Portfolios: From a Pile of Papers to a Meaningful Collection for Student Assessment

Tamara L. Hillmer, M.Ed.
Reading Specialist
Oxford Elementary School
Oxford, Mississippi 38655

Kerry P. Holmes, Ed.D.
Associate Professor
School of Education
The University of Mississippi

Language & Literacy
Volume 9, Issue 2, Fall 2007

ABSTRACT

This article describes the types of portfolios teachers can use in their classroom along with teacher-tested advice for ways to implement portfolio assessment. Portfolio assessment provides teachers and students with a documented chronology of the learning that is taking place. By periodically reviewing their portfolios, students become enlightened about their progress and empowered when they can see for themselves the progression of their learning. This knowledge enables students, with the guidance of their teacher, to set and work toward future learning goals. We have included relevant research that supports portfolio assessment along with comments from our students. These comments dramatically document the power portfolios have to enlighten and motivate students to learn.

Portfolios: From a Pile of Papers to a Meaningful Collection for Student Assessment

Assessment is a controversial topic among those within the education field. This Controversy has grown since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the pervasive use of standardized tests for making critical decisions regarding student placement. The goal of NCLB is to close the achievement gap that exists between white and minority students in the United States (NAEP, 2005). Teachers today are held accountable for student learning as measured by standardized tests (NCLB, 2004).

Many teachers say they feel overwhelmed by the current demands of standardized testing.

It is the goal of this article to describe ways classroom teachers, in grades 1-12, can use portfolio assessment in their classrooms to improve teaching and learning.. I collaborated with Dr. Holmes, a former first grade teacher, about portfolio assessment and how it has helped students in my 5th grade class become more active informed learners. Throughout this article we recount our experiences with portfolios and how they helped us prepare our students for the end-of-the-year standardized tests.

Just what is portfolio assessment? Portfolio assessment is a systematic collection of student work that can help teachers measure individual students' effort, improvement, process, and achievement (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991). Portfolio assessment empowers students through self-directed learning where they view collections of their work and make determinations about future learning goals. Portfolios of student work expose, to the student and the teacher, the step-by-step progress the student is making toward mastering targeted learning goals.

Important Differences Between Standardized and Portfolio Assessment

Portfolio assessment and standardized tests assess the students at different stages of their learning. Standardized tests assess the end product of learning. Though the results of these tests can be used to guide the students' future learning, they come at the end of a designated learning process, usually at the end of the school year, when it is too late to make adjustments to lesson plans. Standardized tests provide teachers with information about their students as a group, and how they compare with other groups of students in the school, district, state, country, and world. These scores are helpful to evaluate curriculum and pedagogy for groups, rather than individual students.

On the other hand, portfolio assessment informs teachers and individual students about the process of learning. The important aspect of portfolio assessment is that it provides ongoing assessment so teachers and their students can set goals and make ongoing fine-tuned adjustments to lessons and activities *before* they take standardized tests. When students and teachers examine the students' work during learning, strengths and deficits can be addressed immediately. The International Reading Association (2000) supports the use of portfolio assessment. They stress that it should be directly linked to classroom planning and instruction (International Reading Association, 2000).

Benefits of Portfolio Assessment

Through portfolio assessment, students are provided opportunities to show off their best work that, in turn, builds self-confidence. Nothing has been more rewarding to me than to see my students bursting with pride while sharing one of their work samples. Through teacher-student conferences, my students received individual attention that allowed them to experience

assessment as a part of the process of learning. Smith, Brewer, & Hefner (2003) found that students actually enjoyed the assessment process when it was tied to a collection of their work. In addition to Brewer & Hefner's findings, we have found that when students in grades one through five were asked to reflect on their own progress as learners, they began to assume more responsibility for their learning.

Glazer & Brown (1993) found the following benefits of portfolio assessment:

1. Risk taking: Students take responsibility for learning, making decisions about how and what to learn

2. Assuming responsibility: The most effective use of portfolios includes work samples that show significant growth and achievement that are collaboratively chosen by teachers and students.

3. Reflection and critical thinking: Students learn to think analytically about their work including their strengths and weaknesses.

4. Establishing learning goals: Students determine present and future learning goals based on their analysis of prior work.

5. Learning perspective: Through collaboration with teachers and peers, students learn how others see their work.

6. Integrating content areas: Because portfolios can be used across the curriculum, students can make connections among content areas. Skillful teachers will help students connect these content areas to prior knowledge and experiences.

Though it has been our experience that teachers primarily use portfolios to guide planning and to communicate with parents, portfolio assessment can also be used as a part of the

students' total subject or class grade. When portfolios are used as a summative tool for assigning grades, the criteria for grading must be tied to specific standards and communicated to both the parents and the students. In the United States, educators at the local level derive these standards from state curricular frameworks that are based on national content-area standards such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

Teachers should use multiple assessments when assigning grades at the end of a unit or learning experience. Portfolios are one important piece of the entire assessment puzzle.

Types of Portfolios

Portfolio work samples can take many forms including essays, letters, stories, poems, anecdotal records, photographs, videos, cassette tapes, and CD-ROMs. Over the years, the definition of portfolios has shifted from being just a container full of student's work to a meaningful deliberately selected collection of work that shows evidence of the student's work and growth in one or more areas.

Teachers can use portfolios to include students' work completed outside of school often encompassing hobbies, interests, and family experiences. By including the entirety of the students' experiences, learning can be seen by the students as meaningful, something tied directly to their lives. When I was a second grade teacher, I viewed my students' portfolios as living collections that evolved over time,

When determining the best type of portfolio to use in the classroom, teachers should consider answers to five questions (Vavrus, 1990):

- Question #1: What is the purpose of the portfolio?
- Question #2: What kind of structure will the portfolio have?

- Question #3: What will go in it?
- Question #4: How and when will the items be selected?
- Question #5: How will the portfolio be evaluated or scored?

Question #1: What is the purpose of the portfolio?

Portfolios meet the requirements for authentic assessment of students' skills and performance in a holistic and meaningful way (Mullin, 1998). Portfolios, if planned with the readers in mind, can benefit students, teacher, parents, and the students' next teachers. It has been my experience that many teachers do not exact the full benefits of portfolios because they lack a purposeful audience. They simply collect students' work in folders and give them to their students at the end of the school year expecting the students to show them to their parents. Students, as well as the teacher, must know the purpose of collecting and storing work in a portfolio.

To ensure that the parents actually see what their child has learned and how their child has progressed throughout the year, I had a Portfolio Party in my 4th grade classroom. My students spent weeks planning a celebration focused on the accumulation of their work. The first step was for the student to examine the contents of their portfolios and prepare written statements (reflections) on their best work. I provided sticky notes so students could mark their best work and write comments to go with it. On the day of the party, my students showed such pride as they showed-off and explained their work to their parents. Several parents delighted in the fact that their children showed such interest in the work they had done.

Student portfolios can be passed on to the teacher of the next grade to provide a detailed account of the students' strengths, weaknesses, and interests. Portfolio assessment in one grade,

enables teachers in the following grade to chart the progress a student has made. When passing a portfolio on to the student's next teacher, it is essential to organize, label and date the work so it is not just a random pile of papers. The collections of work must be meaningful to the next teacher.

Portfolios also provide tangible evidence of progress to the students. A classic story about the powerful effects of portfolio assessment involved a student in Holmes's first grade classroom. George, a precocious student, had been retained twice before he entered first grade. Experiencing nothing but failure in his brief stint as a student, George had little confidence he could ever learn. He was physically handicapped by the effects of a stroke he had suffered as an infant. His hand-eye motor coordination along with a propensity for drooling resulted in rumpled, water stained papers. In late March, George looked around and compared his messy paper to the papers of the students around him. He put his head down and sobbed, saying he could never learn to write. Holmes showed him his portfolio of work that she had collected since the beginning of school, work that contained obvious evidence that the work George was doing in March was noticeably better than the work he did a few months earlier. George, eyes bright with happy tears and a broad grin across his face, proclaimed in a loud voice for all to hear, "I am learning!"

Question #2: What kind of structure will the portfolio have?

Teachers must make sure that the portfolio design they choose matches the selected outcomes for both the teacher and the student (Duffy, Jones & Thomas, 1999). Portfolios can take many forms. They can be kept in large hanging file folders, boxes, or on a computer. Some teachers even hang them on the bulletin board for easy access to the students. No matter the

physical structure, all portfolios should be structured according to the students' and teachers' goals for student learning (Glazer & Brown, 1993). Portfolios can be divided into four levels according the complexity of their structure: (1) the everything portfolio, (2) the product portfolio, (3) the showcase portfolio, and (4) the objective portfolio (Duffy, Jones & Thomas, 1999).

The first level is the "everything portfolio" that contains work samples from all subject areas, from an entire class, or from an entire school year. The work samples that are in this level of portfolio are at various stages of completion. The "everything portfolio" is the easiest level of portfolio to compile (Duffy, Jones & Thomas, 1999).

The second level is the product portfolio, where the teacher gives the students a table of contents or checklist of required topics or products. Throughout the school year, the teacher holds individual conferences with his or her students and asks them why they chose a certain work sample to put into their portfolio. The teacher also asks the students what they could do to make the work sample better (Duffy, Jones & Thomas, 1999). This is an essential stage of learning where students reflect on their work and set learning goals. Note that the students are telling themselves what they must learn rather than being told by the teacher. Even collaborative goal setting with the teacher retains student empowerment.

The third level is the showcase portfolio, sometimes referred to as the exemplary portfolio. It is similar to the product portfolio, except the student provides a rationale for the inclusion of each work sample. The teacher and the student have a conference about the material that would go into the showcase portfolio. The teacher has many opportunities to probe and extend students' thinking. During this process, students become more confident in their self-evaluation skills because they have to back-up their thinking (Duffy, Jones & Thomas, 1999).

One of my fourth grade students commented after a conference at the end of the school year that she liked being able to look back over all of her work for the year. She stated that she found out that she had learned more than she ever thought she would. Her story parallels George's.

The fourth and final level is the objective portfolio. This is the most specific type of portfolios. This portfolio contains work samples that complete objectives given by the teacher. Students must select their best work samples and provide rationale for the each of them. The teacher provides specific feedback for each objective mastered (Duffy, Jones & Thomas, 1999). This type of portfolio is utilized in primarily in the upper grades.

Beginning teachers who want to implement portfolios in their classrooms may find it easiest to start off with the "everything portfolio" or the product portfolio. I used the "everything portfolio" until I felt comfortable. As teachers become comfortable with assembling and using portfolios, they can move to more complex structures or adapt the four described here into a unique system of their own. Based on our classroom practice, the best advice we can give to teachers who want to implement portfolios in their classrooms is to think BIG and start SMALL.

Question #3: What will go in a portfolio?

When teachers are deciding what to put into a portfolio they need to consider the intended audience. A teacher can select completed and in-progress work samples. The teacher may want to include anecdotal records or conference notes in the portfolio to support work samples (Smith, Brewer, & Hefner, 2003). Storyboards, photos with captions arranged chronologically, become excellent product portfolios, or a part of a larger portfolio of students' work. The storyboards reflect students' ongoing progress toward an explicit learning goal. We

both noted that our students were excited when photos were used to document their learning experiences.

During the year I taught first grade I included a video tape of the students reading in their portfolios. I taped my students reading aloud at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. I shared this video with the students and their parents. This was a huge hit with the parents when they saw the progress their children had made.

Question #4: How and when will the items be selected?

Prior to the implementation portfolios, I found I had to create a clear and well-organized system for deciding how and when work samples go in and come out during the school year. Possible times to select are at the end of a unit, semester, or even a year. After my students became comfortable using portfolio assessment, I found it helpful to generate a timeline to keep on schedule. Working collaboratively with individual students to reflecting on their work samples is a time issue. Teachers must decide how they are going to manage this challenge. I documented my reflections on post-it notes and simply stuck them on students' work samples during lessons. I use my students' portfolios as a part of the regular instructional process.

We caution teachers to not wait until the last week of a grading period to put something in their students' portfolios, but rather they need to use portfolios to document the continuous learning of their students. Teachers need to keep in mind that a portfolio is a meaningful collection that tells a story about the growth and achievements of a student over time (Mullin, 1998).

Question #5: How will the portfolio be evaluated or scored?

The key to scoring a portfolio is in setting standards and communicating these standards to students in advance. Students must have a checklist or rubric that details the expectations for the portfolio. A checklist enables students to become actively involved in the selection and reflection on their work. Teachers who choose to collect and store students' work, perhaps using the "everything approach" will still have to determine how to assess student progress. We have found a rubric or checklist based on subject area standards helpful. Standards can be evaluated on excellence of a work sample or the growth of a student. Students should not be evaluated on the basis of one work sample rather they should be assessed on a collection of work over time that shows the process of their learning. Evaluations can be of separate areas of growth including knowledge, skills, and dispositions. It is very helpful to consult with fellow teachers and school administrators to determine what is deemed inadequate, satisfactory, or exemplary work. These standards must be shared with the students so they too can evaluate their work samples.

Challenges of Portfolio Assessment

To avoid surprises that may derail the use of portfolios, teachers must be informed of the disadvantages of portfolio use. The major challenge we faced was time: *time* to develop student portfolios, *time* for students to work on their portfolios, *time* to give students feedback, and *time* to manage and assess the work in portfolios. It took about two years to implement portfolios to their fullest potential in my classroom.

I eased into portfolio assessment slowly. At first I used those little pockets of time available before and after school to read over portfolios with my students. Occasionally, I found

times during the day when I could confer with my students about some aspect of their learning. As I worked with my students, I saw the benefits of laying out the collection of their work and discussing it with them. I began to plan times, usually during group or independent work that I could be more systematic in my interactions with students.

After a few months, I began to schedule regular times I would meet with my students. I also began to take advantage of teachable moments; times when I thought students could be helped by viewing and discussing their past work. For example, when a student was stuck on a writing assignment, we read over the student's previous work. In this way, the student's own work supported the learning of new skills and concepts.

As a new teacher, Holmes used a simple system of portfolios in her classroom. She simply collected and dated pieces of students' work that she thought accurately represented their learning. At first, the intended use of the portfolios was for her to document student performance for referrals and parent conferences. However, once she saw the multiple ways portfolios could be used to help the students in her classroom, she determined things she would do differently the following year.

- Place the portfolios within easy reach of the children so they can be a vital part of the child's learning.
- Give the children more choices concerning the work they want to include in their portfolios. Holmes found that this step must be closely monitored or the children will want to put *everything* into their portfolios.
- Encourage children to look at the work on their portfolios and set goals. Younger children will need help to determine and set realistic and constructive goals.

Another challenge with portfolio assessment is shifting the assessment of student work from the teacher to the student. Students armed with guidance including checklists and rubrics must learn to evaluate their own work, something previously done by the teacher. Initially, students may be uncertain, and even reluctant, to think about their work critically. Metacognitive thinking does not come easily to most students (Smith, Brewer, & Hefner, 2003). Teachers must take time to teach students how to evaluate their work, set personal goals, and in general assume responsibility for their own learning. The following is a list of practical steps teachers can use to engage their students in metacognitive thinking. We have adapted the steps from the work of Fernsten & Fernsten (2005):

- Provide a safe environment where the students feel free to express themselves honestly without fear of judgment and ridicule.
- Plan questions you want your students to ponder as they reflect on portfolio entries.
- Plan time for shared discourse where you and your students can discuss the students' work, celebrate progress, and set goals for future work.
- Be a good role model. Model the steps you want your students to use when they are reflecting on the work in their portfolios.
- Provide opportunities for guided practice where the students, in your presence, reflect on their work.

Conclusions

Portfolios are only useful if they are valued. I was one of the greatest skeptics of portfolios when they were first introduced. I felt portfolios were just another fad foisted upon us that would be pushed into the sunset by the many demands of teaching. It was not until I

reluctantly began to use portfolios in my classroom that I began to see them for myself and for my students. As I saw an increase in student learning, I became a believer. For the past 6 years, my students and I have been able to gather valuable information and insights into their development that would have otherwise been unavailable through traditional testing.

If teachers ask themselves the five questions addressed in this article, they will be able to assess better what their students are learning and how well they are learning it. We recommend that teachers document *everything*! At a moment's notice, we have had to meet with parents or administrators to discuss a student's growth and performance. What is better than pulling out a student's portfolio and showing them exactly what they need to know? There are endless opportunities for effective communication by using portfolios. When portfolios are used to their fullest potential, students become critical thinkers and problem solvers, which in turn, will help them score well on the state's standardized tests.

References

Duffy, M. L., Jones, J., & Thomas, S. W. (1999). Using portfolios to foster independent thinking. *Intervention in School & Clinic*, *35*(1), 34-37.

Fernsten, L. & Fernsten, J. (2005). Portfolio assessment and reflection: Enhancing learning through reflective practice. *Reflective Practice 6* (2), p. 303-309.

Glazer, S. M. & Brown, C. S. (1993). *Portfolios and beyond*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.

Herman, J. L. & Winters, L. (1994). Portfolio research: A slim collection. *Educational Leadership*. *52*(2), 48-55.

International Reading Association. (2000). *Making a difference means making it different: Honoring children's rights to excellent reading instruction*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Mullin, J. A. (1998). Portfolios: Purposeful collections of student work. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 74, 79-87.

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2005). *The nation's reportcard*: *National Assessment of Educational Progress*. Washington, DC; U.S. Department of Education.

No Child Left Behind: A Toolkit for Teachers (2004). U.S. Department of Education.

Smith, J., Brewer, D. M., & Heffner, T. (2003). Using portfolio assessments with young children who are at risk for school failure. *Preventing School Failure*. *48*(1), 38-40.

Tierney, R.J., Carter, M.A. & Desai, L.E. (1991). *Portfolios assessment in the reading-writing classroom.* Norwood, MA: Christopher Gordon.

Vavrus, L. (1990). Put Portfolios to the Test. *Instructor*. *C*(1), 48-53.