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Building Bridges, Closing Gaps *Using Portfolios to Reconstruct the Academic Community*

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Context is everything: What a surgeon does, under any other circumstances, is assault with a deadly weapon.
Jesse Jackson

ONE OF THE FIRST LESSONS WE LEARN WHEN DEALING WITH ANY KIND of assessment is that context is indeed everything. If we fail to understand the context for the assessment, then we cannot know the questions the assessment is to answer; we cannot collect appropriate samples, define appropriate criteria, set appropriate objectives, nor know whether we have achieved them. In short, without a full understanding of context, we leave ourselves open to just the kind of disaster Jesse Jackson mentions: instead of accomplishing a skilled act that does good, we end up hacking the “patient” apart, leaving it worse off than before we began.¹ Of course, the more the context resists understanding, the greater the danger of violating the first principle every surgeon swears to uphold: first, do no harm.

Our context—our educational setting—alas, does resist understanding, primarily because it already resembles the outcome of a bad surgical procedure. Education has been sliced and diced, cut up into pieces by level and discipline to the point that learners and teachers alike pay more attention to the differences between those classes and levels than to the similarities. For a variety of sound educational and logistical reasons, we

have divided the educational process into segments. In doing so, however, we have also created gaps—spaces between the segments—gaps that often obscure the many necessary connections (common goals, basic intellectual tools, etc.) that unify the whole enterprise of becoming educated. Wielded effectively in an appropriate context, assessment can be the scalpel that provides a means for alleviating the discomfort and “disease” these gaps occasion.

Fragments and Gaps

The principal obstacle educational assessment faces at all levels, but especially in higher education, is the way the context has become fragmented. We have something called preschool, which is separate from elementary school, which in turn is separate from middle school, which is separate from high school. And whereas in the past the high school got its name because it was located on the top floor of a building that contained all the grades from kindergarten to twelfth, today each stage occupies a different building, often in different parts of town. At each stage, in many districts, there is a commencement, a graduation ceremony that encourages students to think that when they arrive at their new building, they are making a new beginning. Faculty, too, are caught up in specializations that emphasize the differences between what teachers do at their different levels and in their different locations, rather than the continuity in their common endeavor. An educator with a degree in Elementary Education does not teach in the high school, nor does an educator with certification in Physics teach second graders. In the elementary years, teachers at a single grade level are encouraged to think of themselves as separate from each other, as members of a small group whose purposes are different from those of other small groups, rather than members of a large group engaged in a common enterprise—educating young people. In addition, the higher the grade, the greater the teacher’s specialization, so that by the high school level, teachers are almost always separated into departments by subject area. At every stage, the structure emphasizes difference, not commonality.

The largest gap of all occurs as young people leave high school and enter college, where most often they not only change buildings but also towns. Of course, physical location is not all that separates their high school years from their college ones. Colleges make use of an admissions process that widens the gulf, that encourages teachers and students alike to perceive these two stages as differing more widely than any of the prior stages did from each

other. Basically, the admissions process employs assessment to accomplish this end. Prospective students take tests and submit scores and transcripts to validate their applications, to prove themselves worthy of entry. And, upon entry—most often at an orientation session that occurs several weeks before actual enrollment—students are further tested in order to determine at what levels they can begin different parts of their studies. The simple fact that colleges rely on local assessments in making these decisions, rather than on students' earlier performances, reinforces the notion that somehow students arrive on campus *tabula rasa*; that their earlier experiences and performances are meaningless in this new setting, where they must prove themselves anew.

Once in college, students will eventually choose a major concentration, and that choice will determine in which building or even on which campus they will spend the bulk of their time, in which library they will study, and sometimes in which dormitory they will live. Just as their professors isolate themselves, and are isolated by various institutional barriers from their colleagues in other departments, even other colleges, so students tend to take on identities and form peer groups along disciplinary lines. Simply, they associate with others with whom they have the most in common, and one of the most powerful common interests in a higher education setting is the field of one's concentration.

Admittedly, these separations have occurred for sound reasons. Early childhood education, as an endeavor, differs substantially from the kind of education adolescents need, which in turn wildly differs from what college-age students are ready to do. Breaking education down by subject matter makes perfect sense too, for as Gerald Graff points out, since at least the time of the Industrial Revolution, knowledge has advanced to the point that only the most foolish or the most arrogant would profess expertise over a wide range of subjects. Thus, from the middle school years onward, teachers increasingly specialize because they teach at a more advanced level. From these years, this fact of educational life only grows more apparent, and teachers specialize more and more narrowly, yet no one can reasonably argue at this point in the history of education that we ought to erase these boundaries, that we ought or even that we could go back to the days when generalist teachers taught all things to all learners.

Building Bridges

What we must do, however, is recognize and overcome the obstacles we have placed in the way of education even as we have separated it into logical

segments. In effect, our boundaries are more than mere borders; they are gaps, often great yawning chasms, that separate stages and subjects more widely than they need to do—and much more widely than they ought to do. In a keynote address at Miami University's Composition in the Twenty-first Century Conference, James Berlin characterized this fragmentation as a kind of Fordism, arguing that education, in the process of attempting to run itself like a business, adopts attributes of business that are incongruous with education. In making his argument, Berlin focused on the Fordist economics of education, but he might just as well have focused on the metaphor of the assembly line (Berlin 1994), one of three metaphors Michael Williamson employs in exploring the problems educators create by pursuing efficiency in the educational enterprise, instead of attending, first, to the actual needs of all the stakeholders in our schooling system (Williamson 1994, 170-171). In a very real sense, we move students from station to station along the line, and each station is staffed by a specialist, by someone who supposedly knows just what part to add and just how to add it. This assembly-line mentality is perhaps the most dominant underlying assumption shaping modern education, and as efficient, pragmatic, and even unavoidable as it may be, it nevertheless places significant obstacles in the way of education. Perhaps most significant for present purposes are the problems posed by the fact that each station on this intellectual assembly line seems to exist independent of the others. (Here Graff's arguments about the post-Industrial Revolution era's separation of knowledge from expression—from language—vividly illustrate the problems.) We teach writing in writing classes, chemistry in chemistry classes, sociology in sociology classes, etc. We locate these classes in different departments and different buildings, and for the most part, college curricula, echoing this physical separation, leave students to discover the connections among all these institutionally disparate components of a typical degree program, just as they have to discover how to find their way from one class to the next.

However, what learners need to do typically spans these boundaries, or needs to. They write in their science and social science classes; they use statistics in their science and social science classes (and, increasingly, in humanities classes as well); they *reason* across the curriculum, applying interpretive skills learned in, say, literature classes to bodies of information acquired in a psychology or a history class. Most important of all, they bring—potentially—the sum of all their past education and experience to each new semester, each new class.

This contradiction—fragmentation in the curriculum and unity in the individual learner—creates a tension that resonates with what Mary Louise Pratt has called a “contact zone.” Pratt uses the term to describe the difference between how the educator needs to perceive students and their responses to assignments and the existing range of possible and actual student responses. She characterizes the contact zone as a place “where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 1991, 34). Carl Lovett and Art Young, writing about an experience in which they tried to introduce portfolio-based assessment to the Finance faculty in Clemson University’s School of Business, demonstrate that the concept of contact zones extends usefully into the arena of writing across the curriculum. Lovett and Young played the role of teacher-proselytizer, bringing the good news of portfolio assessment to their “students,” all professors of Finance. In this case, the deliverers of a service were essentially ambushed by the recipients, as a well-designed portfolio-based system for evaluating Finance students’ written products from several courses could not survive the faculty’s unanticipated—and unfounded—objections on the grounds of academic freedom. In each case—Pratt’s and Lovett and Young’s—those who were in charge of delivering a service, to adopt the Fordist analogy Berlin critiques, had institutionally valid needs that conflicted directly with the needs experienced by the consumers of that service. Looking at the structure of education, and in particular higher education, we can easily see that Pratt’s definition of the contact zone extends to the level of the curriculum itself, where the culture of the teacher, who needs the comfort and isolation produced by fragmenting the body of knowledge students set about to acquire, meets, clashes, and grapples with the culture of the learner, whose needs for continuity and coherence are frustrated by the way the academy has deconstructed itself into disparate programs, concentrations, departments, and colleges.

Students face two almost unbridgeable gaps in their attempts to achieve a college degree. The first, described above, occurs as they enter college. The second, somewhat more subtle gap is the one that separates their curriculum into individual, discrete classes, thereby obscuring not only the many ways in which the knowledge learned in one class relates to that from another, but also the ways in which intellectual tools—writing, critical thinking, textual analysis, quantitative reasoning, logic, and so forth—develop throughout the entire experience, the entire curriculum. Somehow we need to bridge those gaps, to find ways of encouraging students to

discover the connections, to use the tools more broadly. We need to use assessment as one tool for accomplishing these means. Let me explain how, using the two most apparent gaps to illustrate both existing and potential bridges.

Bridge One: Portfolios at Entry to College

First, and perhaps most straightforward, we can use portfolio-based writing assessment to bridge the gap between high school and college writing. The University of Michigan's experience developing a portfolio-based assessment for five thousand entering students each year has demonstrated that, at any level, a carefully designed and executed portfolio assessment reaps benefits that extend far beyond the immediate purpose of placing students into courses that most closely meet their needs as writers.² In fact, we discovered early on that placement was the simplest and least interesting outcome of portfolio-based assessment. Even at this early stage—two years of piloting and three years in which all entering students have been required to submit a portfolio—the events surrounding our placement process extend backward into the high schools that send us students and forward into first year writing courses and even to the upper division writing-intensive courses that are the heart of our university's Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program.

Requiring incoming students to submit a writing portfolio has already begun to affect curriculum at the secondary level, as the example of the University of Michigan's placement procedure demonstrates. Since 1978, the University of Michigan has based placement into the first year writing curriculum on a direct test of writing (Morris 1983, 266). Until 1993 that sample was a fifty-minute impromptu argument, written on the first day of orientation. At the time it was instituted, that direct test represented an innovative step forward (Fader 1986, 79-80). Among other benefits, the test delivered the message that students' placements into appropriate writing courses would depend on *writing*, not on indirect measures such as multiple-choice tests. High schools, in response, began requiring students to write more. However, as the years passed, writing instruction in the high schools became more and more focused on helping students succeed on our test and on other similar tests (e.g., the timed samples on the AP English test). Teachers repeatedly told us, in interviews we conducted to evaluate the assessment, that they had their students practice for our test by writing timed essays modeled on the prompts we used in our assessment.

Thus, students were not receiving more or better preparation for college writing; instead, they were receiving more and better preparation for our test. Roberta Camp has discussed the obvious drawbacks of structuring curriculum around a writing task that does not reflect a functional context for writing (Camp 1993a, 54-55 and 66-67). In our case, we came to realize that, while our assessment had had one positive effect—more writing practice in high schools—it also had the effect of producing only the most limited (and limiting) kind of practice.

In part, we instituted a writing portfolio to induce the schools to teach both the kinds of writing that would prepare students for college writing and to induce schools to teach writing in ways that would be more likely to result in stronger, more effective writing on the part of students. Thus, we require three samples from work students have already done:

- one piece that responds critically or analytically to something the student has read;
- one piece from a class other than English;
- one piece that the student identifies as her/his best, favorite, or most representative.

In addition, we ask students for a two- to five-page reflective essay that informs our readers about the background for the pieces the student has selected and that explains any substitutions the student has made for any of the required pieces. We ask what the assignment was, why the student selected these particular pieces, what the student likes about each piece, the process used in writing each piece, and what the student feels he or she has learned from writing each piece. Beyond those particulars, we encourage students to tell us about their development as writers, to give us more information about their experiences as writers than the three pieces alone can do, and to give us any other information which they feel will help us understand the portfolio. We encourage students to reflect thoroughly and thoughtfully about their writing and about themselves as writers.

This model, on its simplest level, requires that students have samples of writing; therefore, schools that want their students to perform well on our assessment must provide opportunities to write. They must incorporate writing into their curricula in areas other than English. They will have to teach students enough about writing for students to produce impressive samples and to respond to the challenges presented by the reflective piece. While the specific long-term effects of the new requirement are not yet clear,

preliminary results indicate that the portfolio is having the desired effects. Interviews with teachers from across the state indicate that they are aware of our requirement. In response to it they are making an effort to increase the amount of writing students do and to give students more chances to revise their writing. Administrators in the schools we visit reveal that they have set up various means of assisting students in assembling portfolios. State officials have contacted us, welcoming the portfolio as an agent for positive change in Michigan's schools. We find, even at this early stage, that the requirement is having a marked effect on writing in the secondary schools and that the portfolio encourages what we would call institutional good practice,³ both in the kinds of writing assignments and the kinds of pedagogical approaches the portfolio requirement is inspiring.

As we bridge the gap between high school and college, we also find that teachers in our first year composition classes suddenly have access to a much wider range of information about their students' strengths and needs, learning histories, and wide-ranging competencies. We know, in great detail, the range of tasks our newest students have been asked to perform, and we know how successful those performances have been. Some of the information we gathered during our reading process confirmed what we felt we already knew: most assignments in the portfolios asked for summary, rather than analysis, for report rather than argumentation.⁴ In other cases, the information surprised and delighted us: 82 percent of students were able to produce a piece of writing from a class other than English. We had asked for such a piece, at the suggestion of many secondary English teachers, in order to promote writing across the curriculum in secondary schools, so the fact that more than four-fifths of our first year class could include such a piece in their portfolios meant that we had, at least in this regard, underestimated the kind of preparation our students receive at the secondary level.

Teachers in first year composition classes can take into account what they learn from these portfolios in making decisions about course curricula, instructional methods and materials, assignments, etc. Individual teachers who read their students' entry portfolios gain a great deal of useful information about where to begin by knowing, for the first time, where their students have been. And students, able for the first time to receive consideration for work they produced in high school, not only feel that the university is making a fair judgment about their writing ability, but they also report that the transition from high school writing to college-level writing is far less forbidding and difficult than they had feared it would

be. Students in my own Writing Practicum—a course for the weakest of entering student writers—testified that the ability to sit down with me and discuss their portfolios was a uniformly positive experience. They were able to show me what they can do, and they were able to listen to and discuss my feedback about their portfolios. As a result, their natural resentment toward being placed into this lower level course eased, and they were able to understand specifically how their writing abilities either did not match or fell short of the competencies that university level writing would demand of them. The students were also able to begin our relationship by supplying me with a high level of knowledge about them and their history as writers, information that helped me approach each of them as an individual learner, rather than as a member of a group. As a result, my plans for the semester developed along even more individualized lines than they usually do.

The information we gather in the entry-level portfolio assessment also feeds into programmatic change. For example, this year, for the first time, the faculty who are responsible for the nine different courses—located in eight different departments or programs—that can satisfy the first year writing requirement are sitting down together to share knowledge about what happens in those courses. In several focus groups, in committee meetings, and in other venues, these faculty are using information from the assessment as the basis for some sort of consensus that will allow the English Composition Board, in turn, to place students into appropriate courses and know that those placements have what we have come to call “systemic validity.” We will be more certain that the assumptions we use to place a student are accurate with regard to the curriculum actually administered in courses at that level. Similarly, as our research progresses, groups of faculty from the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences will gather to read selected portfolios in an activity that serves at least two important functions. First, the portfolios allow us to communicate to the faculty at large a detailed portrait of students’ writing at the time of their arrival on campus. Second, as these faculty members from across the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts discuss these portfolios, they will tell us, the assessors, what they value in students’ writing. This two-way sharing of information will inform the ways existing courses are taught, and it will also inform the effort, just getting under way, to revise the college’s writing program. Thus, we can see that bridging the gap between one level and another changes the very process of education at each level, raising interesting questions about what might happen if we push portfolio-based assessment into the arena of writing across the curriculum.

Many institutions today are attempting to find ways of accommodating the often contradictory needs and competing cultures of both teachers and learners. Portfolio assessment can help build bridges of coherence and continuity, for teachers and for learners, because portfolio-based assessments allow us to be more aware of the contexts within which the assessment and the learning are taking place. In fact, this kind of assessment embodies its context. A portfolio is at once a means and an end, a product that incorporates a process, and it is so for each party in the learning experience. The teacher designs the portfolio so that when she reads it, she can tell whether a student has learned what he needs to know, and how well. A well-designed portfolio is a collection of performances that embody the course's goals and objectives, so the process of constructing and perfecting the portfolio grants a large measure of control over outcomes to the learner, at the same time as it allows the learner to participate directly in achieving the objectives of the course. With Liz Hamp-Lyons, I have argued elsewhere that this sharing of objectives and the responsibility for achieving them, together with the information the teacher gains from reading and judging those performances, results in a kind of continual improvement in curriculum, since at each iteration of the course the teacher has more information about the effectiveness of assignments, sequencing, teaching materials and methods, and so forth (Hamp-Lyons and Condon 1993, 177). Thus, on the level of the individual course, portfolio assessment affects each participant and each aspect of the course primarily because the portfolio participates so completely in the multiple contexts for teaching and learning which the course presents.

This ability to serve multiple purposes is a primary advantage in portfolio assessment. The contents of Pat Belanoff and Marcia Dickson's volume, *Portfolios: Process and Product*, demonstrate that from the beginning portfolios have served in contexts as disparate as basic writing courses, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) courses, efforts to evaluate undergraduate curricula, barrier assessment at exit from college, proficiency testing at college admission and between sequenced first year writing courses, and a host of other contexts. Research in assessment theory and practice is beginning to recognize the value of serving multiple contexts and of an assessment instrument that, as Pamela Moss has pointed out, can provide not only reliable judgments in cases involving "consequential decisions about individuals or programs" (Moss 1994a, 11), but also the kind of systemic validity that promotes "potent and value-laden models of the purposes and processes of school, of the appropriate roles for teachers, students, and other stakehold-

ers in the discourse of teaching and learning, and of the means through which educational reform is best fostered” (Moss 1994b, 124; see also Bryk and Hermanson 1993, 453-467). In all these cases, portfolio assessment serves as a highly flexible tool since a portfolio yields information about student performance *and* information about the student’s opportunities to perform. Knowledge about context is crucial to the ability to make reliable decisions in cases where the stakes are high, and the extensive knowledge about individual students’ learning contexts presents the opportunity to examine curriculum and practice, even systemwide educational efficiency and efficacy.

Bridge Two: Portfolios and Writing Across the Curriculum

As colleges and universities recognize and attempt to bridge the gaps in academic curricula, they set up multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary programs in order to address the learners’ inherent need to put things together, to find the coherence in their courses of study. Perhaps the most extensive effort to create this needed continuity and coherence is writing across the curriculum. If we look at the underlying assumptions of WAC, we can see its potential for bridging some of the gaps, for allowing both learners and teachers to see some of the common elements in what they do from class to class, semester to semester. As Barbara Walvoord and Lucille McCarthy state them, these assumptions clearly span single courses and even single courses of study. WAC assumes that we cannot separate writing from thinking, reading, investigating, or oral communication. These faculties—what we might call the infrastructure of higher education, perhaps of education in general—are so closely allied that treating them as if we could teach them separately is simply wrong. WAC also recognizes that people discover what they think by writing about it, that thinking and writing are recursive and complementary processes. Next WAC assumes that writing and speaking about a topic are powerful means for learning about it. Additionally, writing ability develops over time and across opportunities to write. It does not develop all at once, in only one class. Moreover, since each discipline has its own ways to pose questions, seek answers, and communicate results (in other words, to make knowledge), learners need help as they develop into members of a particular discipline’s discourse community. Finally, we teachers serve as the mentors for students seeking entry into those discourse communities, so our oral and written interactions with the learners in our charge are crucial to the learning

process (Walvoord and McCarthy 1990, 19-22). WAC helps bridge the gaps in our academic community because its assumptions transcend our most common institutional structures—programs, departments, schools and colleges—thus undercutting the assumptions on which those structures are founded. WAC begins to disassemble the academic assembly line, since WAC operates on the assumption that the stations on that line really cannot be separate and distinct from one another.

Portfolio-based writing assessment extends WAC's assumptions, even allows them to be realized in concrete form. If we compare what WAC's assumptions mean in terms of how we teach, and if we compare those results with what happens when teachers use portfolios, then we can see that WAC and portfolio-based assessment make natural partners. For example, as Walvoord and McCarthy point out, WAC demands a shift from content-centered to assignment-centered instruction (Walvoord and McCarthy 1990, 21-22). Rather than focusing on what a course will cover, teachers focus on what learners can do, on how and to what extent learners demonstrate what they know at a given point in time. Since, in part, a portfolio is a collection of the products of learning, portfolio-based assessment reinforces this aspect of WAC, making the conversion from content to assignment easier by giving the teacher the means to accomplish two significant ends: first, to keep track, as the items for the portfolio evolve, of the students' learning as it progresses; and second, by manipulating the portfolio's contents, to maintain an accurate yet flexible outline of the learning opportunities the course presents. In addition, the WAC course's focus on writing and on creating a way for learners to join the teachers' discourse communities demands that learners have frequent opportunities to receive feedback and to revise their written work. In this way, learners move from outsiders to insiders, from observers of a discipline to participants in it. Finally, WAC assumes that active learning is better than passive learning; that students will learn more and faster if they are actively engaged in the knowledge-producing methodologies of a discipline. One of the most powerful benefits of portfolio-based writing assessment is that delayed grading creates more time for active learning to occur and for students to become successful in their learning. Thus, portfolio-based assessment reinforces the major components in *Writing Across the Curriculum* courses.

We can also see how portfolio-based assessment adds to the context developed in a well-designed WAC program, extending and augmenting the benefits of the bridging structure WAC provides. First, the increased em-

phasis on performance assessment goes beyond merely reinforcing WAC's emphasis on assignment-based courses. Converting a course from content-centered to assignment-centered merely creates a context within which performance assessment can take place. Carrying out the conversion to portfolio-based evaluation completes the task by transferring the responsibility for learning onto the learner. Given the fact that performance will be the basis for evaluation and that learners have many opportunities to incorporate their learning into revisions of their writing, using performance assessment allows learners to work as hard as they will and progress as quickly as they are able. In addition, placing the emphasis directly on learners' performances creates an environment in which the learner's goals and objectives are congruent with those of the teacher and the curriculum: all three agents in the process combine to pursue the same set of goals and objectives.

Another way in which portfolio-based assessment extends and magnifies the bridging effects of WAC programs lies in the effects of delayed grading.⁵ When students' products are graded as they are presented during a term, the effects are not, on the whole, conducive to learning.⁶ Granted, this method provides students with information about their eventual grades; however, this benefit is canceled by the degree to which this process emphasizes the grade as a goal, rather than as the description of a learner's performance. Delaying grading decreases the temptation, on the teacher's part as well as the learner's, to see grades as ends in themselves. Thus, learners feel freer to take risks, since they have a cushion—the risk may not pay off, but there will be more chances to raise the level of that performance since the learner can revise it before the moment when the teacher assigns a grade. In this way, delayed grading helps create “teachable moments,” when teacher and learners can work together over a problem or set of problems, with a high degree of investment for both. Learners are fully engaged because the feedback they receive can help them improve the performance before they have to submit it for a grade; the teacher is fully engaged in part because the learners are so responsive and in part because the energy she invests in responding to her students' work can go directly into promoting learning, rather than into justifying a grade. Finally, and in part as a result of this change in the timing, delayed grading alters the teacher-learner relationship for the better. Traditionally, teachers are the watchers at the gate; in one sense, the teacher is the enemy, the one who controls the learners' fate and who is therefore to be kept at a distance, never fully trusted. Every time a teacher grades and hands back an assignment, she emphasizes

that relationship. Delaying grading, then, helps recast the teacher-learner relationship so that the teacher is more of a partner in the learning, with the learner taking the major share of the responsibility. Since grades are delayed, they no longer act as a constant reminder of the teacher's disproportionate power so communicating and building trust becomes easier.

On the whole, then, portfolio-based assessment takes the assumptions and the goals of WAC an important step further. WAC changes the emphasis from what the course covers to what the students can do in order to demonstrate that they have acquired a specific body of knowledge. Portfolio-based assessment—indeed, performance assessment in general—takes advantage of that transformation in order to alter the way a course is conducted, changing the whole process in ways that promote greater learning by giving learners the means of assuming responsibility for their learning, by giving teachers the means of becoming genuine mentors for learners, and by creating a time period within which learning can progress. The combination of performance assessment and delayed grading potentially furnishes each learner with the means to succeed, both in the sense that she achieves the goals and objectives of the course and in the sense that she earns a favorable grade. Combining WAC and portfolio-based assessment, even within the confines of a single course, provides a bridge from one learning experience to another, a means both for tying the experiences together and for creating a document that encourages learners to reflect on the ways those experiences reinforce or build upon each other.

The ultimate expression of this sort of learning mechanism would be a truly cross-curricular portfolio, one that comprises work a student has produced in a variety of courses over an extended period of time. Such a portfolio would provide an unprecedented record of learning, of course, and as such it would be an extremely useful tool for assessing both the student's skills and the ability of the curriculum to accomplish the goals it was designed to meet. More important, though, the act of assembling a cross-curricular portfolio, reflecting on it, and discussing it with fellow students and with a teacher would provide a rich capstone experience for any college student. As well it would provide a mechanism faculty might use to ensure that graduates leave with both a firm knowledge of their strengths and needs as writers and a means of demonstrating their abilities to prospective employers and to any graduate and professional programs a student might seek to enter. Extending portfolio-based assessment beyond the context of a single course would also extend the bridge, providing learners with the occasion to discover some of WAC's most important lessons: that learning

is continuous, that writing is itself a learning process, that communications abilities improve over time and with practice, and that no one act of learning is ever fully isolated from any other act of learning.

The cross-curricular portfolio at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, accomplishes these goals and more. In "Portfolios Across the Curriculum," Susan Harrison identifies the benefits that accrue to teachers as a result of "a portfolio-based writing competency graduation requirement" (Harrison 1995, 39). The transition from timed writing sample to portfolio engaged the faculty in discussions that led to their agreement that all faculty share responsibility for students' writing (Harrison 1995, 39). Common sense tells us that the presence of such a requirement acts as a powerful motivator for faculty to assign more writing by making writing an integral part of the learning opportunities each course presents. The portfolio also, as Harrison points out, "engage[d] faculty in a collaborative development of an assessment tool" that emerged from frank discussions of common and disparate theories of learning and pedagogies, discussions that continue as faculty take their turns as portfolio evaluators (Harrison 1995, 41). As these discussions progressed, faculty standards for writing and for other aspects of students' performance rose, as did the level of awareness among all faculty for the kinds of thinking and writing that occur at various stages of Eckerd's curriculum (Harrison 1995, 43-44). Finally, the effects on students have been equally encouraging. The portfolio indeed helps students to see writing as a transaction between the writer and various audiences and to understand that one's writing improves with frequent opportunities to write for a variety of purposes and audiences (Harrison 1995, 44-45). In short, students are more engaged with their writing—wherever they write—now that they see a purpose beyond the next deadline for a paper or beyond the grade on a term paper. Eckerd's experience suggests that a carefully instituted portfolio-based cross-curricular assessment of writing does indeed bridge the gaps, both by bringing faculty from different departments together in order to pursue a common purpose and by providing students with an incentive to *think* about their progress as writers across the artificial boundaries of course and term. A cross-curricular portfolio, as an agent of writing across the curriculum, alleviates many of the negative effects of a fragmented curriculum, providing learners with the means to make the connections they need to make among the seemingly discrete, disparate learning experiences that the typical college curriculum presents.

Conclusions

From all the examples cited above, we can see that in any of its instantiations, a well-designed portfolio-based writing assessment bridges gaps. It brings teachers closer together with learners. It brings together administrators who, though working in different departments and programs, share common interests, goals, and functions. Even in its narrowest context, that of the single class, portfolios bring manifold benefits. As the context for assessment expands beyond the single class to encompass the writing program, its benefits expand accordingly, as even the earliest such programs demonstrated (Belanoff and Elbow 1991). Extending portfolios across an entire curriculum, then, brings a commensurate expansion of benefits, not least of which would be a surer accomplishing of the several vital ends of writing across the curriculum. Ultimately, combining WAC with portfolio-based assessment could provide the kind of consistency, coherence, and continuity that our learners need and deserve in their educational experience. At the same time as it would involve teachers in rich and exciting conversations about the one enterprise we all have in common, teaching. And the more fully we extend the partnership between WAC and portfolio-based writing assessment, the greater the potential to benefit the educational process as a whole, from both the learners' and the teachers' perspectives. As we collect WAC portfolios from multiple classes, what will we learn, and how might it affect what and how we teach? We may find that addressing the learner's need for continuity will help learners solve some of the problems that stem from the fragmentation of our academies and, at the same time, help teachers solve their own deeply entrenched and seemingly intractable problems with curriculum.

Extending portfolio assessment across institutional lines so that students bring their writing performances with them as they move from one level to the next—elementary to middle school, middle school to high school, and especially from high school to college—helps bridge the largest gaps in our schooling system. Those portfolios allow teachers to know more surely what experiences their new students have had, what learning opportunities the students have pursued, and how well the students have performed in that work. This kind of portfolio allows teachers to design curricula based on actual knowledge of learners' performances and to develop materials that address learners' actual needs. Learners, in turn, benefit from the ability to bring their accomplishments with them from one level to the next. Our experience with entry-level portfolios at Michigan indicates that students

appreciate the effort we put into reading their portfolios, and they have a high degree of confidence in the results, even when the placement is lower than they had expected. The portfolio raises students' comfort level as they enter our first year curriculum: students testify that the experience of putting the portfolio together provides an opportunity for self-assessment, for taking stock; and the knowledge that Michigan has treated them seriously as individual writers helps ease the stresses of coming into such a large, complex, and often intimidating institution.

Context, as I noted at the beginning of this essay, is everything. Portfolios, more than any other means of assessing learning, incorporate, even embody the contexts that produce the work. Because portfolios reveal the kinds of challenge students have met in their curricula—because portfolios necessarily depend upon the contexts in which the work was prepared—portfolios bridge the gaps between one subject area and another, between one level and another, in ways that benefit both learner and teacher. These varied benefits, more than the ability to make more accurate assessments of students' learning, give us the most compelling reason to move forward with portfolio-based writing assessment at all levels and in all areas of our system of education.

Notes

1. Many writers have advanced this argument for the interrelation of, for example, instruction and assessment. Edward M. White offers a comprehensive look at this relationship in his *Teaching, Assigning, and Assessing Writing*.
2. This remarkable program is the child of Emily Decker's brain and the fruit of her hard labor as the ECB's Associate Director for Assessment. Without her knowledge and leadership, the project would never have become reality. The assessment is described in greater detail in an article she and several members of her team are developing for *Assessing Writing*.
3. Cp. A Preliminary Study of the Feasibility and Utility for National Policy of Instructional "Good Practice" Indicators in Undergraduate Education. U.S. Department of Education; Office of Educational Research and Improvement. NCES 94-437. August, 1994.
4. In fact, on June 8, 1994, after we had read approximately 3500 portfolios, the latest report from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) confirmed just this fact: high school graduates can summarize well, since assignments in high school most often ask for some sort of summary or report; however, graduates are often much less adept at analysis or argument since they were not often asked to perform those tasks during their school years.
5. Of course, eliminating graded writing courses altogether is preferable to merely delaying the moment at which a teacher must assign a grade, but a long time will pass before such a move can occur in a program that affects as many academic departments

and disciplines as WAC does. Thus, this discussion assumes that learners will receive grades for their work in courses, and that teachers have a fair amount of freedom to determine their own methods for grading.

6. The remarks in this section stem from my own experience with the portfolio-based exit assessment from the ECB's Writing Practicum which was instituted in 1988. However, that experience parallels almost exactly what Irwin Weiser describes in the basic writing program at Purdue. I was delighted to discover Weiser's cogent account, since it suggests that the benefits we both describe are generalizable to many other classroom contexts.