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Classroom Practice Report
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Portfolios

Overview of practice:

The use of portfolios in the classroom is no longer considered a revolutionary idea. It is a teaching practice that has largely been accepted in the composition pedagogical world. Using portfolios in the writing classroom was a reaction to the test-taking craze, the need to judge, critique and quantify what a student had learned, if they had progressed. Tom Crockett defines the portfolio as “a collection of evidence. The contents or evidence may be referred to as samples, examples, documents, records or products. Because they have been assembled together they provide evidence of a person’s skills and abilities.” (4). The portfolio is viewed as the best way to judge a student over time, through looking at the progress a student is making in their writing it becomes easier for the teacher to (a) assess the student and to help that student with problems they are having but also (b) for the student to grow and learn from their own work, it becomes a cognitive exercise that the student is a vested part of.

“Research also shows that students benefit from an awareness of the processes and strategies involved in writing, solving a problem, researching a topic, analyzing information, or describing their own observations...Portfolios can serve as a vehicle for enhancing student awareness of these strategies for thinking about and producing work--both inside and beyond the classroom.”(Student Portfolios: Classroom, 3.)

The portfolio then becomes a negotiation between the student and the teacher, according to Galbraith, Hennelly and Purves. “Through the process of negotiation, the students gather a sense of the operating criteria in the rhetorical community of the classroom and the school”. (26). In this view of portfolios, the teacher then allows the student to do their own work, and evaluate what they are doing and why they are doing it and how it fits into the larger context of curriculum and learning. The portfolio gives students a vested interest in their work and according to Galbraith, Hennelly and Purves become a part of the “rhetorical community”. (27). This is accomplished by being upfront about what the criteria of the portfolio is and what goals and standards need to be met in putting together the portfolio. These goals and standards vary from classroom to classroom.

The uses of portfolios is varied and changes from classroom to classroom, age level to age level. The drawbacks associated with portfolios is this fact, that there is no standardized way to “do” portfolios and if portfolios are used for assessment and grading at the administrative level, since portfolios are so individualized, how do we judge and make decisions that are “fair”? In order to combat these debates, the Education Consumer

Guide has proposed systematizing or generalizing the way portfolios are used and put together if they are to be used for administrative purposes. That is the grand debate now about portfolios, because research has clearly proven the usefulness of portfolios, and this research has carried over into other aspects of our society, not just education. There are portfolios for businessmen, artists, teachers; the portfolio is the tool we use to show our work and progress in a field. The challenge now rests in how we can use portfolios to assess our students, equally and fairly. The other area of research underway by proponents of portfolios is approaching student portfolios from a digital perspective and how to negotiate the use of the internet, websites, and turning in a portfolio electronically. With computers becoming a more vested part of the classroom, how do teachers adapt the portfolio to the digital age? These are the questions that now face teachers who use this classroom practice, but are also the questions facing the job of teaching itself. How do we grade and assess our students and how do we adapt to current trends? These questions can be answered through trial and error and putting to use a classroom practice like the portfolio.

Lesson plan:

It is not possible to provide an example of this classroom practice, portfolios are a way of approaching the teaching or writing, and so first teachers must decide what is important to their class and what the goals are and why they are using portfolios. I offer this guide as a starting point.

First:

What is the goal of this class? This can be defined either by the teacher or the students.

What should be included within the portfolio, what is acceptable, what is not?

Who is evaluating these portfolios?

How does putting together this portfolio add to the overall goal of the class and help the student to grow and learn?

Second:

Introduce the idea to the class on the first day, talking about all of the information discussed above. Perhaps prepare a rubric of what is expected, and give a time frame in order to keep students on track. The important thing about portfolios is that the idea should be introduced right at the beginning because it shapes how your class is run and what assignments the students will be preparing. Through using a portfolio in the writing classroom, it sets up how your syllabus will be run and how your class interacts with you the teacher and with each other.

Third:

Have monthly checks as to the progress of the portfolio, depending on how strict the requirements are and the amount of time it takes to complete an assignment will determine when you do these checks. It is also important to meet with the students and talk about their work and understanding and progression in regards to the portfolio.

Annotated Bibliography

Calfee, Robert C., Pamela Perfumo, eds. Writing Portfolios in the classroom: policy, practice, promise and peril. National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, Berkely, CA. 1996.

This report is a compilation of multiple studies done by the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy. Each article covers a different aspect of portfolio use in the classroom. The reports range from field studies, practitioner opinions, to the theory of portfolio use in the classroom and of course the opinion of policy makers who have studied the use of portfolios in the classroom. Most of these studies focus on elementary and middle-grade students; however these articles are useful in gaining a better understanding of portfolios. The practices and applications of portfolios presented in the articles are adaptable to any classroom. This compilation of research really provides the vocabulary and the basis of this classroom practice and highlights the positive use of portfolios but also the challenges and debates associated therein.

Crockett, Tom. The Portfolio Journey: A creative guide to keeping student-managed portfolios in the classroom. Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1998.

This book is for practical innovative classroom ideas, it is a practical approach to how portfolios work in the classroom and have a practical fun application. The book views portfolios and the process of putting them together as a journey that the teacher and student take together, the metaphor is carried throughout the book. It is a good place to find ideas about structuring and working with portfolios in the classroom, it is geared toward a K-8 student body but all the ideas can be adapted to work with older students.

Galbraith, Marian, John Hennelly, Alan C. Purves. "Using Portfolios to Negotiate a Rhetorical Community." Report Series 3.10 National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, Albany, NY. 1994.

This study focuses on the relationship between the teacher and the student in a classroom that employs the use of portfolios. By establishing a negotiated relationship through the portfolio with the student the teacher then becomes the "coach" and the student can realize their place within the "rhetorical community". The conclusion is that by laying out the ground work for the portfolio and making the student responsible for the material they are to cover, the goal of helping a student to grow and learn in a creative fashion is met. The article provides many helpful hints as to how to shape the assignment from the first day of class and how to help the student become vested in the project and allow the teacher to step back and let the student do their own work.

Portfolio Process: Online Resource for Educators. 14 Oct 2005.
http://www.qesnrecit.qc.ca/portfolio/port_eng.html

This website is a great general resource for finding out anything you would want to know about portfolios, the theory behind them, their uses in the classroom, and mockup exercises. It was put together by a teacher coalition in Canada. It provides definitions and the reasons behind why portfolios are good in the classroom. It also has

an extensive bibliography of web resources and print resources, along with current case studies related to the use of portfolios. It also has access to digital portfolio programs and can also be viewed in the French language.

Sweet, David A., "Student Portfolios: Administrative Uses." Education Consumer Guide; no. 9. December, 1993. accessed via website, 14 Oct 2005.
<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/OR/ConsumerGuides/admuses.html>

This article provides a general overview of the debate over using portfolios as a tool for assess a student and the fairness factor. It addresses systematizing the content of portfolios to combat this problem. The article is very basic and is just a summary of the argument, for further detail one should look at the compilation provided by the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy.