Writing portfolios: Empowering students, teachers, and the curriculum

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A writing portfolio is a collection of student writing, usually a subset of a larger set, in which students organize, prioritize, and write reflections about their best work. Using writing portfolios can help students develop the critical thinking skills necessary to improve their work independently. This paper reviews the best practices of writing portfolios and presents a model program in which writing portfolios have been implemented. Through this model, the authors weigh the benefits and potential challenges of implementing portfolios into a writing curriculum.

ポートフォリオとは各学生の作文（全ての課題のうち選ばれた何点か）をひとつのファイルにまとめたものである。各学生は自分の作品を整理して最良と思われるものから順にファイルしていく。ポートフォリオ方式は各学生の、自己の作文に対する責任感を養うと共に、作文技術の向上を目指す、確実な方法のひとつである。正しく活用されれば、ポートフォリオ方式は各学生の、物事に対する批判的なものの見方を養うのに役立つ。この論文ではポートフォリオ方式の3つの要素である、コレクト、セレクト、及びリフレクトについて述べる。またポートフォリオ方式をとることが、いかに学生、教師、また各学校における作文プログラムにとり有益であるかについて論述するポートフォリオ方式を活用している学校を例に挙げる。

T he main challenge writing teachers face is trying to ensure that students transfer knowledge and skills from one assignment to the next, learn from their mistakes, and gain both writing fluency and accuracy. Students often show little or no improvement in their writing, despite teacher instructions and required revisions (Leki, 1992). They often do not learn to take responsibility for their own writing, and too frequently ignore teacher feedback on final drafts. Without reflection, review or a post-writing check, the same
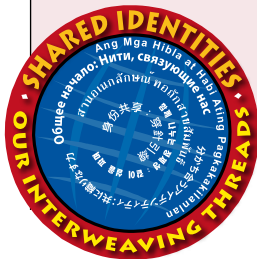
mistakes are often repeated in later assignments. Teachers tend to compound the problem by returning graded final drafts without spending time discussing student writing or mentioning specific problem areas students need to improve upon. In order for students to develop writing skills and become independent and competent writers, they need to learn from previous writing experiences through reflection and development of critical writing skills. One method that has proven effective in aiding development and retention of skills taught, as well as promoting reflection and critical thinking, is the use of writing portfolios. This paper reviews the main principles of writing portfolios, and then presents an example of implementing writing portfolios in a university EFL language curriculum. We conclude with a discussion of the advantages and challenges of using writing portfolios to students, teachers, and the curriculum as a whole.

What is a writing portfolio?

A writing portfolio is a collection of student writing representing a selected portion of performance over a semester or school year. Contents vary depending on the instructional or institutional goals of the course and method of assessment (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991). Portfolios can include formal assignments, drafts, works in progress, and/or examples of writing skills from class exercises and developmental activities (Valencia, 1990). For portfolios to be beneficial, they must involve students in their writing (Tierney et al., 1991) as well as motivate and promote self-assessment and learning (Frazier & Paulson, 1992). To accomplish these goals, portfolios must involve three components: collection, selection and reflection.

Collection

Students need to keep their writing and class materials together, usually in one folder. Since many materials are collected, it helps if students put all related materials of a project together, including notes, rough drafts, and final drafts. By keeping the portfolios organized, students can review previous work. The final organizational form can be decided by the instructor or program coordinator, but it is essential that all students understand and follow this system. Since students are not used to saving their work, teachers will need to spend time explaining what materials students should save and how they should be organized. However, if students simply collect their work without thought ("file and forget"), writing portfolios will not be an effective learning tool.

Selection

At the end of the semester, students choose their best works for inclusion in their writing portfolio. The selection process is important because students need to look back and evaluate their work, notice the variety of assignments, the progress they have made, and their successes (Conway, 1994). By focusing on their best or favorite work, this process can be a source of encouragement and accomplishment. Elbow (2000) believes that students must like their work to improve their writing. By choosing their best work, students realize what they are capable of achieving rather than what they are not.

Teachers can assist in the selection process by setting guidelines for students. For example, teachers may ask for a

specific number of writings or examples of particular styles of writing. For classes in which students do not write many papers nor have a large selection to choose from, they can still organize the portfolio with their favorite or best work first. The result is that students review their writing, and are active participants in selecting which work they wish to highlight. This also aids them in developing autonomy and critical thinking skills (Breen & Mann, 1997).

Reflection

Students need to periodically review, evaluate, and reflect on their writing. Reflections can take many forms, but must include some self-analysis about the writing process and the specific topic the students have chosen. Students can also address their motivation by ranking their assignments in terms of difficulty or enjoyment. Comments could also focus on what changes or improvements have been made, the utility of teacher feedback, their perceived strengths and weaknesses, or their favorite paragraph. Moreover, students can ask the instructor questions or point out specific sections of the paper they would like the instructor to notice. The purpose of the self-reflections is to induce students to become more involved in their writing by reviewing the content, decision-making, and their own personal investment that took place when writing. As Goldstein (2005) observes, "Students learn more effectively when they learn through contexts they themselves have created" (p. 16).

To maximize their value, self-reflections should be done regularly for several reasons. Firstly, students may not be familiar with writing reflections, so they need time to develop this skill. Students may need models of sample reflective responses to understand teacher expectations. Secondly, self-reflections involve students as writers, creating the opportunity for better student-teacher communication. If reflections are only done once or twice in a semester, this exchange is quite limited and may come too late to be of use (Conway, 1994). Thirdly, the self-reflections are a part of the learning process (Smith & Ylvisaker, 1993) and are essential for creating additional learning opportunities for students to identify and manage their learning inside and outside of the classroom (Crabbe, 2007).

Implementing writing portfolios in a language program

One model of a curriculum that has incorporated portfolios is the writing program established in 2007 by the Nanzan English Education Center (NEEC) at Nanzan University. As part of the reform of its general English curriculum, one of the authors was appointed coordinator of the writing program and, having had extensive experience of using writing portfolios at other institutions, chose to incorporate writing portfolios into the Nanzan curriculum.

In this program, 26 first-year writing classes are offered to non-English majors, as electives or required courses. Students are streamed by ability in required courses. Teachers choose their own textbooks from a recommended textbook list, materials, and assignments. The course goals are for students to be able to use pre-writing techniques, write unified and developed paragraphs in the first semester and multiple-paragraph essays in the second semester. Students are also expected to have at least one rough draft for each formal assignment. Establishing more uniform

requirements would be difficult considering the wide range of student levels.

At the end of every semester, each student is required to submit a writing portfolio with the following guidelines:

1. Writing samples

Each portfolio must contain a minimum of three writing samples, with a sample being all the accumulated work (pre-writing, rough drafts, and the final draft) that comprises the writing assignment. For the first semester, in which paragraph writing is the primary focus, students are required to produce a final draft paragraph of at least 150 words. In the second semester, as students advance to the short essay, final draft samples must be a minimum of 300 words. The number of assignments given is decided by individual teachers; however, teachers are encouraged to give more than three assignments so that students have a choice in deciding what to select for their portfolio. Teachers are advised to give students a choice in selection, and to not require every piece of student writing be put into the final portfolio. Students must put their writing samples in order, with their best writing placed first.

2. Reflections

Students are also required to submit a minimum of two reflections with their portfolio (see Appendix 1). One reflection focuses on student writing ability concerning one writing assignment done at the completion of that assignment. The other concerns overall writing ability and improvement over the semester. Teachers are encouraged to assign reflections for each paper, but this is not compulsory.

3. Cover sheet

Students are required to submit a cover sheet with their portfolio that lists which writing samples are submitted and explains why they are included (see Appendix 2). This checklist aids in student reflection, and serves as a guide for the teacher and writing coordinator.

Once students have submitted their completed portfolios, teachers evaluate each portfolio holistically to assess whether the student's work is sufficient to pass. If a student fails to submit a portfolio, that student automatically fails the course, just as if they had not taken a final exam or submitted a final report. Teachers evaluate and grade the portfolios based on their own predetermined criteria. How much weight is given to portfolios in the final evaluation varies widely among teachers; some teachers evaluate the portfolios as pass or fail, while others give them a numerical score.

After the teachers complete the grading, they select any five sample portfolios and submit them to the writing coordinator. The coordinator then examines these portfolios from each class to assess not the students but the writing program. The portfolios indicate whether students are achieving course goals (e.g. the length of assignments, the number of assignments, evidence of correctly typed and formatted papers, etc.), whether the course goals are challenging yet accessible, and whether to make any changes for the future. The portfolios also allow the coordinator to examine teacher feedback on student papers, the types of writing projects that are assigned, the transparency of the grading, and reflection questions students write and the types of responses teachers give. Feedback is later given to each teacher containing comments about the strengths in

the teacher's approach, possible questions arising from the portfolios, and suggestions for how better to meet particular course goals. This exchange allows the coordinator and the teachers to discuss the writing portfolios and shared course goals in a focused and constructive manner, thereby involving teachers more closely in the writing curriculum.

Benefits of portfolios

The first year of using portfolios at NEEC has demonstrated a number of benefits to students, teachers, and to the overall program.

Advantages for students

Writing portfolios encouraged student involvement in learning, involvement in their own writing, and involvement with the teacher. Through selection and reflections, students became more directly invested in their writing ability and more aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Both authors saw instances in the reflections where students not only recognized their weaknesses but actively worked at addressing them in subsequent drafts. Some students referred to previous papers or self-reflections to highlight their efforts at improvement, indicating that these reflective practices promoted learning and enabled the students to become more perceptive about that learning (Smith & Ylvisaker, 1993).

In their reflections, students were able to take the knowledge and skills they had learned, process them, and convey that learning to the teacher. This encouraged students to see their writing as readers, and as a learning process. The reflections also encouraged students to set goals for themselves, both for particular writing assignments and for improving their writing in general. In both the reflections and the class discussions, students referred to comments in their drafts to help guide them in setting goals. This suggests that writing portfolios help students see their writing assignments as part of a process of developing global, transferable writing skills, and not merely as isolated writing tasks (Crabbe, 2007).

Portfolios also encouraged students to be more invested in their writing and its evaluation. Writing can be a solitary activity, and students usually have a passive role in the process of evaluation. As such, students tend to see assessment as a procedure in which they receive, as opposed to earn a grade (Casanave, 2005). By selecting and ordering their best work, students have an active voice in determining what work the teacher assessed. We observed students who were relieved they could omit their weakest work and organize the portfolio so as to promote their best writing. In their final reflections, some students compared their papers and noted aspects of their writing that they felt they had improved upon, to advance their case for a desired grade. Students noted, for example, their ability to write stronger titles, use a variety of techniques to get the audience's attention, write effective topic sentences, use transitions to link ideas, and avoid beginning sentences with *and*, *but*, and *so*. This had an added benefit of raising students' awareness of the writing skills taught in class. The selection process, and the portfolio itself, became sources of pride to students as they realized how much work they had accomplished in the semester and how much improvement they had made in their writing.

Advantages for teachers

One advantage for teachers that we have observed is that writing portfolios give teachers a framework with which to manage the process approach to writing and thus focus attention on revision and development throughout the semester. Since pre-writings and rough drafts are included with the final draft, the portfolios provide a record of that process. Portfolios have created an environment in which less emphasis is placed on grades, and more is given to writing improvement and learning.

At the same time, portfolios have provided a valid means of assessment. By examining samples of each student's work to determine whether the student has progressed sufficiently in the course, teachers were able to make a stronger case for passing or failing a student than they could by an accumulation of numbers or letter grades. By focusing on what students can do, portfolio assessment allows more opportunity for and acknowledgement of writing improvement (Belanoff & Dickson, 1991). Consequently, the portfolios are a better representation of the students' actual writing abilities or writing potential (Elbow, 1994), especially compared with alternatives such as determining a grade based on a final report or exam.

The dialogue between teacher and student through reflection writing is another benefit. This dialogue enriches learning because it presents an opportunity for students to discuss problems they have, explain the writing decisions they have made, or what they are attempting to do in their writing. Teachers have been able to learn more about student thinking, and problems and potential problems students might have. This dialogue may answer questions teachers have about students or can direct them to provide more appropriate feedback, so that students are able to receive the kind of help they need to improve (Ferris, 1999). We observed that students have been more active in asking questions, perhaps because of the rapport built from this dialogue. We noticed from reflections done after a writing assignment when students did not understand a point discussed in class, and we were able to review it in subsequent lessons. We also noticed from reflection comments that students may not realize or understand the writing decisions they make, such as when one student commented that their second out of three supporting reasons was their strongest one, but failed to realize that this reason should have been placed first or last.

Advantages for writing curriculum

The main benefit to the writing curriculum was that the coordinator was able to monitor how different teachers approached the course goals, which assignments they set, and whether the course goals were being met. In the first semester of the writing program, some teachers were not assigning rough drafts as part of each assignment, were not meeting the word count goals, or were not having students type the final drafts. There was greater consistency in what was being done in the writing classes in the second semester of the program after these issues were addressed. Thus, students, regardless of the instructor, are taught the same writing skills and consistently work toward the same goals. Having portfolios allows the coordinator to establish clear guidelines, which creates more consistency in the writing program, and to monitor whether those guidelines are being followed.

Another benefit for writing programs is the opportunity it provides for greater teacher cooperation (Elbow, 2000). In NEEC faculty development sessions, held twice a year, teachers sometimes share their portfolios with each other, and copies of assignment sheets, reflection sheets, rubrics, and peer revision handouts are added to a materials folder, which writing teachers can access freely. Not only do teachers share information about lesson plans, student progress, and trouble spots, but they can also share portfolios to demonstrate student progress or lack of progress. While it is possible for teachers to have discussions without portfolios, having a record of the students' work that shows the range of assignments, teachers' comments, and student self-reflections has made this discussion more open and productive.

Challenges of portfolios

The two main challenges we experienced in incorporating portfolios into a writing program were the lack of time and space. It is time-consuming for students to write self-reflections and for teachers to respond, especially if students do several self-reflections throughout the semester. At NEEC, most writing classes have 28-32 students, but elective courses could have as many as 40 students. In addition, classroom time is needed to teach students how to write reflections.

Another concern was finding a place to store the portfolios. A class set of portfolios is bulky and impractical for teachers (especially part-time teachers) to carry. At NEEC, a storage place is provided. For the teachers who teach more than one writing class and for one teacher who uses a wheelchair, this facility was deeply appreciated.

An additional challenge was setting clear objectives and expectations about the use of writing portfolios. Students had to be informed at the outset that they should save all their work, so that they have a complete selection from which to choose for their portfolios. The coordinator stressed that the concept of the portfolios should be explained in the first week of class, reinforced periodically, and that reflections should begin after students received teacher feedback from the first draft of an assignment. Some teachers later admitted they did not spend sufficient time doing this and found that some students were not able to turn in complete portfolios.

The role of the writing coordinator was another challenge. The coordinator had to explain the purpose, benefits, and procedure of establishing portfolios. To do this, the coordinator sent information to teachers several times throughout each semester, discussed portfolios at faculty development (FD) sessions, and met individually with teachers new to the writing program or writing portfolios. Most teachers attended the FD sessions, where they were able to examine and ask questions about model portfolios, portfolio cover sheets, and reflection sheets. However, two teachers neither attended the FD sessions nor replied to correspondence and, as a result, did not submit five sample portfolios at the end of the first semester. A few teachers also did not follow the course goals as mentioned above, so the coordinator had to meet with them individually to discuss portfolio guidelines and what was expected from teachers and students. The coordinator needed to make sure teachers submitted the portfolios on time, which meant sending out email reminders, often repeatedly.

A final challenge of portfolios is that they lead to teacher anxiety. Requiring teachers to do something new can be a source of consternation. To alleviate this anxiety, the coordinator met with teachers to discuss any problems they might be having, gave a PowerPoint presentation on the benefits of portfolios at an FD session, and created a materials folder with sample handouts. The coordinator also tried to give teachers flexibility by not assigning a common textbook and allowing teachers to choose their own writing assignments. Despite these efforts, several teachers were apprehensive about the fact that they would be reviewed based on the five sample portfolios they submitted. One teacher failed to turn in portfolios, perhaps because of this anxiety. However, after teachers saw the feedback and realized that the primary purpose of the samples was to evaluate the writing program, not individual instructors, to promote consistency throughout the program, to reinforce course goals and offer advice on how to reach them, the response has been positive. Teachers have expressed appreciation for the coordinator's comments, been more forthcoming with questions and problems they are having, and have started sharing portfolios from students who did not perform well.

Conclusion

Despite logistical concerns and some teacher anxiety, portfolios have a positive effect on the writing class in terms of creating more student involvement and empowerment, which translates into greater motivation of students and teachers. They promote critical thinking skills by providing students more practice at analyzing their own work as writers and readers. The dialogue through self-reflections creates a better social learning environment in the classroom. Completed portfolios chart student progress, show the range of assignments, and can be used as a more valid tool for assessment. Students are active participants in the assessment, as they select which writing to submit, and rank their work by order of preference. This method of assessment can be used to supplement instruction, offer formative feedback for student growth, and illustrate the process of writing. For writing programs, portfolios can create more continuity between classes, even if textbooks or individual assignments differ. Portfolios can serve as a means to bring teachers together as they share similar experiences, while providing coordinators with a tool to better assess the writing program and promote faculty development.

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Appendix 1
Sample student portfolio cover sheet

Your Name:

Student Number:

Which three assignments did you choose for your portfolio? Why?

Type of assignment	Reason for choosing it

Which of the five assignments we did this semester was the easiest? Why?

Which of the five was the most difficult? Why?

Which of the five was your best writing? Why?

Do you think your writing has improved? If so, how?

What do you still need to work on to improve your writing further?

Are you satisfied with your progress and work this semester? Explain.

What grade do you feel you should receive this semester? Why?

Appendix 2
Sample self-reflection sheet

Your Name:

Student Number:

What do you think of this assignment?

Easy	1	2	3	4	5	Difficult
Interesting	1	2	3	4	5	Boring

How much time did you spend writing your second draft?

What is your topic sentence? Write it here.

What did you change or add to your paper when you rewrote it?

What was the most difficult thing about this assignment?

If you had had more time, what would you work on more?