



Mari Nakamura & Marian Hara

The Younger Learners column provides language teachers of children and teenagers with advice and guidance for making the most of their classes. Teachers with an interest in this field are also encouraged to submit articles and ideas to the editors at the address below. We also welcome questions about teaching, and will endeavour to answer them in this column.

Email: jaltpubs.tlt.yl@jalt.org

What's at the End of the Rainbow: Educational Gold!

Dean Williams

deanmichaelwilliams65@gmail.com

Three decades of teaching English at the secondary school level, both in my native United States and here in Japan, have instilled in me the following educational beliefs. The first is that students are inherently creative, enjoy making things, and will invariably reward our efforts to develop their creative potential with increased motivation and effort. The second is that learners only truly understand what they mentally process, so it is our responsibility to structure the target content and skills to encourage active and critical thinking.

Finally, the ability to write thoughtfully, accurately, and with originality, will pay enormous academic and professional dividends in our students' futures. Patient instruction in this complex art should play a central role in our pedagogy and curricula. Giving students the creative autonomy to think and write forms the foundations of my teaching practice over my career in two U.S. public high schools and three Japanese private junior and senior high schools.

As the director of the Global Course at my current school, I am lucky enough to receive two solo instructional hours per week with our G12 Global students. These learners are in their last year of a challenging, six-year progressive program that includes several extended stays abroad, a dynamic core curriculum loaded with group work, presentations, authentic problem-solving, and an innovative team-teaching regime that emphasizes both structural rigor and expressive power. As a conceptual background to the various activities, they have learned the 10 IB Learner Profile Attributes (International Baccalaureate, n.d.), that include characteristics like Risk-Taker and Inquirer. These help students contextualize their learning and give them concrete academic and personal goals.

In addition, this group of learners has experienced five years of Kieran Egan's LiD program (Egan, 2010). In LiD, or Learning in Depth, students research an individual challenging topic, such as birds or stars or inventors, for all the years they are at school. LiD complements and enriches a program's curriculum by allowing the students to pursue a knowledge stream in incredible depth and detail. Along the way they write reports and do presentations. This class has already done five full years of LiD research. They will spend their senior year applying what they have learned in writing a full-length English research paper, complete with a thesis and citations. This Global Research Project (GRP) is a separate writing class taught by another instructor.

Overview of the Rainbow Portfolio

The two hours in which I instruct this G12 class are regarded as the capstone for the various content and skills they have mastered in prior classes. There is a great deal of curricular freedom, but the expectations from the school and the students are high. Creative, collaborative work centered on global topics and current events is essential, as is critical thinking resulting in active discussion and writing. In addition, 2020 demonstrated that in-person classes might not continue indefinitely; at any point the school could return to online instruction. For the upcoming 2021–2022 academic year, what was called for was some kind of sophisticated weekly framework that would harness the richness of the students' prior learning and also record any further personal and intellectual growth transpiring in their senior year. In addition, a weekly assignment framework would lend welcome support to any possible online classes.

In early April of this year, just before classes began, I decided to color-code the framework's content bands. From there, it was only a short conceptual leap to wrapping the whole construct up in a rainbow package. The familiar progression of colors from vibrant red to soothing violet would hopefully give the activity an intuitively natural feel. In deciding on the themes of the seven bands, student interest was paramount. To have a positive

impact, the Portfolio project needed to be done all year, and to maintain their motivation, the students needed to perceive every band's topic as personally relevant to them.

The result is the Rainbow Portfolio; the seven-band framework that I introduced to my classes in mid-April. The instructions can be seen in Figure 1. The activity is submitted weekly on Google Docs. For full marks, the students must write at least a paragraph for each of the seven bands. As long as their entries correspond to the theme for that particular band, they are free to write on any topic they choose.

Figure 1
The Rainbow Portfolio: Standard Version

| Themes | Instructions |
|--|---|
| Red: <i>Lifetalk</i> | Talk about the events, people, moods, etc. that you found most memorable and meaningful this week. |
| Orange: <i>My Learning</i> | Choose the parts of your learning, in school or out, that you found most interesting, important, or challenging. |
| Yellow: <i>Books & Arts Playlist</i> | List the books, stories, music, performers, movies, TV/streaming episodes you enjoyed this week and might enjoy talking/writing about. |
| Green: <i>Deep Questions & Big Ideas</i> | From school or anywhere else, choose one Deep Question and/or Big Idea that you find intriguing and can discuss and/or write about. |
| Blue: <i>The World This Week</i> | List at least one headline from an article you read and want to discuss. Be prepared to summarize and evaluate the significance of the article. |
| Indigo: <i>A Yearlong Thought</i> | Think of a topic, e.g., gender equality, that you are really interested in and think you could discuss the entire year. Your LiD topic is one option, but you are free to research another subject. |
| Violet: <i>Lifelong Learning</i> | How satisfied are you with how you studied and learned this week? Feel free to use the IB Learner Profile Attributes: <i>Inquirer, Open-minded, Knowledgeable, Caring, Reflective, Communicator, Thinker, Risk-taker, Principled, Balanced.</i> |

An Example Portfolio, Class Applications and Assessment

In Figure 2, we can see a student's entries for the week of April 26 to May 2. One of the primary purposes of the Portfolio was to generate topics for class discussion.

Figure 2
A Student's Sample Entries

| Rainbow Portfolio: Standard Version | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|---|
| Week of: <u>April 26~May 2</u> | | |
| Red | <i>Lifetalk</i> | <i>Online classes started. Though I don't have to commute to school, I am still tired of Zoom because I often cannot attend classes smoothly. Also, the amount of time I can take classes is definitely reduced.</i> |
| Orange | <i>My Learning</i> | <i>From a book called <u>How to Make Hope</u>, I learned that it is important not to be afraid of wasting efforts. Tiring things which seem useless perhaps will help you in the future.</i> |
| Yellow | <i>Books and Arts Playlist</i> | <i>Books - <u>Prisoners of Geography</u> by Tim Marshall Movies - 'Seven Year Itch' and 'Quo Vadis' In calligraphy class - We are making a hanko.</i> |
| Green | <i>Deep Questions and Big Ideas</i> | <i>DQ: What is the identity of Japan? BI: Scientific evidence is what we believe the most.</i> |
| Blue | <i>The World This Week</i> | <i>"Menthol Cigarettes, Flavored Cigars Face Ban in United States" by Reuters They are considering measures for the American people's health, but I wonder what will happen to the sellers of those cigarettes.</i> |
| Indigo | <i>A Yearlong Thought</i> | <i>About international relations, I worry about Japanese producers after RCEP came into being. The Japanese government says they enforce duties on foreign rice, sugar, dairy products, beef, pork and wheat, but I want it to protect other Japanese products as well.</i> |

| | | |
|--------|---|--|
| Violet | <i>Lifelong Learning (IB Learner Profile)</i> | <i>I was able to memorize both English and classical Japanese vocabulary this week. Next week, I don't think I will study as hard as I do now in order to enjoy GW. I want to balance both studying and enjoying myself.</i> |
|--------|---|--|

Of the seven categories, the Arts, Deep Questions and News bands are the most appropriate for class sharing, so we have focused on those in class. Once the class got into the habit of doing the activity, carrying out pair and group discussions has become far easier. Although the students had acquired some facility with discussions through their experience in junior high, they still required a fair amount of motivation, maintenance, and detailed coaching. This was especially true for shy or less motivated students who had difficulty speaking up in class. The sheer range of interesting topics generated by the Portfolio, and the fact that the learners are choosing their own Deep Questions, news articles, and so on has greatly enhanced students' general motivation to discuss topics and the level of discourse in the class has risen as a result.

In a typical class, the students work on an unrelated project designing their own business. Then the last quarter of the lesson shifts to Portfolio-based group discussions. To take one example, a group of students discussed the Deep Question, "What is a good life?" After an intense conversation, they recorded all of their answers. Being close to family and friends, satisfaction with daily life, achieving life goals, making others happy and searching for one's reason for living were among the impressive responses. To complete the cycle, the students were asked to summarize the discussion in writing and give their final opinion on the topic. In this way, the Portfolio has become a kind of educational one-stop-shop, taking the class from quick writing based on individually-selected topics, to discussion and back to deeper, more analytical writing.

Assessment and Feedback

Students' time and energy resources are limited, and we teachers should always be aware of this fact. The Portfolio demands a fair amount of critical thinking and creativity, and for the activity to have meaning, my students need to do it every week. I developed a simple, two-pronged assessment and incentive strategy, which consists of allotting nearly half of the course points for the Portfolio, (and informing them of this fact) and using the Google Classroom comments function to give them

descriptive feedback. The comments show the students I am fully engaging with their entries and not just checking them. Formal assessment is based on weekly completion, on doing all seven bands and on the overall quality of the writing and the ideas.

Developing Different Versions of the Portfolio

We had online classes for several weeks in May, and the Portfolio proved an invaluable aid in maintaining weekly productivity and keeping up the students' motivation. My ongoing observation informed me that discussions centered on the Books and Arts Playlist were a favorite with the students. The students took advantage of their devices' multimedia capabilities on Zoom to play snippets of the songs, TV shows, movies, and anime they were recommending to their friends. Their Playlist choices ranged from classic movies to documentaries to hard rock albums and the latest Murakami Haruki novel.

The students' obvious enthusiasm for the arts band, and the unexpectedly wide range of their selections, led to the idea of a fine-art-focused Portfolio. For such a version to be truly educational, the students would have to learn more about visual art that they were not familiar with. I gave them a simple art catalog with all the major Western art periods (Asian art to be handled in the next term) and their approximate dates. In groups, they had to find a representative work for each period or style, along with its date of composition, artist, and title. (One student later apologized for failing to find the painter of a Lascaux cave painting!) I then taught them how to do a basic art review in which they would describe the work, its context, and then assess its aesthetic worth. The catalog was then used as a resource for the actual Portfolio. The final necessary ingredient was a suitable descriptor for each color band. These were derived by categorizing paintings, sculptures, as well as films, and finding terms that seemed sufficiently evocative and intuitive. Respectively, the band descriptors are On the Edge, Exciting, Sunny, Balanced, Melancholy, and Deep. The violet band, Reflections and Connections, serves as a synthesizing space for finding links between and reflecting on the other six entries. The students did the first Arts Portfolio collaboratively. The time spent looking at art to make the catalog and working together to create the first Arts Portfolio has given them the ability to categorize aesthetic works, which was one of the goals of this version. The students went through the same process to learn how to integrate unfamiliar genres of music (such as jazz and gospel) and fine art photography into the Portfolio. In class, we have followed the same

discussion procedures as for the standard Portfolio, with similarly positive results. The arts version can be seen in Figure 3 (available online).

Just before our summer break, we revisited news and global issues. These students have been trained to read English news online since G10, but the Portfolio construct allows us to delve more deeply into current events. To explore a full range of news stories in a given week, the categories must be comprehensive. From red to blue respectively, the areas covered are International News and Politics, Business, Society and Culture, Environment and Health, and Technology and Science. The indigo band, The Infosphere, is of special interest. Its goal is to promote students' media literacy. Students need to understand the various types of information resources that exist in print and online, and to what extent they can be trusted as valid sources of information and ideas. We went through several sample entries in class to ensure the students understood how to do this band. Finally, as with the other Portfolio versions, the violet band is reserved for synthesizing, reflecting on, and connecting the information and ideas in the other six bands. The news version can also be seen in Figure 4 (available online).

It should be noted that each new version was incorporated into the Standard Portfolio once the students had demonstrated they had understood the new version. For example, the students did one week of the Arts Portfolio collaboratively in mid-May, and then the next week the art descriptors for each band were folded into their respective bands for the standard version. Students had the choice in the red band to do Lifetalk or On the Edge, and so on. This process was continued in a roughly two-week cycle for every successive version. The virtues of these hybrid versions are increased student autonomy and motivation. Some students enjoy writing about the arts, while others wish to explore news topics more thoroughly, and for some the standard version has enough variety to keep them going.

Reflections and Advice

The acid test of whether this activity is worth continuing is the opinions of the students which have been overwhelmingly positive. Interestingly, the responses to an end-of-term survey showed diverse rationales. Some focused on how it improves the learning process: "I could remember what I learned, what I did, and what I thought by writing the Portfolio. It has had a big effect on my learning... I can remember my learning, good memories with my friends, and also my mistakes. And it helps me organize my thinking." Others appreciated

the inclusion of the arts: "My favorite part was the Books and Arts, because in my daily life I didn't have any opportunity to think about the arts. But, because of this section, every week I was able to touch the arts, including music, books and movies, and think about them deeply." And other students have come to see it as an aid to self-discovery: "Before doing this Portfolio, I had never thought about my life deeply or about what was happening in the weeks. Now, I can give feedback from the weeks to myself. So, I can improve my bad sides and continue my good sides." One student summed it up nicely: "It became a kind of super diary of my week."

This is a creative, critical thinking, and writing activity, so it's difficult to assess quantitatively. In general, from its launch in mid-April, the quality of the students' entries has consistently exceeded my expectations. The Lifetalk entries have been funny and candid, the My Learning comments—perceptive, the Books and Arts Playlist selections—eclectic, the Deep Questions—thoughtful, the World This Week analyses—informative, the Yearlong Thought opinions have demonstrated genuine intellectual progress, and the Lifelong Learning comments have been honest and optimistic.

In terms of meaningful communication and peer learning, the activity has unlimited potential. Each of the bands can be the springboard for partner or group sharing, and the variety of content and the different versions led to wide-ranging discussions in which the students genuinely feel they are learning from each other. For example, the students show interest not only in what their friends choose to write about in the Arts Portfolio, but also their rationale for categorizing the works as they do. After a session in which they shared their photography entries, one student wrote, "It's very interesting to think about why she put this scary woman's photo in the green Calm band. I felt that every person has different impressions of art. Moreover, she put some details in her comments to explain this photograph, so I learned something new."

For teachers who are interested in adapting the Portfolio for their own uses, here are a few ideas. First, having an array of color-coded bands is more important than having exactly seven bands. If five is enough for your purposes, red, orange, yellow, green, and blue would be sufficient. Next, if you are going the adjective route, the terms should be intuitive to you and explainable to the students. For nouns and conceptual categories, such as in the News Portfolio, the match of category and hue is not as essential. The construct is highly flexible. A professional acquaintance who works at a local university took the concept, switched around one

or two of the original band descriptors, replaced one, and now her Global Communication freshmen are doing “Rainbow Journaling” every week.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by saying that successful innovations like these I have made over the years have strengthened my conviction that individual classroom teachers should be given the opportunity to create, refine, and then share their original instructional materials. This is how our field can progress most efficiently and democratically. The Rainbow Portfolio has also proven once again that trusting in our students’ creative and critical thinking capabilities is rarely, if ever, a bad bet.

References

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Dean Williams is the director of the Global Course at Notre Dame Jogakuin Jr. and Sr. High School in Kyoto. His areas of interest in teaching and research include formative assessment and writing.

[JALT PRACTICE] BOOK REVIEWS



Robert Taferner & Stephen Case

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This month’s column features Christopher Colpitts’ review of *Active Skills for Reading 3* (3rd edition) and Robert Dilenschneider’s evaluation of *A Guide to Faculty-Led Study Abroad: How to Create a Transformative Experience*.

Active Skills for Reading 3 (3rd edition)

[Neil J. Anderson. Boston: National Geographic Learning, a part of Cengage Learning, 2014. (E-book, Audio CD, Assessment CD-ROM with ExamView® Pro, and Teacher’s Manual available) p. 240. ¥2,750. ISBN: 978-1-133-30806-5.]

Reviewed by Christopher Colpitts, Fukuoka University

The *Active Skills for Reading* series are composed of 5 levels, from *Active Intro* for low-level readers to the *Active 4* textbook for advanced readers. For a class of intermediate level readers in a university reading and writing course, *Active Skills for Reading 3* was chosen.

Active Skills for Reading 3 is marketed as a textbook that reaches up to the TOEIC 730-score range, with a Common European Framework Reference (CEFR) Level 3: B2/C1 designation, meaning it is suitable for upper intermediate/advanced English level learners. I found the textbook suitable for my reading and writing course with intermediate level learners.

The contents of *Active Skills for Reading 3* include 12 extensive units and 4 review units covering a wide range of relatable topics such as travel and technology, money, fashion, health, culture, customs, and comics. Other units tackle more challenging topics such as endangered species, space and flight, and mysteries. This wide range of themes provides the teacher with many options with regards to activity extension and scaffolding. Each unit is quite comprehensive, dedicating about 14 pages per unit with at least 2 essay-type readings, each consisting of approximately 300–350 words. While the syntax presented is not overly challenging, the potential new vocabulary exposure with anywhere from 7-15 possibly unknown vocabulary,

