily to enable the maker of the collection to reveal something of the range, and perhaps the development, of his or her abilities or accomplishments. It is a *collection*: it includes more than one document, though all the documents in the collection *may* be versions of the same final piece. It is *ordered* in the sense that the contents have been assembled for a purpose and not randomly; each piece in the portfolio has a specific place in the portfolio. Each item in a portfolio may have been composed with the intent that it will go into the collection; or one or more, or even all, of the documents in it may have been composed without that intent. A portfolio can contain any number of documents, and the documents may be of many kinds. The number and kinds of documents may be decided by the person preparing the portfolio, or stipulated by those requesting the portfolio. The documents in the portfolio may have been compiled over years or over a short time (a semester or less). The subjects of the documents may be essentially the same, or may differ widely; the preparer or the person asking for the portfolio, or both together, decide. Some portfolios include comments by the writer on the individual pieces and/or on the whole collection. What gives portfolios their distinctive appeal is the variety of ways a portfolio can be constructed and the number of purposes portfolios can serve. Portfolios are highly flexible constructs.

Portfolios have for some time played an important role in education and in the world of work. Students seeking admission to courses in studio art or photography are often asked to bring a portfolio of their works to the instructor for evaluation. In some colleges, adults seeking credit for life experience are asked to bring a portfolio of writings, letters of recommendation, and other documents to the officer in charge of individualized studies for evaluation. In some teacher education programs, students compile portfolios in which they document and reflect on their teaching experiences, incorporate supervisors' evaluations, and include assignments, lesson plans, and other teaching materials. At the 1992 meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Lee Shulman of Stanford University spoke eloquently of the value of portfolios in recording and preserving important teaching experiences for later study. Teaching experiences, Shulman said, are a bit like blocks of dry ice; they evaporate without a trace at room temperature. A portfolio, he suggested, is a way to keep those experiences from evaporating.

Portfolios have recently entered the assessment of writing in several ways. Why? Because they provide the basis for much fairer, more informative assessments of students' work than other assessment procedures. Multiple-choice tests of writing, which ask students to choose preferred forms, preferred words, preferred idioms, preferred ways of completing a passage, and so on, are fast and easy to score and are alleged to predict performance in writing courses. But they ignore the role of "invention" (the finding of ideas) in writing, ignore the acts of planning and drafting, test the act of revision artificially, and thus give those in

charge of testing no sense of how the student composes a total piece. Holistically scored essay tests of writing meet those objections, and they *can* be scored reliably. A weak case can even be made for using holistically scored tests when an institution needs a quick and dirty, and later adjustable, placement of the student for instruction. But holistically scored tests create a totally artificial context for writing, deny students access to information they need for writing the test essay (unless the student has accidentally received the information earlier and can recall it under pressure), and limit the time available for drafting and for revision.

Further, holistic scores are in most instances acts of rigid classification, and the classifications of students they produce can often be misleading and discriminatory and wrong. Such tests may serve as the revolving door that drives students out of school, and they may indeed be devices to force students to adhere mechanically to rigid forms and conventions of writing. In addition, there is often little evidence that the individual test validly measures the construct, "writing ability,"

*Higher education needs fairer, more comprehensive assessments of students' writing than we now get.*

that it claims to measure. My college uses holistically scored tests of writing as bases for placement and as the barrier students must hurdle to continue in college beyond 64 credits. In my experience, scores on those tests often do not describe or predict effectively the performance of students in my classes. Furthermore, few people experienced in the testing of writing today accept as reliable and useful the student's score on one writing sample (in effect, a one-question test). Higher education *needs* fairer, more comprehensive assessments of students' writing than we now get. Portfolios *may* meet that need well.

One frequent use of portfolios in the assessment of writing is the plan by which a teacher or a teaching staff determines whether the student passes or fails a course by examining at the end of the course a portfolio of the student's writings—either all of them, or a selection from them. The procedure benefits students, and strengthens assessment, in two ways. First, if (as is usual) the student has the opportunity to revise all papers before submitting the portfolio, the student has the opportunity to be judged on the best work of which he or she is capable at the end of the course, after the student has had the opportunity to learn all that the writing course has to teach. Students in writing courses, as they see what the course seeks to teach, often improve sharply late in the semester. Furthermore, when examining a portfolio, the instructor has before him or her a generous sample of the student's actual writing, not just entries in a grade book or notes on comments made earlier in the semester on the student's writings. As an example, Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff, at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, describe in their article "Portfolios as a Substitute for Proficiency Examinations" how they initiated the use of portfolios to determine students' passing or not passing their first-year writing course. By giving several members of the teaching staff, as collaborators, the responsibility for negotiating the judgment of each portfolio, Elbow and Belanoff in effect established a small seminar on assessment of writing for young or new teachers, which

quickly became a seminar on how one understands the term “writing” and on how one might define “success” in different kinds of writing.

Portfolios typically include writings of different lengths and writings that attempt different rhetorical tasks, since most writing courses ask for varied writings. Such a portfolio might, for instance, include a piece examining, for classmates, a major turning point in the student’s life; a piece summarizing the essential content of another’s essay; a piece arguing (for classmates or for publication in the college’s literary magazine) the student’s interpretation of a text in literature; a piece evaluating, for fellow students, the argument of a work of public discourse; and a piece synthesizing the views of several writers into an argument on a public question about which students are divided. The portfolio might even include, if the instructor allows, a piece written by the student for personal pleasure. But variation in length of entries or purpose is not essential. A law school might ask students to compile a portfolio of revised briefs they have written for various cases they have argued in moot court. And a student’s laboratory notebook in chemistry can be thought of as a portfolio of laboratory reports on different experiments.

Such portfolios comprising only end-of-course work, to be sure, give the reader essentially a static representation of where the student is at a given time. But portfolios can also offer dynamic representations of a student’s progress—what Pat Hutchings of the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) calls a “moving picture” of the student developing as a writer, not just a “snapshot” of a person in place. Those whose teaching depends on helping students master the “writing process” (a misnomer, since there are many kinds of writing processes used by different writers and by the same writer in composing different writings) may want at least some writings in the portfolio to be accompanied by students’ earlier drafts of those writings. The teacher may even want the student’s notes on the processes of invention employed in preparing for the writing, sketches of a possible structure for the piece, outlines, and similar artifacts of his or her creative processes. Such teachers find it useful to base their final assessment of students’ work at the end of the semester partly on the felicitousness with which students moved toward final texts and partly on the improvement achieved in the final drafts over earlier drafts. Portfolios provide data to teachers interested in evaluating students’ composing processes that they cannot usually compile if each completed writing is graded separately and simply returned to the student. This kind of dynamic portfolio is increasingly in use at colleges and universities, and is a kind of portfolio commonly required in the schools.

Still another kind of portfolio found in the schools these days and in many college writing programs, including the courses I teach, is one in which the collection is accompanied by a statement from the student evaluating that work, and/or by a statement from the student evaluating comparatively the several items to reveal their strengths and weaknesses. To the extent that writing is in effect revision, and to the extent that revision depends on the student’s ability to read and assess his or her own work, many teachers consider that developing students’ abilities at self-assessment is essential. Portfolios that incorporate students’ evaluation of their own work and progress, then, connect assessment visibly to improved

teaching and learning. Many classes in California schools, particularly those influenced by teachers from the National Writing Project, ask students for precisely these kinds of portfolios—and indeed encourage students to work together collaboratively on each others' portfolios to help others decide what to include in their portfolios. Portfolios, used thus, bring a tool of assessment to the service of instruction.

One should note that in shaping these kinds of portfolios, the preparer always makes the final choices, his or her perceptions sharpened by discussing the work in peer groups and by writing an evaluation of the work. But there are "outside" influences: the teacher's assignments and the advice of fellow students. And sometimes, under the guidance of imaginative teachers, students compose portfolios as complete "whole" texts, with their own structure, introduction, and conclusion, and even with their own unifying theme or image.

Portfolios make possible a second kind of dynamic assessment: revealing a student's progress over several semesters of writing courses and, especially, revealing the growing knowledge and other kinds of educational progress a student can display *through* writing—that is, knowledge and progress that one can identify from reading what the student has written. One important example is the use of portfolios to assess students' progress in their major fields, as is done, for instance, in the Department of English at Christopher Newport College in Virginia. In such portfolios, a faculty may collect students' papers analyzing published research in their field, papers evaluating concepts and methods of inquiry in the field, papers reporting students' own research in the field, and project papers submitted in the "capstone" course in the field, to name a few representative kinds of work. Still another example is the gathering of portfolios of students' writings in several academic fields, in order to find out, for instance, how well students practice critical thinking within different disciplines, how well students can read the core texts in different disciplines, or how well the students can synthesize concepts and readings from related disciplines. Portfolios allow for the simultaneous study of a *group* of writings, rather than just the isolated examination of individual pieces. Such portfolios can help faculty observe students' intellectual growth over time and even their moral and spiritual development: what has happened over four years of study, for instance, to their values.

I might add that for administrators or faculty self-study groups eager to learn the sort of education their students are receiving or the sorts of instruction faculty are giving, portfolios of writings completed over time, in different disciplines, can yield information about the kinds of subjects students are asked to discuss in writing, and the kinds of problems they are invited to confront through writing. Portfolios of writings read and handed back by faculty can also suggest much about the clarity and helpfulness of the guidance students receive in doing their writing. For instance, portfolios can indicate whether the assignments are clear and specific. Portfolios can even yield information about the attentiveness and usefulness of faculty's responses to students' writing.

## Reading Portfolios

Regardless of the purpose or context for collecting portfolios, those who collect them have to decide how to read them. “Decide” is the word: portfolios do not automatically bring with them a procedure for reading them and learning from them. Given the diversity of the materials they can include, and the many possible reasons for collecting them, several scoring procedures are possible. I will mention only a few.

Portfolios can be read, first of all, to reach a general impression of their accomplishments; they can receive a holistic score (a classification score), as indeed they do in the Miami University advanced placement/exemption program. The readers, using carefully worked out criteria and “decision rules” for placing a given portfolio into one or another category, read the contents of a given portfolio against the criteria and classify it into a specific group. Edward White, in his book *Assigning, Responding, and Evaluating: A Writing Teacher’s Guide*, advocates exactly that procedure, and shows, as he usually does in talking about holistic scoring, how “a composition staff working together” can discuss approaches to reading and criteria for judgment, reach consensus on the kinds of portfolios that will be classified in particular ways, and apply the agreed-upon standards. The standards should *not* be imposed top-down, White always insists, by an administrator or the leader of a scoring session.

But portfolios usually contain such a rich gathering of material that giving a single summative score is in most instances not the best way to read them, just as summative scores on individual writings are simplistic and inadequate. Peter Elbow emphasizes this point in *What Is English?* One summative score on a portfolio will hardly do justice to what is in that portfolio. Much more appropriate, I would argue, is an analytic reading in which faculty decide what they want to know about a student’s performance and look into the portfolio for specific indications of what the student has attained. Below, I list a few of the kinds of features of a portfolio at which readers might look.

- What acts of thought and writing (summarizing, evaluating information, narrating, citing evidence to support assertions, and so on) has the student been asked, or has she elected, to perform in the writings in the portfolio? How well does the student perform each of these acts of thought and writing? What acts of thought and writing does the student *not* perform in papers where she could well have done so? Whatever the faculty’s definition of critical thinking, how consistently did the student display such thinking when she had the opportunity?
- What specific features of writing do the faculty working with these portfolios value particularly (e.g., freedom from error; appropriate use of English idiom; consistency in carrying out the promise made by the writer, at the beginning of the writing, about what she would do in the writing; felicitous use of metaphor and analogy; presence of a distinctive voice; freedom from ambiguity; etc.)? How far are these qualities (individually) present in the portfolio?

- What details of information do the faculty want to see the student citing in her papers (in one course, or across courses)? How far are they present in the portfolio?
- What uses do the faculty hope the student will make of concepts and readings and issues raised in various courses, when he or she writes papers? What awareness does the student show of specific ideas and issues?
- What signs are there in the papers (especially in portfolios of writings from different time periods) that the student has developed in power of analysis and thinking over the course of her study? Do later papers penetrate more deeply into issues or display, for instance, stronger abilities at evaluating "evidence"?
- What signs are there in the writings that the student, over time, has experienced a change in moral values? Are her decisions on important issues different, or more complex, in later writings than in earlier ones?

Before reading portfolios with these questions, of course, faculty readers need to reach consensus on how they understand each question, and on how each question applies to a portfolio. Once consensus is reached, these particularized acts of reading can be powerfully informative.

### Using Portfolios

Before suggesting items a faculty might consider when planning to use portfolios for assessment, let me report on the uses of portfolios for assessing writing at two institutions other than Miami University.

At the 1992 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Cincinnati, Nancy Baker presented a paper on her study of the value of portfolios as a tool of assessment and as an influence on teaching in a second-semester writing course at Southeast Missouri State University. She found no significant connection between "portfolio-based" instruction (as differentiated from other forms of "process-based" instruction in which each writing is completed, graded, and set aside) and students' course grades or their attitudes toward writing at the end of the course. But she did find that students liked being in classes where final judgments of their writing were deferred until portfolios were read; the students felt they benefited from the new procedure for assessment. And these benefits came, Dr. Baker reported, without the teachers experiencing an unmanageable increase in their workload or finding unreliability (serious disagreements among instructors) in the grading of students' work. Indeed, in the view of the instructors, Dr. Baker reported, the multiple samples of writing in the portfolio "allowed for a more comprehensive evaluation of students' writing at the end of the semester." Furthermore, instructors benefited from discussion of what is valued in writing, of bases for grading, and of assignments. The quality of *instruction* enacted under the plan for using portfolios most probably *improved* over what it had been.

At the University of Cincinnati, as Marjorie Roemer, Lucille Schultz, and Russell Durst report, extensive planning, consultation, and conversation preceded and accompanied a pilot study of the use of portfolios, instead of a timed exit examination, in assessing students' work in several composition classes. Though the roughly twenty-five participating instructors (many of them part time) found themselves giving more time than before to reading students' writings and to helping them revise drafts, they "agreed that portfolio assessment provided a fairer and more accurate way of evaluating students' writing than the traditional grading system." (Roemer p. 466) At Cincinnati, it would seem, both instruction *and* assessment benefited from the introduction of portfolios as bases for assessment.

What advice, then, for faculty and administrators as they consider the possible use of portfolios for assessment of writing, of critical thinking, of mastery of an academic major? First, consider: do you genuinely want to strengthen assessment and teaching (particularly, though not always exclusively, of writing), and do you want to learn about features of students' performance that you do not now know and cannot learn about in any quicker way? If the answers to those questions are "no" or are uncertain, the effort may not be worthwhile. One liberal arts institution tried out a plan for collecting and scoring portfolios only to find that it learned from the effort little that it did not already know.

Second, consider whether you can commit some funds and some support for faculty to the effort. Though Miami and Southeast Missouri State did not find the scoring of portfolios unacceptably time-consuming, the instructors at Cincinnati had to give a good deal of effort to the instruction that led students to have a presentable portfolio, and others to whom I have talked have remarked that the processes of installing portfolio assessment and the scoring of portfolios would be unduly burdensome for their institutions. At Miami, faculty scoring portfolios in the summer are paid for their work, and on almost any campus the leaders of the process for instituting portfolios require some sort of compensation (time, if not money). Also, those who collect portfolios, distribute them (to readers), and store them or return them to students need compensation.

Third, give yourself *time* for careful initiation of the use of portfolios. Using portfolios requires major changes in teaching processes—changes that faculty will not undertake unless they have been consulted about the need for them and have been invited (I'm tempted to add, warmly and repeatedly encouraged) to *participate* in making them. Discussion over time, perhaps with the aid of specialists familiar with the processes of evoking and scoring portfolios, is essential to success with such a project. One instructional benefit from using portfolios is the enlarged and enriched communication among teachers about what writing is, what to value in students' writing, and how to recognize what is valuable in students' work. However, that benefit takes time to realize, and it will not realize itself.

Fourth, work to avoid the perception that the administration wants portfolios collected so that it can read them secretly for evaluating faculty. Portfolios can yield insights into students' learning and development and

into the quality of instruction—insights that the university community may value as members discuss possible changes in curriculum and teaching strategies. But faculty *and* administrators *and* even students need to be involved, willingly and knowingly, in those processes of assessment.

Thoughtfully introduced, with a search for consensus among faculty (and, if possible, among students) on what is sought from students, portfolios are a humane alternative to mechanistic and arbitrary practices in the assessment of those distinctively human activities: thinking and communicating through language.

### *Suggested Readings*

- Belanoff, Pat, and Marcia Dickson. *Portfolios: Process and Product*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1991.
- Camp, Roberta. "Thinking about Portfolios." *Quarterly of the National Writing Project and the Center for the Study of Writing* 13.2 (1990): 8–14, 27.
- Elbow, Peter. *What Is English?* New York: Modern Language Association, 1990.
- Elbow, Peter, and Pat Belanoff. "Portfolios as a Substitute for Proficiency Examinations." *College Composition and Communication* 38 (1986): 336–339.
- Larson, Richard L. "Using Portfolios in the Assessment of Writing in the Academic Disciplines." Pat Belanoff and Marcia Dickson, eds., *Portfolios: Process and Product* (1991): pp. 137–149.
- Murphy, Sandra, and Mary Anne Smith. "Talking about Portfolios." *Quarterly of the National Writing Project and the Center for the Study of Writing* 13.2 (1990): 1–3, 24–27.
- Roemer, Marjorie, Lucille M. Schultz, and Russell Durst. "Portfolios and the Process of Change." *College Composition and Communication* 42 (1991): 455–469.
- White, Edward M. *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating: A Writing Teacher's Guide*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.