# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**Response to *JTW*, 12.1, a thematic issue on portfolios:**

In reading Emily Decker, George Cooper and Susan Marie Harrington's "Crossing Institutional Boundaries: Developing an Entrance Portfolio Assessment to Improve Writing Instruction," I was amused to see they had misquoted remarks I made at the Miami Portfolio Conference: "Brian Huot has argued that entry-level portfolio assessment is akin to 'using a sledgehammer to kill a cockroach'" (88). My original statement was that "Considering the extra time, effort and expense portfolios demand over single sample assessment, to use portfolios unnecessarily would be as logical as using a blow torch to kill a cockroach" (331).[1]

I was first struck by the misquote because I knew I had advocated the use of a blow torch rather than a sledgehammer (more dramatic I thought), but I was a little dismayed to see that I had dismissed using portfolios for a particular purpose. Upon reexamining my statements, I realized that I had not dismissed portfolios for placement but had said, "do we need a portfolio of student writing to decide what course an individual student should be placed into? Probably not . . . decisions like these need to be made on a local basis" (331). It is quite logical that the authors made the connections they did. Perhaps I should refrain from dramatic statements (even though they are so much fun), and I am apologetic for misleading the authors. However, I must deny the train of thought to which they attribute my statements. "He claims that the distinctions made at entry assessment are not so fine as to require either the wealth of

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[1]This is how my statement appears in *New Directions in Portfolio Assessment* edited by Black, Daiker, Sommers and Stygall for Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 1994. It and other quoted material from the chapter also appear verbatim in the original text I read at the Miami Portfolio Conference on October 2, 1992.

information portfolio can provide or the tremendous expense in time and money . . ." (88). My statement was based upon my experiences as a placement director and on the experiences of surveying placement programs in which single sample placement procedures had provided effective results (331). My distinction here is crucial because I don't believe there exists the kind of evidence necessary for us to decide globally when and where portfolios or any other assessment instruments should be used. These decisions (as I said) should and need to be made on a local basis. Curiously enough, I am presently involved in piloting the use of high school portfolios for placement at the University of Louisville because the local conditions are right for such a program.[2]

I don't think we can overemphasize the importance of localizing decisions about assessment. I think we also need to recognize that there are pressures for us to standardize the way we evaluate student writing. Several of the articles in this issue of the *Journal of Teaching Writing* address the importance of making localized decisions about writing assessment in general and portfolios in particular, illustrating the types of pressures those of us who attempt assessment and portfolio use are bound to face. For example, I really enjoyed Willa Walcott's account of setting up a pilot program for using portfolios in the high schools, but I could feel the pressures for standardization in decisions she felt compelled to make about the construction of portfolios. One thing that troubled me about the Walcott study was that we were never made aware of why the study was being conducted in the first place. Instead of being directed by the local purpose for evaluation, Walcott was pressured and distracted by issues of standardization and scoring.

Mary Lynch Kennedy and Carl Herzig's articles about the effect of using and scoring portfolios at their institutions illustrates many of the problems involved in trying to use assessment schemes developed at other institutions for other purposes. Both authors describe their attempt to use the model developed at SUNY Stony Brook. Mary Lynch Kennedy sums up the experience nicely: "None too quickly we woke up to the fact that

[2]High school students in Kentucky are now compiling portfolios as part of their requirements for graduation.

[SUNY] Cortland and [SUNY] Stony Brook are very different places . . . 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" (16). Cortland's use of portfolios like Carl Hersig's at a small college in Iowa ended up looking quite different from the model that had lead both these people to advocate portfolio use at their institutions. Nonetheless, both authors report that portfolios have had some important effects on the way writing is being taught and evaluated. Carl Herzig contends "The bottom line here is that as a result of the portfolio system and our discussions, instructors *are* changing the way they teach, and by extension the way their students are learning" (31).

As most of the essays in this issue demonstrate, making portfolios work for a particular school or system requires a lot of work and reflection in finding their appropriate role and purpose. Decisions about what portfolios should look like, how they should be evaluated and what purpose they can serve is a matter of institutional fit and should only be made within a local context. It is clear from this issue of the *Journal of Teaching Writing* that we who believe in the potential of portfolios for teaching and assessing student writing have much work to do in discovering how they might best be used.

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As I read Carl Herzig's "Portfolio Assessment as Faculty Development: The Small-School Context" in a recent issue of the *Journal of Teaching Writing*, I found myself smiling and nodding as he described an afternoon of portfolio readings that he'd "rather forget" (29). Actually, my smiles and nods turned into graphic flashbacks as I recalled the "noisy chaos" that erupted during a faculty development workshop at the University of Louisville this past May.

Our Writing Across the Curriculum program at U of L hosted a two-week, three-hour a day workshop in May for faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences interested in incor-

porating more writing into their courses. WAC coordinators, Brian Huot, Laura Harbolt, and myself, were joined by faculty in Anthropology, Pan-African Studies, Geology, Communications, and Sociology. As WAC enthusiasts and Rhetoric and Composition specialists, we believed that we had the theoretical groundings and practical experiences as composition instructors, writers, and readers to conduct a workshop that would give others outside our discipline an opportunity to learn more about writing-to-learn in context courses. We did not, however, want to establish ourselves as the "writing authorities," so we took the time to plan the workshop around the expressed needs of the participants. In a planning session with participants before the workshop, we discovered that group members were interested in practical techniques that they could take with them from the workshop and put into action in the classroom. Pedagogical and theoretical discussions about teaching and assessing writing were of little immediate concern. Once the workshop began, however, the unpredictable occurred. Participants became less interested in the writing tools they could use in the classroom, and more concerned with the theoretical, pedagogical, and philosophical issues that arise when classroom instruction changes in order to encourage, accommodate, and value student writing.

Group members began to ask questions about what they could expect from students who had successfully completed their freshman composition courses, and also began to question their own expectations and assumptions about what students could and could not do upon entering their content specific courses. Voices were raised, fingers were pointed, and like Herzig, many of us during those two weeks longed for an authority. The "authority" we discovered rested in the knowledge and writing our students were constructing in our various classes. Once we began to read and discuss writing assignments, and students' responses to those assignments, we were better able to see how our expectations and pedagogical practices play out in the classroom and influence students' writing. Like the members of Herzig's reading group, we were also forced "into an awareness and articulation of our underlying assumptions about teaching and writing" (30). For workshop participants, the act of benefiting from such insights has begun.

As our WAC program prepares for future faculty development workshops, I'm encouraged by the chaos and open dis-

cussion of values related to teaching and writing that occurred this May. I'm also enticed by the potential for using both student and teachers' portfolios as faculty development tools and self-assessment instruments. As Christine Hult notes in "Using Portfolios to Evaluate Teachers: Learning From Ourselves," "teachers need to reflect on their teaching. . . . We need to work toward a cycle of learning, self-reflection, and performance feedback for improvement actually to take hold in the classroom" (62). The next time our WAC staff hosts a faculty development workshop, I'd like to see us develop, along with our workshop participants, our own student and teacher portfolios—portfolios that we can reflect on and learn from as we emerge from the noisy chaos.

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