

## Portfolios, WAC, Email, and Assessment

### *An Inquiry on Portnet*

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#### Portnet and Portfolios: Michael Allen

“PORTNET” IS A GROUP OF POSTSECONDARY PORTFOLIO TEACHER-RESEARCHERS across the country who exchange, evaluate, and discuss each other’s portfolios. It began in October 1992 at Miami University’s “New Directions in Portfolios” conference, as a way of examining an argument against portfolio assessment: that since there is no “normed” or standardized portfolio, portfolio programs are too local and thus too individualized. While they are interesting classroom pedagogy, portfolios lack the validity—but more particularly the reliability—needed for assessment purposes. At the Miami conference, Michael Allen asked several participants if they would send five to ten portfolios to be read by outside readers, and if they would read others’ portfolios as well, to explore differences in scores and programs. Although surprised at the level of interest he found, he was also warned by a friend, Sandra Murphy, who said (approximately), “Since every program is different, you’ll be lucky to get 50 percent agreement in scores.” Initially, then, Portnet was established to explore these issues of portfolio localization and difference, and to see just how different portfolios and portfolio

programs are. If portfolio programs are “too” local and “too” different, we reasoned, then “outside” readers would have difficulty understanding and evaluating different portfolios.

In the summer of 1993, nine participants sent five portfolios, plus scores and accompanying contextual material—a description of the program or course, rubrics or scoring guides, and sample scored portfolios, if available—to Michael, who kept the scores and sent the rest of the package on to two outside readers. Over the summer, participants read when they could. When they sent their scores, they often forwarded other responses: long analyses of the different program; objections to the program’s requirements; concerns about the fairness of their scores. When two outside readings were complete, the scores were posted on an email mailing list called “Portnet.”

The results of this initial reading were surprising. The sets of portfolios fell into two groups: 1) program portfolios scored locally by a reader other than the course instructor (entrance, first year, longitudinal, etc.); and 2) classroom portfolios graded by the course instructor. For the program portfolios, agreement among local and outside readers was high: 82.5 percent. For the classroom portfolios, agreement was low: 26.5 percent. These results suggested several hypotheses. First, experience in reading program portfolios seemed to allow readers to “take off our own hats and put another’s hat on”; even when outside readers expressed objections to program elements, they could read the portfolios according to local standards. Second, classroom portfolios seemed encased in local context such that agreement among raters was much more difficult to accomplish. Third, more readings, and experiments with outside readings, were necessary.

Jeff Sommers, of Miami University, Middletown, suggested that we read a portfolio and discuss it over email before reaching an evaluation. This experiment transformed Portnet from a place where we *talked about* the project, portfolios, and assessment to a new scene *for* writing assessment. Through snail mail, Jeff sent us a Miami entrance portfolio; he asked us to read it and reach a tentative evaluation, then discuss it on Portnet for three days, sending him a private email message with a score at the end of the third day. Despite some technological glitches (missing messages and the crash of the Ohio State email system, which supports Portnet, on the last day), the email session was fascinating for those involved: over fifty messages with much variety in style and tone; a discussion which quickly left the portfolio (we felt an early consensus on the score) for larger issues in

portfolios (e.g. how we read reflective letters); and nearly total agreement in scores (3,3,3,3,3,2 on a 6 point scale). The email session was a new experience in writing assessment, providing a privacy for discussion and fostering analysis in ways other assessment venues did not: on email, no one could interrupt our development of ideas; on email, we heard others' ideas more fully developed; on email, we were less constrained by time or local hidden agendas (however, also on email, we lacked the looks and familiar gestures of colleagues); and finally, on email, we reached near consensus on a midrange portfolio, which "conventional wisdom" holds is the range of portfolio that defies agreement.

Clearly, we would do another email evaluation, this time on a portfolio supplied by Kathleen Yancey, of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte: an across-the-curriculum portfolio from an Economics class. As with the Miami portfolio, we were forwarded the portfolio in advance and asked to read it and make a tentative evaluation using the local rubric, then to discuss it for four days before sending Kathleen a final grade. This time, more of us participated: Michael Allen (Ohio State, Mansfield); Bill Condon (University of Michigan); Marcia Dickson (Ohio State, Marion); Cheryl Forbes (Hobart and William Smith Colleges); George Meese (Eckerd College); Jeff Sommers (Miami University, Middletown); and Kathleen Yancey. This essay, then, begins with some background information on the portfolio and continues as a collaborative reflection of our findings after that second email session.

### The Global Port: Kathleen Yancey

The portfolio I chose to share was composed by a student in an honors class on my campus. The class, Honors 1702, is an undergraduate class in global economics, with varying emphases: on economic theories; on the relationship between first and third world countries; on practical solutions that first-world peoples (i.e., students) can employ to address economic problems like diminishing resources and inequitable distribution of resources; and on student development of multiple perspectives. It is not, however, an advanced course; it usually attracts first and second year students. Nor is it quantitative in methodology. Nor, as I discovered, was it a WAC course; that is, when my colleague asked me to work with her, I said yes because I wanted to see how a writing-intensive portfolio on my campus might work. But as we examined the syllabus together, and as we discussed the criteria for the portfolio (e.g., understanding of economic systems), and

as we thought about the trade-offs the portfolio would require, we decided that it would replace the final exam, thus contributing one-seventh of the student's final grade. It became clear, to me at least, that this portfolio was another kind of portfolio. It relied on writing, true enough, and the class was writing-intensive, but it relied on conceptual understanding and application, too. In a word, this was more than a writing portfolio. That's what I thought, anyway, and I wondered what my colleagues across the country would think.

A second reason that I wanted to share this portfolio was that the student who composed it had, I thought, created some interesting entries and used an interesting arrangement. She used the metaphor of a puzzle to talk about her learning. She included responses to her work—journal entries and a midterm, for instance—that showed her thinking in response to the comments made by the instructor. She included the reflective essay at the *end* of the portfolio, and I wondered what if any difference it made to put that entry at the end, after the “evidence.” In other words, this student had made this model of portfolio come alive, and I wanted reaction to that as well: to the model my colleague, her student, and I had developed as well as to this enactment of it.

And perhaps too I wanted confirmation: that the score we awarded it would look like the scores from others.

### Reading the Global Port and Reacting, too: Take One: Cheryl Forbes

My date book for Monday May 16, 1994 contains three entries: “Portnet discussion, 2:45 Sharna Fabiano WC, 10:45 Kristen.” On May 17 I find these entries: “Portnet discussion, dinner w/ toni and susanne—my house; 4:00 SAOP meeting.” And on May 18 “scoring/Portnet; Christy 3:00 re Alvarez.” Anyone finding my date book would understand all the entries but those with the word “Portnet” in them. Seven letters—a lucky number, I hear—that signify intellectual roller coastering, rapid finger-slapping on my keyboard, and intensive email discussions that had the effect of mainlining caffeine and carbos. All in real time and info time. I had to up my email ante twice to accommodate the messages.

Kathleen's WAC portfolio took us all by surprise. Her brief introduction and the sweeping syllabus from the professor who taught the course caused some of us—me included—to assume that we had an upper level advanced portfolio. And so we read accordingly, and disappointingly. We—or should I say I—had missed the clues we needed: like the number of the course, like

the discipline of the course, like the age of the writer, like our own fear of the subject—economics, broadly defined. What did we know about that? humanities types, one and all.

We bashed the writer and the portfolio. We bashed ourselves. We tried to keep pace with each other, even though we weren't face to face. Just as I ended a session, another provocative message appeared, and so I would begin again, thinking faster than my fingers could type but fearing that I was typing faster than my mind could think.

And once again, the rich, complex, challenging, ambiguous, ambitious, unaccountable act of reading overwhelmed me. Sure, we came to some agreements, and sure, Kathi kept us in a state of tenuous balance. When we threatened to head for a precipice, her “yes, buts,” “aren't you forgettings?” and “but don't you thinks” let us live a little longer. She became the advocate for the writer, the portfolio, the professor, the course, and the context which she has convinced us every portfolio writer needs when outside evaluation occurs—like a defense attorney or a parent.

Which returns me to the act of reading and all the acts of reading I do when no advocate is around. Who, then, acts as advocate if not the text, or portfolio, itself? Or the writer? Do all texts need advocates? Or, better still, what rhetorical strategies help a text defend itself? What might hinder such a defense? For me, more is at stake in outside portfolio assessment than whether an outside group can reliably and validly read. Or, I should say, that's the least of what is at stake—the least of what I can learn.

Our email scoring session of this WAC portfolio forced me to consider how I read, what was important to me as I read, why I made the decisions that I did as I read, why my colleagues seemed so wrongheaded at times and why I was so wrongheaded at others; in short, it focused my attention on the *rhetoric* of reading. Which then returned me to the rhetoric of the writer at hand and to asking how the rhetorics of reading and writing intersect. Our Portnet discussion became a manifestation of this intersection, at the same time that we were discussing how our reading fit with the writer's writing. It's a matter of reading a noninteractive text interactively—or to invoke Bakhtin, all texts are dialogic and should be so read, even (or especially) email texts about portfolios.

For every question about my own rhetorical reading choices, then, I asked two about the writer's rhetorical choices. Why did she—we all assumed it was a she—choose *her* particular order, why the reflective letter at the end? What language showed that she had changed her mind about world population or the United States's use of resources? What kind of

relationship with her professor and her text did her responses reveal? Why did she move between personal and distanced discourse? What tensions did her revisions reveal? What rhetorical strategies might have played portfolio advocate better?

I couldn't go to the writer and ask her these questions, any more than I can stop midsentence and shout a word to Joan Didion or Cynthia Ozik. I could only ask my colleagues. I could only ask, "Does my asking make sense?"

### Reading and Reacting: Take Two: Michael Allen

I very much felt a contrast between the two email evaluation sessions. The first one concerned a Miami portfolio, from a program I'm somewhat familiar with, and with a purpose I'm very familiar with: placing incoming students.

The second session involved a WAC portfolio from an Economics class—something I'm not familiar with. I felt the information accompanying the portfolio, while it seemed appropriate (syllabus, rubric, and some description of the course), did not let me into the context enough; I always felt on the outside, trying to make sense, first of how I was to evaluate the portfolio, but later, of the portfolio itself. How much should I rely on the rubric? How much should the "honors" label count? The rubric seemed to ask for fairly sophisticated thinking and writing; maybe I should take the "honors" label seriously and expect to learn something from the portfolio? But because I was unfamiliar with this kind of portfolio, I was ready to be persuaded to review and revise my evaluation. This openness to persuasion led, however, to even more questions about this portfolio and how to evaluate it.

As Kathi started acting as an advocate for the portfolio, I listened hard. Early on, she listed three things she liked about the portfolio: the metaphor which governed it (the globe as puzzle pieces); the responses to midterm and journal comments; and the engagement with ideas in these responses.

Later, Kathi wrote, "A classroom portfolio is much more complicated (than a placement portfolio), much easier to critique, and much harder to honor, is what I've come to think." That's a good way to put it: how does an outside reader honor what is from a local context that perhaps can never be articulated well enough?

As the evaluation went on, Cheryl suggested that we needed a statement from the teacher about the class and its performance, a reflection from her that told us what was actually accomplished in the course. The rubric

and syllabus alone set up an “ideal” context; the classroom experience may establish a different context, a “hidden” rubric which the teacher has in her head as she evaluates a portfolio, but which the outside reader cannot see. Maybe the class as a whole fell short of the teacher’s plans and expectations; maybe within the context of the class, essays/portfolios were better than the course syllabus and rubric would lead one to expect. This difference became obvious as I noted the grades the teacher gave some of the portfolio’s essays. I would have graded them lower, given the course syllabus and rubric.

But I was not the classroom teacher; I did not have a clear sense of the full context. Given the difference between the classroom context and what an outside reader misses—cannot see—of that context, should there even be outside reading of classroom portfolios? Maybe there are uses of portfolios which are more intimate, less public, and therefore an outside reading—while it may be an interesting event for outside readers such as us—is simply inappropriate. Maybe there is, in the process of a program portfolio’s formation (e.g. the Miami portfolio) an articulation of issues and criteria with outside reading in mind. A program portfolio is designed to be read by an “outside reader”—an instructor outside the classroom. That design seems to be easily transferable to other outside readers, be they in Florida or Michigan. In order to be fair, an outside reader needs to be given ways into a portfolio, an invitation which arises not only from the rubric and program apparatus, but also from the writer’s orientation toward two audiences: the classroom teacher and an outside reader.

My anxiety about being fair came not only from my unfamiliarity with an economics portfolio but from the lack of invitation I felt as an outside reader reading a classroom portfolio.

### Email, Community and Time: Marcia Dickson

Can ten different readers, from ten different schools, develop an assessment community with a common context over something as cold as a computer network? It seems unlikely. In my experience, communities grow from spontaneous give-and-take discussion, frequent “do-you-mean?” questions, or “let’s-cut-to-the-chase” interactions. In email communities that spontaneity disappears; correspondents read, respond, and wait for answers all alone at their computers.

These acts of reading and writing are far from spontaneous. In fact, the sheer number of email entries a participant must slog through can be a major detriment to community bonding. For instance, when printed out as

individual messages, the posts generated by Portnet for the WAC evaluation described in the introduction to this article numbered over two hundred pages. Some posts were merely a line or two, but others were three or four printed pages of comments. Oddly enough, the short messages presented more problems to me than the lengthy ones. Because email messages come over the wire in a random fashion, interspersed with messages from students and other correspondents, these tidbit missives often seemed to come out of nowhere. I nearly always had to create a context for these abbreviated messages before I could make meaning from them. Needless to say, I sometimes had to hold four or five conversations in my mind at a time. After experiencing this intellectual overload, I'm no longer surprised to hear members of larger electronic mail groups claim that the commitment of time that their networks demanded forced them to drop out.

In theory, email should create more time. But even though readers can chug along at their own paces, individual paces may not always be in sync. For example, my participation in the first Portnet reading was hectic but manageable; the posts were fewer, the issues clearer, the demands of my local community under control. The second reading, however, led me to desperation. I was desperate for time. Because of my teaching and professional schedule, any email communication had to wait until evening—late evening. My commitment to Portnet faltered somewhat the first time I turned on my computer at eleven o'clock P.M. and discovered more than forty Portnet messages waiting for me. The next night over eighty Portnet messages appeared on the screen. Slipped in between Portnet questions were more than twenty posts from my students—asking for help on papers—and another ten from local colleagues on various matters. Needless to say, under those circumstances, I began to doubt that this was a community I should have joined.

But wait. As sour as this experience may sound (I've just reread), I'm not arguing that there can be no community over the wires or that the hassle isn't worth the outcome. Quite the contrary. There are other types of time involved in developing community, time which proves quite valuable and extremely positive. Despite the problems, I've learned a lot. The Portnet community has provided valuable insights into what other members of our profession believe constitutes good writing and good evaluation. Moreover, my interaction with these ten good people has caused me to rethink various aspects of my own writing program. This technological experience has even convinced me that under certain conditions portfolios can be read accurately by outside readers. But the Portnet project has also convinced



me that teachers and evaluators need to take considerably more time to explore their assumptions about everything from student writing to the purpose of writing courses.

No community can be built by short, sporadic conversations. And Portnet has helped me see that this is as true of face-to-face communities as it is of electronic ones. Ironically, that lack of spontaneity I abhor in email messages contributes to the effective creation of context and community. The short spontaneous electronic messages, despite their resemblance to real conversational dialogue, were the least effective for me. I could attribute this fact to the lack of context or the assumed context that can exist on the information highway, but it's not really much different from the problems which arise when our spontaneous conversations are built on the assumption that our local colleagues know what we're talking about and accept our conclusions.

The Portnet community hasn't perfected the art of electronic assessment yet. To build on the benefits of email and minimize its defects, I'd suggest we change our present system: take longer to discuss portfolios, read more portfolios from the same school or classroom, and write each other frequently, allowing time—a week or even two—to digest ideas before we decide on final scores. I believe that this sort of continuous yet studied conversation will bring our very diverse attitudes about writing much closer together. Will it help us to find that mythical perfect national standard for writing? No. That's still a myth. However, this well-spent time can keep us from teaching, grading, and/or evaluating in a vacuum, and that serves both our profession and our students.

### CMC and Portfolio Assessment: William Condon

Although electronic mail was not part of the original scope for the Portnet project, its use in scoring two portfolios revealed that computer-mediated communication (CMC) can play a powerful role in large-scale portfolio assessment. Granted, since both CMC and portfolios are in their early stages, we should proceed with caution as we attempt to meld them, but the early indications, based on what we know about how to perform a reliable writing assessment and about how CMC can expand and extend communities, are promising.

Portnet's first two experiences with email scoring sessions suggest that CMC can provide both a medium for readers from distant places to communicate effectively with each other and a forum within which those

readers can have more than the usual opportunities to talk with each other about matters of importance in achieving agreement on portfolio readings—in other words, in achieving reliability: the context for the portfolio, the readers' criteria, the meaning and consequences of different score levels, and so forth. CMC seems to provide support for just the sort of reading community that is most likely to agree, over time, on outcomes.

Basically, there are two ways to achieve reliability among readers, and these methods echo the two primary movements in writing instruction: product and process. First, a program may focus on agreement of scores—the product of the reading. This kind of program typically supplies “anchor” samples that have been carefully chosen to represent certain score levels, and readers are trained to read to those samples. If a reader cannot understand why the anchor illustrates a certain level, or if s/he cannot consistently match other samples to the anchors, then s/he is removed, dismissed, or given some other task that does not involve scoring samples. This method is the standard in holistic scoring of timed samples. The second method works in almost the opposite way. Instead of focusing on scores, readers spend time bringing their reading processes into line with each other. They read and discuss samples with an eye toward developing and refining a shared sense of values and criteria for scoring. In other words, this method fosters a reading community in which reliability grows out of the readers' abilities to communicate with each other and to grow closer in terms of the way they approach samples (see Decker et al. 1992).

This second method seems best suited for reading portfolios since portfolios tend to be so complex and so varied, both internally and among samples, that anchor portfolios less effectively illustrate a particular score level. In other words, if the sample is rigidly controlled, then the anchor method is likely to work, since the range of possibilities for what writers can include is severely limited. However, the more open the sample is, the less likely we are to find anchors that adequately illustrate each score level. The reading process needs to respond to this heightened complexity, which necessarily accompanies the portfolio's heightened face validity. No longer can readers simply look to the major characteristics of anchors; instead, readers need to share their internal as well as external criteria with each other, to discuss what they notice, and, as they read and score sample portfolios, to talk about their scores and their scoring practices with an eye toward developing a consensus that can last as they read other samples.

CMC can support the process of developing communities that place a priority on sharing a complex set of values that support decisions made

by individuals. In an electronic mail group like Portnet, for example, each member of the group can “speak” as much and as often as s/he wishes, and as long as the other members of the group are conscientious about reading their email, each member will be attended to as often as s/he speaks. In addition, even though we know each other to varying degrees, communicating via electronic mail exerts a leveling influence on the group, giving it an attractive egalitarian flavor. No one voice can dominate; no one member’s input can necessarily have more import than another’s. All the talk helps forge a community, helps us find our evaluative center, and helps us come to know each other. In the end, at the deadline, each of us makes her or his decision alone. In other words, this process avoids the weakest aspect of CMC: while it is a powerful tool for discussion, it is not particularly apt for reaching group consensus for decision-making. CMC supports the community-building activities so necessary for scoring portfolios, but it also leaves readers the space to exercise their judgment as members of the reading community.

### Portfolio Assessment and the Well-Educated Men and Women: George Meese

Portfolio evaluation has been instituted for many purposes, but primarily to give evaluators a rich sample of discourse to judge and to spread the evaluative acts among several people, with the hope of improving the fairness of summative evaluation. In a typical preportfolio situation, a college would rely on composition courses or a single-shot timed essay to assure every graduate’s competency in written discourse, but such choices reduce the foundation for judgment to one teacher’s opinion of a whole course’s assignments or to several people’s opinion of a single, unrepresentative document. (Timed essay tests are unlike most other written work, and thus, low in validity.)

When an institution sets up a program for evaluating writing by portfolio, a “community” of experienced women and men get to pass judgment on the student’s representation of her or his best work. At our college, we originally wanted to allow faculty to make judgments while fully aware of contexts: in this community of learners, is this student’s composition successful in this particular situation, for these particular purposes, and at this level of developmental sophistication? Our vision of good writing assessment has not been to ask, “Can I defend my judgment to the student’s

family or friends?"; the student is in college to meet the standards of a collegiate community, and if Mom and Dad want to set criteria, they can join the faculty. We believe that this community is a fundamentally different institution than other human endeavors, and that our assessment of writing needs to embrace originality of thinking and expression. Our portfolio system seeks to include professors' local purposes for discourse in all fields, as well as highly experimental forays by the students themselves, in or out of class, and thus we do not write detailed specifications for portfolios that would serve only the writing pedagogues among us.

When Michael Allen offered the Portnet opportunity at the Miami University conference, I wanted to test our program's presuppositions against the evaluative perspectives of folks outside our community. If composition really is radically contextual, wouldn't outside scoring be problematic, and maybe impossible? In the first round of Portnet scoring (before the email phase), I behaved defensively, saying, "Those of us who are assessing ought to know what the purposes are . . . A portfolio at Eckerd College is *not* just like any other school's unless we share very similar philosophies of what senior undergraduate level academic discourse ought to look like, and differences due to purposes should bother only those who think all colleges ought to be roughly the same. We don't." After many more iterations of Portnet evaluations and email conversations, I've had to modify my composition theory to accord with actual practice. While the production of successful collegiate texts is indeed radically contextual (especially for the more sophisticated tasks in major field papers), experienced evaluators from outside the generative community can make reliable assessments.

How is this possible? Our Portnet experiment in external evaluation included program descriptions that helped the readers imagine themselves within the system of evaluation at the home institution. The encouraging agreements we achieved (above 82 percent on all the instances of competency/summative evaluations) might depend on the quality of the program descriptions: to the degree that the outsiders are able to imagine themselves in the matrix of assumptions of the home institution's evaluators, the resultant judgments correlate. Portnet's modest sample sizes and necessarily restricted design do not support broad claims, but the experience strongly suggests that evaluators try to play out a role consistent with both the institution's purposes and, when context-setting introductions are present in a portfolio, with the student's professed purposes as well.

Another phenomenon may influence correlations between home and external evaluations. When students graduate from college, most deans or presidents mark the occasion with the expression, “Welcome to the community of educated men and women.” This is no accidental locution, but a commendation with significant social import. It is possible our good correlations of scores over Portnet are part of a real, larger community of judgment that shares more commonality than the limited, partial psychometrics of earlier composition evaluation. In other words, when the sample is sufficiently rich, and the evaluators have clarified their purposes, it is possible to render reliable judgments with strong external agreement. Further, the acts of judgment are far more complex, yet more simple in expression, than previous constructions of “writing competency.” It is possible that when we say, “This student’s portfolio has demonstrated competency in writing,” we are also saying, “This student has performed as a member of the community of educated women and men.”

#### A Final Take: Kathleen Yancey

My national colleagues valued the model of the portfolio my local colleague and I had designed; that pleased me. My local colleague and I valued the student’s work more highly than Portnet did; that disappointed me. But on reflection, I think it shouldn’t have. English professors critique more rigorously when the material belongs to someone else; as Peter Elbow has noted, our education has rewarded us for exercising such critical judgment.

But through the reading, talking about, and scoring of this single portfolio—over email—we learned:

*about assumptions* and about how embedded they are. Honors on one campus, for instance, isn’t honors on another; a number like 1706 might be an advanced level and might not. Even when the subject matter of the portfolio is outside our area of expertise (especially when it is the work of a first or second year student), many of us feel comfortable evaluating it; *about the role that reflection can play*. Reflection is important for the *student*, who learns through the review of her work and the articulation of what that review produced; for the *teacher*, who might comment on what actually transpired in the class and use that to help her improve her teaching, and also about how this reflection would help outside readers; for the *readers*, who balance the tacit with what is known as they reflect on what they found in the portfolio as opposed to what they expected;

*about the role of email in assessment in research.* Through email discussion groups, teachers and researchers can come together to read portfolios from each other's campuses, can critique the models, can assess the work, and can make suggestions for improvement. How we do this is still being determined, but some factors seem evident: a stable, informed group; a clear focus; an agreed upon protocol; and a leader who facilitates without dominating.

*and about how we read fairly/reliably/appropriately without being directed by anchors and benchmarks and a training process.* Again, we don't have all the answers here, but we are beginning to see some of the items:

- 1) *program/course descriptions:* level of the course and its aims, with a syllabus if possible; rationale; conditions of compilation; and a rubric.
- 2) *demographic information about the school* Some of these items, however, can lead to false assumptions, so some of them may need "qualifiers" or "amendments": an honors student on my campus might not be admitted at some of the other institutions represented here, for instance.
- 3) *some explanation as to what actually happened in the class/program exemplified in the portfolio* As teachers, we sometimes promise more in our syllabus than we actually are able to deliver, or we deliver differently than we expected. These kinds of data need to be supplied as well, and during the reading process.
- 4) *an advocate* It's true that texts need to act as advocates for themselves, but within a reading process like the one described here, where no one is really vested in the outcome and where being critical can be its own reward, having someone commit to being the advocate simply insures that all perspectives will be represented, that the readers are asked to advocate for our own points of view in the same ways that the students are asked to do.

In other words, without our quite being aware of it, we've created a lab where we can learn about our work and the context where it takes place: what it means to teach writing, both inside the writing class and beyond; what it means when we say reflection; what we actually do when we read; what kind of response we might make to a student; what goes into a program and why; and how to work together in an electronic context. Like portfolios, this lab is messy, with borders that are permeated by other borders, with

more questions than answers, with potential not fully realized, nor, I think, quite understood yet.

As important, I think, are the processes involved in Portnet. What we have shared here of it is in its way a vignette, a very small tableaux of what it feels like to read together, to compare notes about portfolios and writing and reading and teaching and values and discourse, and then to write together. In the process, as Cheryl noted, we can find ourselves surprised at how wrongheaded some of our colleagues on Portnet are, and then surprised at our own wrongheadedness. In sum, our community is informed by difference as much as by consensus, and given who we are, that's no surprise, really, either. Some of us teach at elite institutions where students arrive with high SATs if not financial legacies; others of us teach at open admission schools. Some of us believe passionately in the value of external assessment and its power to enhance teaching; others would just as soon slay the assessment dragon. Some of us find email easily the equal (and in some cases the superior) of real life; others see it as a pale and inadequate reflection of face-to-face interaction. It is through explaining, exploring, and defending these differences—more than through agreeing, perhaps—that we learn.

And we continue to explore, believing too, that it is in the exploration as much as in what is found we—and our students—learn.