

# PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF: BEFORE YOU ASSESS YOUR STUDENTS, ASSESS YOURSELVES

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Portfolios are exceptionally versatile; in fact, they can serve as many functions as we envision for them. Nonetheless, in many college settings, we increasingly see portfolios used for one purpose: proficiency testing. There is no question that a collection of essays produced over a variety of contexts is preferable to a single writing sample. But the haste with which colleges are launching programs that substitute portfolios for exit examinations is worrisome. The biggest problem with this development is that many of us are proceeding backwards. We are collecting portfolios and using them to judge whether students should pass or fail our courses, and only later do we inquire into what the portfolios can in fact reveal about our curriculum and instruction. I would like to argue that before we use portfolios for assessing our students, we should use them as tools for assessing ourselves.

Self-examination will answer three critical questions that writing teachers need to address before embarking on a program of proficiency testing: (1) What do portfolios tell us about what

we have taught our students and about what they are able to do? (2) What does portfolio writing reveal about our curriculum and instruction? and (3) What does the review process indicate about the amount of knowledge we share as a community of writing teachers? Once we have answered these questions, we will be in a better position to judge student writing.

A pressing reason why we should read portfolios for what they discover is that the writing they contain can only be a product of our curriculum and instruction. Unlike the exit essay produced in a testing situation, often outside the classroom, the writing in a portfolio is highly contextualized. It is embedded in the immediate culture of the classroom and in the wider culture of the writing program. When a student hands over a portfolio, she is offering a collective written testimony of her actual classroom learning. She is publicly declaring to portfolio readers, "This is what I produced in my writing course this semester. Read through my portfolio and you'll see what I've learned about writing skills. You'll see the types of assignments I've been given. My cover letter will tell you about the process I've gone through. Here's the best that I was able to do."

The student expects the response of the portfolio readers to be context-sensitive. She doesn't think of these readers as a mysterious, distant audience; they are composition instructors with the same interests, affiliations, standards, and conceptions of writing as her classroom teacher. Early in our pilot project we discovered that if a student received a passing grade, complimentary teacher comments, and positive reviews on a paper, and then had that paper judged unacceptable by portfolio readers, the student was stunned and bewildered. Some students complained that even though they had composed the piece with their teacher and classmates specifically in mind, they expected their portfolio readers would also understand and value their writing. If the portfolio readers view the portfolio as decontextualized writing, however, and judge it according to assumptions or schema that differ widely from what the student has been taught, the assessment will not be fair. One of the most positive features of the self-assessment is that teachers gradually come to a shared understanding of what constitutes writing performance and proficiency in their own particular community. They also develop a deeper appreciation of the rhetorical richness and variety of portfolio writings, thereby rejecting the notion that

portfolios are about some putatively universal but generally unspecified writing ability. They learn that portfolios cannot be judged only on the basis of semantic and syntactic competence and grammatical proficiency. Rather portfolios reveal a task-specific competence because they evolve from rhetorical situations in writing classes.

Self-assessment requires us to approach portfolio texts less like omniscient readers and more like curious, interested readers who are trying to understand the writer's intention, given what we know of two curricular contexts: the classroom context in which the essay was produced and the larger rhetorical context of the writing program itself.

Collectively, portfolios are affirmations of a writing program's objectives and goals. By studying the portfolios of groups rather than individuals, we can determine if students are accomplishing what we set out to teach them. An objective of our entry-level composition course at Cortland, for example, is that students learn to write essays in which they integrate information from reading sources with their own knowledge and experience about a topic. If the portfolio review reveals that a substantial number of students are writing personal experience narratives and rarely engaging other writers' texts, we know our curricular objective is not being met. The portfolio, then, is evidence that a program's objectives and the actual outcomes of its activities are congruent. If that congruence does not exist, if what we see in the portfolios is not what we want students to be learning, then we will want to consider making some sensible suggestions for program change.

Also emerging from the process of self-examination is a growing consensus about what it means to function as a community of writing teachers: to adhere to a common philosophy of teaching writing, value the same sorts of writing experiences, and share similar expectations for student performance. One could argue that before teachers presume to pass or fail students on the basis of a portfolio of contextualized writing, they should make every effort to attain the local knowledge which will enable them to function as an "interpretive community." Stanley Fish tells us that "interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the

shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around" (171). Without this shared knowledge and "stability of interpretation among different readers" (Fish 171), how can writing teachers assess fairly the writing of students in their colleagues' classes?

In the remainder of this paper, I will explain how we are attempting to build interpretive communities in the composition program and in academic departments at the State University of New York at Cortland, a rural liberal arts college of about 7,000 students in upstate New York. Cortland's initial attempt at portfolio assessment was simply to clone the Stony Brook model and use portfolios as proficiency exams. Fortunately, we began with a small pilot program, so we were able to contain the extent of damage and confusion that we caused to students and faculty. None too quickly we woke up to the fact that Cortland and Stony Brook are very different places. All forty of our English faculty, Distinguished Teaching Professors as well as part-time adjuncts, teach writing, but very few have any formal training in composition. At Stony Brook, almost all composition courses are staffed by graduate students and all these students have been trained to teach writing. By virtue of their position, these composition teachers are engaged in a collaborative effort, and they bring to portfolio assessment a certain amount of shared knowledge. This sense of community did not exist at Cortland College.

Troubling questions and widely divergent views issued from the writing we found in the portfolios that we collected during the first year of our project. We soon dispensed with the idea of using portfolios as exit exams, confessing to one another that we had been downright presumptuous to think that we could do so. How might we judiciously assess collections of essays emanating from our writing courses when we ourselves were not yet operating like an interpretive community driven by consensual standards, uniform practices, and common goals?

In fall 1990, we went ahead and implemented a portfolio requirement across all sixty sections of our two-semester sequence in composition, but we had a new focus. We moved away from evaluating portfolios for evidence of students' writing proficiency and moved toward examining portfolios to determine the extent to which the student writing reveals that we are meeting our curricular goals. In our current portfolio project, we

are not assessing students; we are assessing ourselves.

We are implementing a comparable program assessment in our academic departments. Relieved of their uneasiness about comparative rankings and external judgments, faculty in these departments are working together, first to articulate goals and standards for writing in the academic major and then to examine students' portfolios for evidence that the goals are being met.

What comprises a portfolio? While students are enrolled at Cortland, they create two bodies of written work: a foundation portfolio containing six essays, three from each of their two composition courses and a final portfolio containing at least four pieces of writing from courses in their major. The first portfolio is evaluated by English faculty at the end of each composition course and is then passed on to the students' major departments where four papers are added. The second portfolio is read by faculty in the student's major department prior to graduation.

Let me describe our progress in self-assessment. In composition, we have followed accepted practice in portfolio assessment, collecting portfolios from all students and rating them in faculty reading groups. Before midterms and finals, we review one another's portfolios and discuss our findings in calibration sessions. In a large department like ours, the reading groups bring together part-time instructors who would otherwise see each other only fleetingly at mailboxes, copiers, or coffee machines. Membership in groups gives these instructors a more clearly defined place in the community, and it also offers them scheduled opportunities to share what Steve North calls "Practitioners' lore," talk about "what has worked, is working, or might work in teaching, doing, and learning writing" (23). Such talk inevitably heightens consciousness about curriculum and, in the context of a program assessment, it enfranchises the composition instructors as official shapers of the community.

The goal of curriculum evaluation required us to analyze the portfolios beyond the treatment they received by the portfolio readers. Our interest, however, was the impact of the curriculum on students' overall performance, so we didn't have to analyze the portfolios of individuals. Instead, we focused on representative student groups by drawing a stratified random sampling from the 1990-1991 corpus of 1711 portfolios collected in composition courses. Two trained faculty raters evaluated the

sample, and two other faculty did an in-depth analysis of a subset of the essays.

As we analyzed the portfolios, foremost in our minds were four program goals. We expect our two-semester sequence in composition to enable our students to: (1) Integrate information from reading sources with their topic knowledge and experiences, (2) Interpret their readings and adapt their writing for a rhetorical purpose, (3) Employ a standard repertoire of strategies for read-to-write tasks, for example, paraphrasing, summarizing, and documenting sources, and (4) Practice commonplace forms of academic discourse, including thesis/support essays, argumentative syntheses, and evaluations.

Of the six pieces of writing that students submitted in their portfolios, we selected three essays: (1) An essay using a reading source to develop a thesis or support a claim, (2) An essay using multiple sources to support a thesis and argue a position, and (3) An essay analyzing and/or evaluating a reading source. We judged these essays for evidence that the program goals were being accomplished.

The portfolio assessment is, therefore, taking place on a number of different levels. The most basic analysis reveals whether the students are writing the requisite essays and whether their cover sheets indicate that they have had ample opportunities for revision. More detailed, in-depth analyses provide answers to questions like the following:

(1) Are there discrepancies between a writer's statement of purpose, as stated in the portfolio cover sheet, and her ability to carry out the plans she intends?

(2) Are there differences in the way our students represent commonplace academic writing tasks like responding and reacting to texts, arguing from sources, and evaluating texts?

(3) When practicing conventional forms of academic writing, do our students operate on a level of critical literacy or a level of limited literacy? Does their writing reveal critical, thoughtful interpretation of sources and transformation of knowledge, or does it display knowledge-telling, simple recording, regurgitation, and reporting of concepts and facts (Scardamalia & Bereiter)?

(4) Do our students have a rhetorical habits of mind, or are they able to turn a rhetorical situations into rhetorical ones?

Having analyzed the argument essays and gotten a good start on the evaluation essays, we are about two-thirds of the

way through our study. Our preliminary findings raise troublesome questions about the lack of agreement between our program goals and our outcomes. Even more important, beyond the local level, they raise questions about the ways college students learn or fail to learn the conventions of academic discourse.

What we have discovered about argument essays will serve as an example. A goal for our second semester composition course is that students learn to write argument essays in which they draw on multiple sources and “state a thesis, explore competing hypotheses, and explain the relationship between [their] position and the competition.” Our initial examination of the portfolios revealed that 9 per cent contained no arguments, so we had to disqualify these papers. Of the essays that remained, only forty per cent offered the type of argument we expected: two-dimensional arguments, in which the writer not only presents and supports his or her position but also displays the ability, as Connor describes it, to “recognize and adapt to the reader’s perspective by dealing implicitly or explicitly with possible counterarguments” (76). And the rest of the essays? Twenty-eight per cent were one-dimensional arguments which took the form of theses/support essays, frequently organized as five-paragraph themes. And the final 32 per cent were essays which contained argumentative elements—a debateable issue, two sides, the writer siding with one and not the other, etc.—but they were really not argument texts that were driven by the writer’s purpose. For the most part, they were controlled by the sources rather than by the writer’s desire to persuade an audience of his or her point of view.

We gave the argument essays three readings. Instructors in the portfolio reading groups rated them holistically as acceptable or unacceptable. Then two other instructors judged them on four features: clear purpose, to argue or persuade; suitable form, as stipulated by our program guidelines; judicious use of sources; and appropriate adaptation of the sources to the audience. An interesting but not so surprising finding was that the composition instructors who rated the essays holistically found 77 per cent of them to be acceptable, whereas the judges who assessed rhetorical purpose, arrangement, use of sources, and attention to audience found only 42 per cent to be acceptable.

Next we analyzed essays that both the portfolio instructors and the judges agreed upon to see if there were significant differences between those that they had judged as acceptable and those they had rated as unacceptable. We investigated two features: the writers' use of sources and their awareness of the audience's needs with regard to the source material used. To summarize our findings, we discovered that compared to writers of unacceptable essays, writers of acceptable essays wrote longer pieces, used the same number of sources but cited them more frequently, and gave readers more background and contextual information. They also did much more acknowledging of source authors in the text proper, informing their audience of source titles, and providing them with parenthetical citations. All these differences were statistically significant. These findings have left us with pressing questions about the value we are placing on rhetorical features of text and about the marked differences we are seeing between the performance of writers who produce acceptable portfolios and those who produce unacceptable ones.

Our analysis of argument essays shows dramatically how students in a shared context, following the same curriculum, writing an essay allegedly for the same rhetorical purpose, interpret the situation in very different ways. Research on writing from sources, especially Flower, Stein, Ackerman *et al*'s Read-to-Write (1990) studies, have found "radical differences in how individual students represent an academic writing task" (vi), so the mismatch between our curricular objectives and our students' performance shouldn't have come as any great surprise to us. Admittedly, we were naive to think that the outcomes we desired would occur automatically from the curriculum we engineered. We now know that in order to accomplish our goals, as a faculty we need to do a lot of sharing, negotiating, and changing. Our self-assessment has taken on the characteristics of a feedback loop: with composition teaching influencing students' learning; the learning influencing the quality of the essays produced for the portfolios; and the portfolio assessment influencing and improving future composition teaching and, ultimately, future student learning.

The process is the same for faculty in academic disciplines. The first step for department members is to express their expectations for writing in the academic major. Next, they have to translate these expectations into written goals. No small feat!



My colleagues in the English Department, for example, view these goals in terms of abilities that English majors should possess. They expect that students' portfolios will reveal their ability to: (1) Explicate texts without the aid of secondary sources; (2) Interpret theme through systematic analysis; (3) Recognize relationship between form and content; (4) Take relevant historical, biographical, and/or social contexts into account in the interpretation of literary works; (5) Understand, summarize, and synthesize critical arguments; and (6) Evaluate varied critical views.

Our economics faculty have taken a similar tack. They expect economics majors to be able to write papers that demonstrate their ability to: (1) Explain economic theories and economic concepts in prose; (2) Effectively describe the technicalities of economic models and other methodologies employed in economics (illustrated using graphs and equations); (3) Relate economic theories to historical and contemporary issues; (4) Compare and contrast different economic arguments; and (5) Present an economic argument effectively, backing it up with theoretical arguments, data, and historical examples, as appropriate (illustrated with graphs and equations when necessary).

Once faculty agree on the writing goals, they need to make three decisions about procedures: (1) How many portfolios will they analyze, the entire population or, in the case of large departments, a representative sample? (2) Who will be responsible for doing the judging, each member of the department or an appointed committee? and (3) What impact will the outcomes of the assessment have on the department's curriculum and instruction?

At Cortland, portfolio assessment of writing in the majors is taking about three years. Sophomore and junior English majors are preparing portfolios that will be submitted for evaluation in spring 1994 and spring 1995 respectively. These portfolios will be distributed amongst all full-time faculty who will judge them for evidence of whether the department's goals are being affirmed or not. At the conclusion of the process, the department will be ready to make some sensible suggestions for program change.

Our experience with assessment calls to mind Bizzell's notion that "producing text within a discourse community . . . cannot take place unless the writer can define her goals in terms of the

community's interpretive conventions. Writing is always already writing for some purpose that can only be understood in its community context" (225). If this is so, then we have an imperative. Students whose texts will be judged by teachers other than their own must acquire a working knowledge of the interpretive conventions of the broader community. They should also be writing for purposes that this wider audience endorses and understands.

Our assessment revealed that in our writing program, in many cases, shared knowledge about writing did not exist. We saw a disturbing disjunction between the forms of discourse we purport to teach in our composition courses and the versions of discourse many of our students presented in their portfolios. The causes of this mismatch are open to interpretation. Perhaps instructors in our community are having trouble teaching our interpretive conventions; consequently, students are having trouble learning them. It could be that teachers are doing a stellar job, but students have low investment strategies or different writing agendas. Yet another explanation is that the mismatch is alerting us to the need to alter our goals. For example, our expectation that freshmen should be able to compose a rhetorical analysis and evaluation of a text may be unrealistic. Whatever the reasons for the lack of congruence between goals and outcomes, this new awareness forced us to reconsider our program objectives and reexamine our expectations for student writing. Then we went on to discuss ways we could better help students attain an accepted level of performance. As a department, we spent almost an entire academic year examining the findings from our self-assessment and discussing the changes we would have to make in order to create a community and context in which both students and faculty shared knowledge and understanding.

Our experience with assessment has taught us a very important lesson: Before we ask students to produce portfolios that will function as proficiency exams, portfolio readers as well as portfolio writers should have already arrived at a general consensus about the forms and conventions of the discourse that will be judged. Once we have assessed our programs and found that we are functioning as interpretive communities, we can go about the business of assessing student writing.

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