

### **Portfolios: The Place Where Writers Work**

Attention was given, during the process movement, to portfolios as an accurate way of assessing student writing in composition courses. The writing process movement developed in the 1960's, specifically at the Conference of College Composition and Communication in 1963, where there was a renewed interest in rhetoric and composition theory and a desire for students to more actively participate in the process of writing (Clark, 5). A reaction against the product centered pedagogy that had been the style of composition classes; the process movement emphasized self expression and the personal voice, as well as collaborative learning in the classroom. It was a necessity for student voices to be heard, and for teachers to ask questions of themselves and their teaching. In this movement, more space was created for portfolio learning, and in the past fifty years portfolios have been viewed as "complex, multifaceted, shifting assessments of learning" (Estern, 125).

Perhaps the most significant outcome of portfolio learning is the rhetorical questions this style of assessment inspires students to ask. Reynolds addresses this concept in the section of her book called "Portfolio Preparation as a Rhetorical Act." Students must "make rhetorically informed choices and be responsible for these choices in a 'real' situation" (Reynolds, 14). Portfolios become real to students in the ways they address situation, habit and responsibility, self-presentation, arrangement, and audience (14). Reynolds asks us to think of portfolios as a *place* where writers work, a place that requires habits of upkeep, maintenance in order to form a writer's character. If the portfolio is a student's garden, than he/she is the garden keeper, nourishing and keeping safe the soul of the work while perfecting the structures that inform it. Rather than other testing methods, which can be flat and limiting, a portfolio is a living entity. It is alive because it has the capacity for change, and to take on not only the essence of its author, but the voices that help the author in the revision process. If no writing is ever truly finished, then students become part of a community that allows for continuous fulfillment in the process of creating better and better writing. Students are audience conscious, as they are not only thinking about the instructor who is going to grade their work, but their classmates and others who might read their portfolio both in class work shop activities and after it has been completed.

Writing, and all learning, is best assessed by viewing documents produced over time, and "portfolios are increasingly seen as a way to evaluate students' work more authentically and effectively" (Estern, 125). Finding inspiration from the world of art, as portfolios have been a common, if not essential, component to art composition courses, writing portfolios allow different aspects of students work to be captured. Nedra Reynolds, in "Portfolio Keeping," makes the case that portfolios "give writers more time to develop and give teachers more room to provide formative evaluation" (1). Portfolios allow for students to make informed and individual choices, both organizational and reflective. Students like portfolio keeping, because it allows for freedom and creativity, and centers less attention on the final product and/or grade. In fact, many portfolio supporters advise that instructors give feedback on drafts, but not grade individual pieces of work until the student has turned in their final portfolio. Reynolds cites Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff: "Portfolios permit us to avoid putting grades on individual papers, and thereby help us make the evaluations we do during the semester formative, not summative" (31). Assigning grades is a product-centered act, and disrupts process pedagogy, in which students are more able to decide the fate of their

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work. Reynolds implies that enough instructor and student-driven feedback will have occurred that students should have some idea of how they're doing, and will therefore be motivated to continue the process. This also satisfies the concern instructors share about the paper load portfolios might produce, and the time commitment. In utilizing peer review and postponing grades until revisions have had the chance to develop, time isn't typically an issue. Reading and grading portfolios takes *no more time at the end of the semester than does reading and grading any set of final essays*, and, because instructors have already seen some draft of the work, they have a base to work with (Reynolds, 63). Teachers have, at this point, had time to gain confidence in their abilities to assess writing and are ready for the grading process. As exemplified by the adjoined assignment, I would have the portfolio be an essential part of the class, worth maybe forty or fifty percent of the grade. I would, however allow students to, at least by mid-term, know what grade they are getting. This grade would be tallied from a mid-term exercise on drafting, revising, and reflecting on a paper, and also participation and other such classroom activities and assignments.

At the end of the term, portfolios must be accountable for knowledge, no matter how one tries to get around the issue of grading. Therefore, as Brian Stecher, in his "Portfolio Assessment and Education Reform," informs us, "a careful analysis of the technical quality of portfolio scores should consider three things: the consistency of ratings of individual pieces (rater reliability), the consistency of student performance across pieces (score reliability), and the interpretability of scores (validity)" (206). How are portfolios to be graded, one might ask, when student consistency varies from piece to piece? They will be graded in terms of process pedagogy. Many times portfolios will require students to include two or three drafts of a paper alongside their final copy. Also, there is most always a highly-valued reflection component to the portfolio, in which a student examines his or her self and the ways in which their writing has improved in the course. The reflection also allows for some explanation about the choices the student made as to what pieces to include and why. Portfolios will not, as other testing forms do, breed conformity, and will instead celebrate individual talent (informed by a community).

Portfolios, therefore, balance process and product by giving students rhetorical situations that allow them to practice, develop, take risks, and, when the time is right, perform, pull it all together, show their stuff (Reynolds 15). They inspire the kind of independence and strength that young writers need to acquire, while also preparing them, in workshop and group-work, for future conversations with their peers and other members of society. Portfolios allow for individual talent, and perhaps genius, to develop in the classroom. In addressing individuality and professionalism in his "Professionalism: What Graduate Students Need," Andrew Hoberek exemplifies issues prevalent in Ayn Rand's novel *The Fountainhead*. The leading character, Howard Roark tells an assembled courtroom that:

The mind is an attribute of the individual, and thus, There is no such thing as a collective brain. There is no such thing as a collective thought. Any agreement reached by a group of men is only a compromise or an average drawn upon individual thoughts. It is a secondary consequence. The primary act- the process of reason- must be performed by each man alone. Only by living for himself is the innovator able to achieve the things which are the glory of mankind" (Hoberek, 133).

If we, as composition instructors, are asking students to acquire *it*, *it* being *what it takes to make it in the world of academics*, to find *voice*, to develop *integrity* in writing, etc., then is there the possibility that portfolios might inhibit this type of development by focusing too

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much on collective consensus in group work and work-shopping? I think not. Stanley Fish is quoted as stating “Anti-professionalism is professionalism itself in its purest form” (137). In order to be an individual, to say something that truly matters, that no one has said before (which one could say is the goal of writing), one must first know what others have said. One must first know the academy in order to accept or oppose it. Some of the best collections of writing, much like portfolios themselves, are done by members of the academy / a larger community. How does this relate to portfolio keeping?

Portfolio keeping allows more space for the individual mind to flourish, while, at the same time, best revealing the process of writing to the students. The process of reason, that the character from *The Fountainhead* refers to, is best able to develop in a situation where students can fully know the way decisions work and can decide how to articulate original thought. Peers are utilized to inform and make solid a student’s own ideology so that it can both recognize and go beyond the community it is a part of. Portfolios accomplish this better than other forms of assessment, particularly due to their emphasis on rhetoric. Rhetoric, the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, plays into portfolio use because students are forced to defend themselves (their thought processes and writing skills) and contemplate how and why they make the choices they do while compiling a portfolio.

## Annotated Bibliography

Bloom, Lynn Z. "Why I (Used to) Hate to Give Grades." The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

Bloom uses a personal narrative to convey the grim world of grading. Grades are misleading. They exist for the convenience of an administration, they fit record keeping formats. They look precise, but aren't, because they attempt to put a precise measurement on a number of components. They appear objective, but aren't, because they reflect the cultural biases and tastes of the time. And, they label the writer, unfortunately, as a certain type of student. They undermine equality in the classroom by signaling who is better than who, and cause students to desire to please the teacher above all else. Grades look permanent and can be dishonest. However, grades are necessary. Bloom calls for a course that emphasizes revision as the soul of the writing course, that anything written has a chance of being made better. In Bloom's experience, a workshop format (no grading til necessary) worked. It allowed students to feel open and equal when discussing their writing. He tells his experience with portfolios and portfolio conferencing (good and bad), particularly students assessing their progress and speculating on their grade.

Bullock, Richard. The St. Martin's Manual for Writing in the Disciplines: A Guide for Faculty. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994. 61-64.

Chapter Nine, entitled: "Assigning Portfolios," is of particular interest. The recent development of portfolio writing more accurately assesses students writing than any other method of assessment. It is best to assess writing from different samples and different stages. Portfolios do this, and also allow students to assess their own writing and foster self-analysis. Bullock gives suggestions for a teacher considering portfolios, on assigning and evaluating them.

Clark, Irene L. Concepts in Composition: Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2003. 1-29.

The first chapter of Clark's book, "Process," provides an overview of the process movement of the 1960's, providing a brief history and the conferences that influenced the movement, early observational studies of composition, expressivism and personal voice, collaborative learning, genre and post-process theory.

Estrem, Heidi. "The Portfolio's Shifting Self: Possibilities for Assessing Student Learning." Pedagogy 4.1 (2004): 125-127.

Although portfolios are currently seen as an authentic way of evaluating student work, there is a danger that they are, or can be, lifeless testing rather than living portraits of learners, classrooms, and programs. Estrem looks into the history of writing assessment in college composition, and asks questions about what exactly we are trying to learn about students in our assessment practices; how do portfolios teach us something about the self/selves that go into composition. Portfolios will remain successful if they have the ability to shift and change. There needs to be consideration for the ways portfolios represent multifaceted selves and also create a picture of learning that is understandable to society.

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Hoberek, Andrew. "Professionalism: What Graduate Students Need." If Classrooms Matter: Progressive Visions of Educational Environments. Ed. Jeffrey R. Dileo and Walter R. Jacobs. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Hoberek questions the position of graduate students in the university, and how the university prepares them, or doesn't, to be individuals within an academic community. The article addresses such ideas as professional academics, anti-pedagogy, professionalism vs. anti-professionalism (and the contradictions in this distinction), and the importance of graduate students taking part in some form of administrative work (that graduate students might not only better prepare themselves for life after grad-school, but might help the department they are working for become more innovative). For this practice report, I was most interested in the collective vs. subjective 'brain,' and how this might play into portfolio use and workshoping in the composition classroom.

Reynolds, Nedra. Portfolio Keeping: A Guide for Students. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000.

---. Portfolio Teaching: A Guide for Instructors. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000.

The most exhaustive assessment of portfolio use I have seen, Reynolds, a supporter of portfolio use (she uses them in her composition classes), claims that portfolios, though not the only answer, are hugely important for process pedagogy and rhetoric-centered composition classes, as they provide for, among other things, revision and decision making. The guides are conceptually similar, as they both define writing portfolios as reflective practices, as rhetorical acts, as community (yet individual) efforts, and so on. The guide for instructors spends more time on course planning, conferencing, assessment, and managing other concerns (such as paper load). The guide for students addresses goal planning, organization, working with others, choosing entries, ways of writing introductions and reflection essays, editing, and so forth.

Stecher, Brian. "Portfolio Assessment and Education Reform." Testing Student Learning, Evaluating Teaching Effectiveness. Ed. Williamson M. Evers and Herbert J. Walberg. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2004.

This chapter, "Portfolio Assessment and Education Reform" defines portfolio assessment, reveals its purposes, and reviews research on portfolio assessment in the U.S. in terms of technique, classroom practice, and burden/cost. It questions whether portfolios can be used instead of testing as an assessment system. Although it generalizes, and spans subject matter, it generates a real awareness of the benefits and fall-backs of portfolio use, and the terms in which portfolios can be scored.

Salvatori, Mariolina Rizzi. "The Scholarship of Teaching: Beyond the Anecdotal." Pedagogy 2.3 (2002): 297-310.

Salvatori begins by addressing the proposal for the 2001 MLA forum, "Understanding Teaching" in which the argument surfaced about whether teaching is represented as scholarship. The discourse of teaching is overshadowed by advances in other areas of research. Teaching needs to be understood in ways other than what has been experienced by teachers, and what is instinctual to them. However, the scholarship of teaching is not traditional scholarship, although it shares features with other forms of scholarship. Although focus on close attention to students in teaching pedagogy has

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allowed some good questions to surface, teaching is still unrecognized. Salvatori exposes the myth of the teacher who can use improvisation when he/she doesn't have anything prepared for class, and then deliver an epiphany invoking lecture. This kind of myth glosses over the difficulty of teaching, ignores theory and planned expression, and calls instead calls teaching mysterious. She formulates how a scholarship of teaching might be promoted: by teachers sharing work with others, by having regular classroom visits and therefore "going public," by institutional changes like more evaluation of teaching by tenure track committees, by course portfolios of faculty work that undergo peer evaluation, and also by seminars in the teaching of teaching for grad students that formulate a common theoretical language.

## Portfolio Assignment

**Keeping:** The act of holding or supporting. Observance of a rule, institution, practice, promise, and so on. Custody, charge, guardianship. In painting, the maintenance of harmony of composition. Agreement, congruity, harmony.

**Keep:** To take care of, to look after, watch over, tend. To maintain in proper order. To maintain continuously and in proper form and order (a diary, books, and so forth). To celebrate, to observe. Noun: the stronghold of a castle; a jail.

**Keeper:** One who has charge, care, or oversight of any person or thing. One worth keeping, especially a fish large enough to be legally caught.<sup>1</sup>

\* A major component of this class is portfolio keeping. Keeping a portfolio will help you to pay attention to both the processes and products of writing. It will also help you to keep track of the evolution of each writing project as well as your development as a writer. You will be the sole keeper of your portfolio, and it will be a reflection of your individuality and independence, as well as your ability to utilize the conventions of writing. You will also be selfless, and undergo many workshops and revisions with your peers and myself. Thus, in this activity you will learn both self and selflessness, in being a member of the academic community.

\* Keeping a portfolio is an active process, and involves choice. Your final portfolio is not due until the end of the semester. However, we will be mindful of keeping a portfolio during every class. In the end, you will hand me a collection of work that best represents you as a writer. Because writing involves practice, process, and reflection, all of these elements will appear in your final portfolio.

*Your portfolio will include a total of five pieces. It is worth 40 percent of your final grade. The rest of your grade will represent in-class activities and participation, and your ability to assess and revise your work and the work of others. More details appear on the syllabus.*

- The first piece of writing in your portfolio will be a preliminary draft alongside a final draft. For this, you will write half of a page reflecting on your progress, taking careful look at your strengths and weaknesses, and tell me why your final draft is best. What does this process reveal to me about you as a writer?

*We will discuss this at mid-term, when you will practice by reflecting on the first and final drafts of a paper of your choosing. We will spend a class period talking about reflection and examples of professional writers reflecting on the writing process.*

- Your second piece will be a journal entry. We will spend ten minutes at the beginning of every class free-writing, and you will decide which of these pieces you might include, and

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<sup>1</sup> Keeping, Keep, and Keeper and their definitions taken from the introduction of: Reynolds, Nedra. Portfolio Keeping: A Guide For Students. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000. p.1.

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why. We will be writing from different prompts, and utilizing different styles of writing, so this will allow you some freedom. You might pick a creative piece, a piece that reflects on the techniques and process we are learning about in class, or a piece that best reveals your writing style.

- The third piece will be chosen from the three rhetoric based papers we complete in class. This piece must be concise and must best represent your ability to write an academic paper.
- The final components of your portfolio are two sheets of pre-writing activities: outlines, webs, any sort of brainstorming you have done for a paper or assignment.
- Also, a final reflection must be included in which you articulate why you chose the pieces you have, and what this reveals about your thought process as a writer.

*More details on what the portfolio should look like (cover page, table of contents, etc.) to come.*