Portfolios and Process Writing: Effective Tools for University Writing Classes

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One challenge many teachers face in their EFL writing classes is trying to create writing tasks that can work for students of varying skill levels. Another hurdle is finding a good method for providing each student with feedback that they will be able to apply to future drafts or other writing assignments. When we were given the opportunity to create a new writing course, we explored the idea of incorporating portfolios into our writing class that would hopefully address both of these challenges. It was hypothesized that writing portfolios would allow students to work at their own pace and writing level by giving them the opportunity to decide how and when they would complete their writing projects. The course delivery and instruction centered around student-teacher conferences intended to give individual feedback to each student multiple times throughout the semester.

　能力の異なる学習者に対して有効なライティング課題を与えるのは多くのEFL教員にとって難関であり、同じ様に有効なフィードバックを各生徒に返し、各生徒がその助言を新たな文章や改訂版に反映するプロセスを考え出すのもまた悩みの種である。今回、著者達に新たなコースを作ると言う課題を与えられた結果、ポートフォリオ式のライティング・クラスを行えば上記の二点に対応出来るのでは無いかと言う結　論に至った。まず、この形式だと各生徒のペースに合わせていつ課題を終らせるのか計画を立てられる、各自の能力レベルに合わせやすくなるのが一点で、もう一　点は生徒と教員の間でフィードバックを行える1対1のカンファレンスを複数回行える点が上げられる。

I**N 2010,** our university asked us to teach a new writing course entitled "Writing Strategies" that would be offered to 3rd- and 4th-year students. At our institution, all English language courses offered to juniors and seniors are electives and most of these do not have minimum language proficiency requirements. Therefore, we knew that the students who enrolled in the class would probably have a wide range of ability levels that would have to be addressed. Also, because the course was being offered to 3rd- and 4th-year students, we anticipated high absentee rates due to job-hunting activities and teacher-training internships.

As we were given the opportunity to create a completely new course, we began by first discussing how writing is traditionally taught and then brainstormed ways in which this class could be different. There were three areas we wanted to try to address. First, we wanted to design a course that would allow us to address students' individual writing needs. In our previous classes, feedback on a piece of writing was usually provided in a written form that may or may not have been understood or utilized by the students. We believed that finding a way to work with students more closely in order to address varying levels was essential. Second,

we wanted the focus of the writing assignments to be more on the creative process of writing and revising than on the finished product. At our university, all 1st-year students are required to take a two-course reading and writing series. Because of the amount of material to be covered, there are few chances to work with students in any depth on their writing. We wanted to build time for individualized feedback into this class plan by focusing on the types of writing students had already been exposed to and limiting the number of finished pieces required. Third, we wanted to give the students an opportunity to choose not only the writing topics, but also how much effort they wanted to put into their writing. We felt this course could be an opportunity for the students to learn and practice not only some useful writing skills, but time management skills as well. With all of this in mind, we decided to build the class around a writing portfolio.

Writing Portfolios

In structuring the class, rather than have each writing task set apart as an individual assignment in which each piece would be handed in for a grade as it was completed, we decided to have each student generate a writing portfolio. In general, portfolios are a collection of writing pieces, along with drafts and revision notes that together demonstrate the students approach, progress, and writing ability. They are a tool for displaying both product and process (Nunes, 2004) and are often used to demonstrate writing progress over a longer term or period of study. By including earlier examples of writing alongside more polished pieces generated after the writer has gained more skills, progress can be observed. On this basis, Campbell (1998) stated that portfolios can also give far more information about a student's writing ability than other types of assessment. When reviewing the portfolio, a teacher can compare various samples of writing to look for consistencies and also monitor how the writing has changed over time.

Since the objective of the class was on developing and improving writing skills, we first discussed what types of writing tasks might benefit the students most. As our university is a foreign language, liberal arts school, most of the students enroll with the desire to study abroad or obtain jobs that will make use of their English. We believed that focusing on skills such as how to organize and express ideas clearly in academic and professional genres would prove useful for them in the future. As Scrivener (2005) noted, having this kind of practical purpose for their writing also helps to increase student motivation. Therefore, we decided to have students focus on writing paragraphs, five-paragraph essays, and letters or email, which most of the students were introduced to in their freshman year. That way, we could maximize writing time so students could gain practice expressing their ideas in a way that could help them when studying at overseas universities or communicating in writing with host families, international friends, or even future colleagues.

We entitled our portfolio a Life Book, based on Gottlieb's (1995) "collection portfolio," which was to be "an expression of the students, their lives, and their identities" (p. 13). This type of portfolio also stresses that there should be flexibility about what goes into the portfolio, both in content and amount. Keeping this in mind, each student's Life Book was to incorporate a variety of paragraphs, letters, and essays based on important people and experiences in the students' lives. This meant that the learners would be writing on topics they knew well without having to do research. The justification for this decision was so the focus would be on the writing itself, not the research process.

Portfolios and Three Educational Constructs

Besides creating a clear structure for the class, the use of a portfolio would allow us, the teachers, the opportunity to build the class around three educational constructs: student auton-

omy, one-on-one feedback through writing conferences, and a focus on process rather than product.

Student Autonomy

One of the benefits of portfolios is that they can incorporate autonomous learning principles by "allow[ing] students to assume responsibility for their own learning" (Gottlieb, 1995). In autonomous learning environments, students are given opportunities to set their own goals and take an active role in planning and executing learning tasks (Little, n.d.). Following this guideline, we developed the class in such a way as to help the students become active participants in their own learning.

We felt it was important to allow each student to decide what their goals for the class were and what types of projects they wanted to complete; some students wanted intensive writing practice whereas others wanted a more relaxed writing experience. Students were asked to complete three types of writing: paragraphs, letters, and essays. Of these three types, it was unimportant which the students decided to work on; all participants, from lower level students who felt that they just wanted to write paragraphs to higher level students who really wanted to focus on their essay writing skills, could participate in and benefit from the class. In this way, no one was forced to work above or below his or her level, but all could benefit from the class.

We also felt it was important that students have the opportunity to decide when they would finish each project by following an individual work schedule. Therefore, there were no deadlines built into the semester plan; as long as the final portfolio was turned in by the end of the semester, when each piece was finished was of no consequence. The university allowed for only a certain number of absences and attendance was recorded, so most students did attend class regularly. However, on occa-sions when students needed to be absent due to other obliga-tions, they would not be penalized. They could work outside of class and simply come to class for a writing conference if they wished.

Considering these factors, we created an assessment plan that would take into account varying skill levels and allow each student to target what their final grade for the class would be. Each of the three types of writing was awarded a point value: Paragraphs were worth one point, letters worth two points, and essays worth three points. To receive these points, students had to complete a 4-step writing process and include all drafts, notes, and revisions in the final Life Book. To help with this, each student kept a check sheet (see Appendix) at the front of their Life Book so that they could track which steps were com-pleted and see what still needed to be done. They would then receive a final grade for their Life Book based on the following scale: 16 points = 90-100%, 13 points = 80-89%, 11 points = 70-79% and 9 points = 60-69%, which will be explained more in the next section.

Process vs. Product

In process writing, students are asked to complete several steps over an extended period before arriving at a finished prod-uct. The most important concept in process-focused writing is that, although the final product is important, more emphasis is placed on the work it takes to get to that final product (Ono-zawa, 2010). A common pattern follows a 4-step process of: (a) brainstorming and prewriting, (b) first draft, (c) revisions and editing, and (d) final draft. For our class, in order to complete their Life Books, the students were required to show this process approach by including at least one brainstorming sheet, either a mind-map or an outline, for each piece of writing, at least two drafts, and the completed piece of writing.

To assist learners in beginning the writing process, it is important to encourage a variety of planning and prewriting strategies. For our purposes, we devoted the first 20-30 minutes of each class to a speaking activity, such as an interview or small-group discussion, designed to help the students generate writing ideas. This was then followed by time for more individualized brainstorming through the use of a mind-map or outline form, drafting, writing, and rewriting. Students were also encouraged to continue these steps outside of class as well. Along with writing, students could also use class time to engage with the teacher in a writing conference. Following a writing process like this can be especially beneficial for ESL/EFL students because they are not only practicing their writing skills, but can also practice their communication and language skills. Having multiple drafts of the same work also means students can compare drafts and, hopefully, see how their writing has changed over time.

The final grade for the portfolio was not based on how well the final pieces were written, but rather on how well students had used the writing process in completing their portfolios Rather than assessing the final version as a stand-alone piece of writing, it was compared to the earlier drafts and conference notes. As noted above, portfolios were awarded a grade based on a point system, each with its own percentage range. This made it possible to award a higher grade to a student who had made significant changes between drafts as compared to a student who made only superficial changes. This means that it was possible for a lower proficiency student, whose final writing may have been lower in quality than that of a stronger writer, to receive a higher score simply because they put in more work.

Writing Conferences

In order to further help students understand this process approach to writing, as well as to be able to provide them with personalized feedback, we implemented the use of writing conferences. These face-to-face conversations between the teacher and student were used to review previous writing and drafts with the goal of finding ways to improve the student's writing or plan future projects. We felt that conferences could lead to some meaningful exchanges with our students that would help them improve their individual writing skills.

Providing feedback in a writing conference can focus on two main areas: feedback on form and feedback on content (Williams, 2003). No matter which is being focused on, there are some important guidelines to follow in conferencing that will ensure a positive and educational experience. Graves (1982) proposes four characteristics of successful writing conferences that are useful to keep in mind when meeting with students:

1. The conference must have a predictable structure; the students should be aware of what the purpose of the conference is.
2. The focus should be on just a few points; focusing on too many issues at once can be overwhelming and discouraging.
3. The teacher should demonstrate solutions to problems, especially for content or organizational issues.
4. The conference process should stimulate pleasure in writing by giving positive feedback and encouragement every time.

It is also very important to remember that writing of any kind, at any level, is a very personal activity; by putting words on paper, the writer is placing a part of themselves in the public arena and the teacher needs to acknowledge this by beginning slowly and carefully, taking the writer's feelings into account. One way to do this is for teachers to begin every conference with a short silent period in which to read and organize their thoughts on the student's writing and what they would like to focus on in

the conference (Pryle, 2009). In order to help the students improve and gain confidence, something to praise should be found first. Also, the students have chosen their topic in order to share something, so it is important to acknowledge the meaning of the piece—what is it they are trying to share, say, or teach?

Feedback on Content

When conducting writing conferences, there is a hierarchy that should be followed. First, there should be a focus on the content of the writing. This would involve examining how the students have developed and presented their ideas and make sure the piece is substantial enough to be a first draft (Pryle, 2009). For example, if the student's goal is to write an essay about university students and part-time jobs, but their first draft is simply a description of their job at Lawson, the teacher may use this conference time to help the student with their brainstorming process, which may have been inadequate, or to decide on and construct a strong thesis statement with several good reasons to back up that statement.

The next step is to help the student eliminate unnecessary information and flesh out their writing with more details and examples. Writing conferences not only provide writers with an opportunity to receive immediate feedback on their writing that they can respond to, but the conferences can help them see their work from various angles to help improve their writing.

Feedback on Form

Once the content of the writing has been reviewed, and hopefully improved, then it is time to examine the work at the sentence level. There are many advantages to conducting a writing conference to look at structure and grammar errors rather than just providing students with written comments on their paper.

One reason is that students often find written feedback to be confusing (Williams, 2003). A conference allows the teacher and student to trace the cause of the problem and develop some ways to correct it. It also provides the students a chance to ask clarification questions in order to gain a clearer understanding of the grammatical issue being discussed. Students enjoy participating in this type of encounter as part of the process and studies have found that students find feedback given in conferences to be more effective than written feedback (see Brendar, 1998, Williams, 2003).

However, it is important to remember that the same conferencing guidelines apply to this type of feedback as well—it will be most successful if the student does not feel threatened or discouraged, and can receive careful, constructive criticism. As in conferencing on content, writing instructors and advisors are encouraged to take time to plan what will be said beforehand. Scrivener (2005) provides some useful tips for conducting a conference that focuses on form:

1. Keep a positive tone; writing conferences can be intimidating, so it is important the students are at ease.

2. Avoid focusing on too much at once; trying to correct every mistake can be overwhelming and won't necessarily help the students to improve.

3. Make sure that the errors focused on are appropriate for the level of English and writing goals of the student.

4. It is best to perform error correction together with the student, guiding them towards the correct answer. However, if a marking system is used that the students will then use to make corrections on their own, making sure it is easily understood and interpreted correctly is key for learners to be able to take action on it.

Putting it Into Practice

Since this was a one-semester course that only met for two 90-minute classes a week, we wanted to maximize the time available for writing conferences. Therefore, we decided on a very simple set-up for each individual lesson and the semester as a whole.

Because the three types of writing were already familiar to the students, we felt a quick review of each type of writing, including the basic four-step writing process, would be sufficient to get them started. We wanted the focus of the class to be on output through the use of a writing process and student-teacher conferences, so we limited whole-class writing instruction to just the first 3 weeks of the semester (see Table 1). The assumption was that reintroducing these types of writing together at the start of the course would provide students with the most flexible opportunity to begin whichever writing tasks they wanted to complete toward their course grade. It would also allow for unavoidable absences later in the semester in that students wouldn't have to worry about missing important content lessons.

The middle 10 weeks of the semester were devoted to student-teacher conferences and building the Life Book and the final 2 weeks were reserved for student presentations in which they shared their completed Life Book with their classmates. The oral presentations provided closure for the class and gave the students an opportunity to share their writing and stories with their classmates.

Table 1. Class Schedule

Week	Monday	Thursday
1	Class & syllabus introduction, getting to know you	Paragraph writing and the writing process
2	Letter writing	Essay writing
3	Essay writing continued	
4 - 13	Building your Life Book All draft checks must be completed by July 4th!!!	
14 & 15	Sharing your Life Book: Final presentations	

Weeks 4-13

During weeks 4 to 13, each class was conducted in the same manner. For the first 30 minutes of class time, students were led in a pair, small group, or whole group speaking activity such as an interview or "Find Someone Who" activity. The interview or discussion topics were designed to help students generate ideas for new writing projects. For example, they were asked to interview a classmate about his or her work experience. They were then provided with some writing prompts such as (a) write a paragraph stating three reasons why you like your part-time job; (b) write a letter of introduction to a company you would like to work for; or (c) write an essay stating reasons why you think college students should or shouldn't have part-time jobs.

After concluding this speaking activity, the last 60 minutes of the class were reserved for independent work and writing conferences. When students were ready for a conference, they wrote their name on a list. The teacher then met with each student in turn. Because the finished Life Book would consist of several

different projects, students who were waiting could always work on a different step, for example brainstorming a new project or making revisions to a draft previously conferenced on.

Depending on the size of the class, the conferencing period can be an extremely busy time for the teacher, but we felt it was important to spend as much time as possible with each student in order to provide them with as complete a conference as possible, one that would leave them with some clear ideas on how to proceed in order to revise for a stronger draft. One way to maximize time is to have students needing a grammar check give their paper to the teacher to be read and checked outside of class. Also, even though the ideal situation is to see students in turn as they sign up, teachers can ask students who they feel will need less help to step back and let a lower ability student go first to make sure that students with the greatest needs get the help they need.

Weeks 14 & 15

In the last 2 weeks of the semester, the students were given a chance to share their Life Books with their classmates in informal presentations. This provided the students with an audience and purpose for their portfolios, which is an important motivational tool (Scrivener, 2005). We decided to employ a presentation style similar to a poster presentation. Four or five presentation stations were set up around the classroom and students gave their presentation to two or three small groups of classmates. The repetition gave students a chance to improve their speaking skills each time and it was nice for them to be able to talk about their projects more than once, after having put so much time into them. Also, the informal setting worked well for this type of project; the Life Books can be quite personal, so a simple "chat" with classmates seemed appropriate. This is also an area where the benefits of repetition could be seen. As the audience became more comfortable with the presentation style,

they also began to ask more questions and interact with the speaker more.

Outcomes

When first planning this course, we anticipated several issues that we felt should be addressed. One was that the students would most likely have varying skill levels. This turned out to be true, and the portfolio and conference system seemed to work well in addressing this issue. Students of all levels were able to successfully complete the Life Book project no matter what their skill level.

Students expressed a high level of satisfaction with the class in their evaluations. From their comments, we can surmise that part of the satisfaction with the class was related to the fact that students were able to work at their own pace. Lower level, and possibly less motivated, students could work at a slower pace without holding back the other students or feeling pressure to work at a faster pace than they were able to or wanted to.

For a variety of reasons, we also anticipated high levels of absenteeism, which was a guiding factor behind the development of this course. We wanted to design a system that would allow students to be able to pass the course even if they were unable to attend every class. We were successful in our design in that those students who were absent due to unavoidable conflicts were able to complete the course with a passing grade, due to the flexibility built into the schedule.

Future Goals

One aspect of portfolios that we did not include in this course was that of reflection. In the future, we would like to build self-reflection into the conferencing sessions through discussions with the students about how they feel they are progress-

ing throughout the semester. We would also like to include some form of reflective writing in the final Life Book, either about why students chose to write the pieces they did or their thoughts on their writing progress as a whole (Fiktorius, 2012).

The use of portfolios and writing conferences is not new, but it is not widespread in the EFL community. We need to conduct further research to find out which aspects of the class students enjoyed and benefitted from the most, whether it was the personalized feedback rather than more traditional written comments or the fact that students were allowed to choose how many points they completed. However, what we do know is that using this method was a successful way to provide students with personalized feedback on their writing.

Bio Data

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Appendix

Project Check Sheet

Project Check Sheet **Name:** _____

Project #1 Title: _____

Type: _____ Points: _____

☐ Brainstorm and/or outline

☐ 1st draft checked for content Date: _____

☐ 2nd draft checked for grammar Date: _____

Project #2 Title: _____

Type: _____ Points: _____

☐ Brainstorm and/or outline

☐ 1st draft checked for content Date: _____

☐ 2nd draft checked for grammar Date: _____

Project #3 Title: _____

Type: _____ Points: _____

☐ Brainstorm and/or outline

☐ 1st draft checked for content Date: _____

☐ 2nd draft checked for grammar Date: _____

Project #4 Title: _____

Type: _____ Points: _____

☐ Brainstorm and/or outline

☐ 1st draft checked for content Date: _____

☐ 2nd draft checked for grammar Date: _____