

12

Producing Purposeful Portfolios

Mary Perry

Recognizing a Need for Portfolios

EVERY BELIEF I HAD EVER HELD ABOUT EDUCATION WAS CHALLENGED during the summer of 1991 as I learned about project-based instruction with a group of approximately twenty-five other educators in a month-long session sponsored by the school district where I worked. We studied and debated the educational implications of documents prepared by local businesses showing math, reading, and writing skills needed for employees to be successful in various occupations. Another document with a business focus, *What Work Requires of School*, from the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills confirmed the need for major changes in education. We also looked at the work of educators. Daily, we revisited Dewey with a chapter by chapter discussion of *Experience and Education*. And we looked to more contemporary work, studying "The Foxfire Approach: Perspectives and Core Practices," as well as the works of Dennie Palmer Wolf and Lauren Resnick.

I returned to a high school English classroom in the fall, determined to use projects and portfolios with my students. They enthusiastically began work on projects, and I was thrilled with the high quality of work they produced. I had no doubt that their portfolios would reflect their best efforts, and I planned to use portfolios as a culminating task during the last grading period of the year.

First Effort

The first time I asked high school students to put together portfolios of their work, I suggested they review their writing folders and consider work they had done in other classes as well as their interests outside of school. And I required four items: a resume, a letter explaining their portfolio entries, and at least two pieces of writing.

Yes, they could include video tapes. Yes, they could include science experiments. Yes, they could include drawings. While most of the questions centered on what to put in the portfolio, some students asked what we were doing this for and who was going to see it. “Well,” I said, “you know.” I knew I was in big trouble with the group the moment I said “you know.”

“You might want to use it to try to get into college, or you might want to use it to get a job.” And when I could tell that these reasons were not particularly appealing to my ninth graders in the last several weeks of the school year, I quickly added the lamest reason of all, suggesting, “You might want to show it to next year’s teacher,” which held no water since we all knew that I would be their tenth grade English teacher the following year.

It was a miracle that rebellion didn’t follow, and the fact that it didn’t was indicative of the classroom climate. The students remained polite, but totally disengaged in their work. As the deadline drew nearer, they still seemed relatively unconcerned.

While my students were working on their portfolios, I, too, worked on assembling a portfolio showing my professional work. Producing a portfolio of my work was one of the professional goals I had established for myself that year, and I planned to present my portfolio to my supervisor as part of the annual evaluation of my performance. I shared my progress with my students and asked their permission to include a class project in my portfolio. They asked why I wanted to include their work, but readily gave me permission when I explained that their hard work reflected the work and commitment I’d given to the class.

But even though I was modeling both the task and the process, in a class that had gone better than any I had ever taught before, it wasn’t enough. Most of the students waited until the last possible moment, threw work from their writing folders into their portfolios without even considering further revisions, added their resumes, and then drafted cover letters that were included in first draft form. These they presented to me.

Knowing the quality of work these students had produced during the year, I was disappointed with the results. These students had spent most of

the year studying the SCANS (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) competencies from the U.S. Department of Labor, comparing the competencies with our district's ninth grade language arts curriculum and writing a proposal suggesting that the curriculum be changed to reflect the SCANS competencies. Most of the students included this document as one of their portfolio entries, but they put little effort into their other selections. The portfolios simply did not live up to my expectations, but how could they since I had never even clearly identified my expectations? Knowing the problem was greater than end of the year burnout, I reminded myself that this had been a learning experience for all of us, and I was determined to help the students do a better job the following year. There was no failure attached to the portfolios, and I rested easier knowing high stakes for the students had not been attached to our initial portfolio experience.

Time to Reflect

Just a few days after the school year ended, a group of teachers who had worked and planned together the previous summer reconvened to discuss our year using project-based instruction. Some spoke of their problems with portfolios; others planned to use portfolios the following year; I confessed nothing. But when we devoted a day to discussing portfolios, I realized the major errors in my efforts with my students.

Had I not gone through the process of putting together a professional portfolio, my students' problems might still have eluded me. But, as we discussed portfolio contents and purposes and audiences, I realized I was able to successfully put together my portfolio because I had a clear sense of both the purpose and the audience for my work while my students knew neither. Knowing the purpose and the audience allowed me to gather appropriate contents. So, I reasoned, if my students had both a clear sense of purpose and audience, they too would be able to assemble better portfolios. And, I knew the purpose needed to be relevant to the students. These students had been willing to work on the curriculum document through numerous revisions because they knew the work was important. It wasn't just school work; it had a real purpose and audience outside the school building. But, I couldn't imagine a singular portfolio purpose that would meet the needs of all of my students.

Year Two

“You’re gonna have to put together a portfolio,” one young man who had been in my class the previous year told a newcomer on the second day of school. He looked at me for confirmation, “Right, Ms. Perry?”

“That’s right,” I said. “We are all going to put together portfolios, and we’re going to do a better job this year.” Everyone anticipated portfolio work. Without my prompting, students who had a portfolio shared their experiences with others. Each time portfolios were mentioned, I pointed out my expectations for improvement the second time around.

Near the end of the first semester, I asked students to begin three lists on the wall in the room. The lists (see Appendix A) were labeled Possible Portfolio Purposes, Possible Portfolio Audiences, and Possible Portfolio Contents. Students added to the lists as new ideas struck them, but I said very little about the lists.

By the time we placed the lists on the wall, I was making plans to move out of the area at the end of the school year. Again I shared my portfolio with students showing them how I changed the contents as I interviewed for different positions. I put certain items in for an interview with a testing company. I rearranged the contents before meeting with school district personnel. And, I told my students, potential employers were visibly impressed with my efforts. My portfolio gave me an edge over others applying for the same positions I was interested in, and this was an edge over the competition that I wanted them to have.

We picked a date at the beginning of the last grading period, and each student came to class and declared his or her portfolio purpose. Clearly the purpose of the portfolio determined the audience. Most decided to use their portfolios in order to get jobs; the audience for these students’ portfolios would be potential employers. Another large number chose to design portfolios in order to gain entrance to or a scholarship for college; the audience for these students’ portfolios would be admissions officers or scholarship committee members. One student came to class and said, “You know I’m going to college. Before I go, I’ll put together a portfolio for that. But I need a job this summer, so I’m going to work on a portfolio that will help with that now.” The students were beginning to recognize portfolios could be tools to help them reach their goals.

Students then began to work with other students who shared the same purpose and audience. Only after the students determined the specific

purpose and audience for their portfolio effort could they successfully consider contents.

The plan was for each group to figure out whom they could interview in order to get an idea about contents for their portfolios. Each group was charged to design interview questions, and each student was to conduct an interview. Group members were then to review the data collected from the interviews and to design a rubric to be used in order to score the portfolios. Each group would have a rubric, and each group member could then assemble a portfolio to meet the specifications set forth in the scoring guide.

The students who were trying to get jobs—and there were two groups of these students—conducted interviews (see Appendices B and C) with people in area businesses who often hired high school students. These groups had few problems, but the students who were putting together portfolios to get into college had a very different experience. They contacted admissions officers (see Appendix D) at different colleges and universities and had trouble getting any helpful information whatsoever. Admissions officers told them they just needed to submit a completed application for admission, a copy of test scores, a high school transcript, and at least two letters of recommendation. The students realized they were being told what every student who wants to enroll was told, and they were frustrated.

We held a group conference, and I pointed out that if the admissions officers could quickly and easily describe appropriate portfolio contents, it would be because many students were submitting portfolios. Thus, they would have no edge over their competition. I reassured them that it was truly a plus that help was not so readily available. We renegotiated deadlines for their interviews, and they tried again with much the same results. However, one young man came in one morning saying he'd had no luck getting any helpful information from the school he called. "So," he said, "I walked two doors down and asked a prof who teaches science what he'd like to see in a student's portfolio. He said he'd like to see some of a kid's good work from high school." This group designed their rubric to include the items typically requested by the admissions office as well as school work other students might not include. They then bombarded the counselors' office with requests for transcripts and test scores. The students decided to use the scores from the state test taken earlier in the school year as a place holder until they took the SAT as eleventh or twelfth graders.

I asked the students to consider not only contents, but also the quality of contents as they designed their rubrics, so I was concerned when they equated quality of contents with whether or not the entries were typed or

written (see Appendices E and F), but rather than lecturing or holding a conference, I waited and watched. Again I was concerned as some groups designed rubrics that made it very easy for someone to just skate by with a passing score, but I watched and waited. Students took ownership of their portfolios, and no one tried to take an easy way out.

One rubric (see Appendix G) contained a point value breakdown for contents and the quality of contents. I liked the specificity of this rubric; however, I talked to the group members and expressed my reluctance to use this rubric when I realized that a student could get twelve points for well-organized in the high category but fifteen points for semi-organized in the average area. They explained to me that there should be no confusion since each group member would declare whether her portfolio (all members of this particular group were girls) should be scored on the high scale or on the average scale.

Once the students had the rubrics, they began to select the contents for their portfolios. Unlike the year before, revision took place, and the students in all the groups had many impressive entries to include in their portfolios. Most students included self-assessments of their work. Some of the students included a chapter they had written for an educational book. In this chapter the students discussed their work putting together the curriculum document the previous year, and by the time the students were assembling their portfolios, the chapter had been accepted for inclusion in the book. Several students had done presentations at professional educational meetings. These students had conference proposals and conference programs to display in their portfolios. One student wrote about the portfolio experience itself as a portfolio entry:

Problems With Presenting The Portfolio

1. . . . the college I called . . . did not know about portfolios. Ex. They said "That they were confused about what portfolios were used for."
2. (The college) didn't put me in touch with the right people. Ex. They kept transferring me to different departments, neither of them knew what I was talking about.
3. One mistake I made was that I probably didn't give enough information or fully explain what a portfolio is.
4. Another mistake I might have made was not asking for the right department.

In conclusion, I think that there was a lack of communication on my part and theirs. The next time I contact a college or any important building or business, I will be fully prepared.

I was very pleased with this entry because it showed a change in attitude over the course of the two years we had spent together. Initially reluctant to accept responsibility for anything that did not go well, students came to realize the value in taking risks and learning from mistakes.

At some point during this work, all of us agreed that the score on each portfolio would be used as the student's grade for the last six weeks' grading period. We planned for each portfolio to be scored three times: once by the owner, once by a peer selected by the portfolio owner, and once by me. However, the group that put together portfolios for college was understandably behind schedule, and most of those portfolios were scored only twice, by the owner and by me. But it didn't matter; scoring conflicts were nonexistent. I scored the portfolios the same way the students scored them. Portfolios with three scores had three matching scores.

Another Group's Efforts

Since my work with the high school students, I have helped students in an alternative middle school setting put together end-of-year portfolios. The purpose of these portfolios was to demonstrate readiness for the next grade, a most meaningful purpose since many of these students left the regular academic setting with numerical averages that would have meant certain failure without an alternative form of assessment.

These students selected the contents of their portfolios to show they were competent in the areas of language arts, math, science, and social studies. In addition, they included self-assessments where they discussed their progress toward meeting the individual goals they had set when they entered the alternative program. One student included an office referral she had received earlier in the year for disruptive behavior and placed beside it a discussion of her current behavior. This juxtaposition was a most effective strategy for her purpose and audience. And all of the students gained positive recognition for their efforts when the portfolios were displayed at a fine arts fair and reviewed by the principal.

Implications and Conclusion

Most importantly, the purpose and audience of any portfolio must be explicit. Moreover, the purpose must be meaningful to the students. All students do not have to assemble portfolios for the same purposes and audiences, but all must have explicit rubrics for scoring. Teachers should

model the portfolio process, sharing their portfolio efforts with their students. Models of student portfolios are helpful as well, but these should, however, only provide a place to start, so each portfolio can be an expression of its owner.

Portfolios are flexible, adaptable instruments; to be useful, they must change constantly. A portfolio that is several years old is like an old photograph. It might be pretty, but it doesn't give a clear picture of the owner's current strengths. Certainly, it is appropriate to include entries from years past in a portfolio, but the portfolio should be revisited and revised regularly. Not only should revisions take place for new purposes or audiences, but also they should take place for self-reflection.

Another significant factor is the classroom climate. Much is written about risk-free environments in schools, and certainly this type of environment is necessary for the creation of successful portfolios. If I had been overly critical of my students' first portfolios or had placed high stakes on their initial efforts, the students would not have generated enthusiasm for another try. And students will only be able to be active participants in the portfolio process if their involvement in all phases of their work at school, from planning projects to negotiating deadlines to assessing their efforts and the results of their efforts, is routine.

My guiding principle then is to ask students to do work, and that includes assembling their portfolios, only if it will truly benefit them and/or the community. And the students are active participants in deciding what they should do. Once this principle began to guide my efforts with students, the quality of their work increased dramatically. The evidence to support including students in all phases of classroom decision-making is overwhelming when I consider the differences between portfolios from the same students, who one year assembled them to meet the course requirements and the next year assembled them based on their own needs.

When a student works hard to produce a portfolio that meets the student's needs, there is a sense of accomplishment, pride, and ownership. "Yes, Ms. Perry, you may borrow my portfolio to show at the conference," one student graciously said. "But you'll have to carry it on the plane. I trust you, but you can't let it out of your sight."

Appendix A

Student Lists of Portfolio Possibilities

Possible Portfolio Purposes

- to be evaluated for a grade
- to show off abilities
- to get a job
- to get into college or get a scholarship

Possible Portfolio Audiences

- self
- friends
- parents
- teachers
- possible employers
- college admissions officers
- scholarship committee members

Possible Portfolio Contents

- stories
- poems
- plays
- self-assessments
- reports
- experiment results
- video tapes
- audio tapes
- photographs
- controversial issue papers

Appendix B

Purpose of Portfolio: To Help Obtain Employment

contacting _____

person interviewed _____

title _____

phone number _____

address _____

1. What would you like to see in the portfolio of a student who is a potential employee?
2. What do you look for in a potential employee?
3. Does the appearance of a potential employee matter to you?

Appendix C

Purpose of the Portfolio: To Help Obtain Employment

contacting _____
person interviewed _____
title _____
phone number _____
address _____

1. What would you like to see in the portfolio of a student who is a potential employee?
2. What kind of writings would you like to see in a portfolio?
3. What would impress you most about a potential employee?
4. What do you expect when hiring somebody?
5. What typing qualifications are required to be hired as a secretary?

Appendix D

*Purpose Of Portfolio: To Help Obtain Entrance
And/Or Scholarship To College*

contacting _____
person interviewed _____
title _____
phone number _____
address _____

1. What would you like to see in an incoming student's portfolio?
2. Is a portfolio required upon entrance?
3. Would the presence of a portfolio affect the entrance of a person in college?
4. Do most of your students have a portfolio when entering your college?
5. What happens when a student does not show a portfolio?

Appendix E Portfolio Scoring Guide

Portfolio Purpose: to obtain entrance and/or a scholarship to college

HIGH 91--100		AVERAGE 80--90		LOW 0--79	
contents	quality of contents	contents	quality of contents	contents	quality of contents
resume	typed	resume	typed	resume	typed
table of contents	typed	table of contents	typed		
transcripts	printed	transcripts	printed	transcripts	printed
test scores	printed	test scores	printed	test scores	printed
recommendations	written	recommendations	written		
previous school work (5 samples)	written	previous school work (2 samples)	written		

Appendix F Portfolio Scoring Guide

Portfolio Purpose: to help obtain employment

HIGH 91--100		AVERAGE 80--90		LOW 0--79	
contents	quality of contents	contents	quality of contents	contents	quality of contents
resume		resume			
cover sheet	all typed	cover sheet	all hand-written	cover sheet	all hand-written
table of contents	and edited	table of contents	or typed	table of contents	or typed
past employment records					
references		references			
transcripts					
self-assessment		self-assessment		self-assessment	
writing sample		writing sample			

Appendix G Portfolio Scoring Guide

Portfolio Purpose: to help obtain employment

HIGH: 100		AVERAGE: 85	
contents:	70 points	contents:	50 points
resume (1 or 2 pages)	10 points	resume (1 or 2 pages)	10 points
cover letter	10 points	cover letter	10 points
one or two letters of reference	10 points	anything else (at least 2 entries) that shows responsibility, reliability and dedication (for example: writings, books, videos, presentations, class projects)	15 points each, 30 points total
anything else (at least 4 entries) that shows responsibility, reliability and dedication (for example: writings, books, videos presentations, class projects)	10 points each, 40 points total		
quality of contents	30 points	quality of contents	35 points
contents typed and edited	13 points	contents typed or handwritten	15 points
well-organized	12 points	few mistakes allowed	
on time	5 points	semi-organized	15 points
		if on time	5 points
		accepted 2 or 3 days late	
Grades may be flexible		LOW: a poor average	