

9

Behind the Scenes

Portfolios in a Classroom Learning Community

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I STARTED MY TEACHING CAREER TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AGO BY FURNISHING A large corner of my classroom with a couch and a rug made of carpet remnants. There my eighth graders lounged, upright or prone, while I fed them books and blank pages for their writing. The arrangement did little justice to the student-centered curriculum of James Moffett and B.J. Wagner which was, at the time, in serious contention with the one-lecture-fits-all approach, supported by desks in a row. If anything, couches and carpets were proof that ambiance is overrated.

On the other hand, students spend thirteen or more years in classrooms. The design of those classrooms—beyond carpeting, recliners, or desks—definitely matters. Design matters if learning is to be more than just a furnishing. It matters if special practices, like portfolio assessment exist, not as the “right” curriculum or the privileged pedagogy of the year, but as a tool in the service of student learning.

In this chapter, we will look specifically at classroom designs that make portfolios a means to learning, rather than an end—designs that extend, rather than freeze portfolio practices, and therefore, help students stretch themselves. In fact, any look at portfolios—what they are and how they work—simply must take into account their residences. Are there living arrangements that accommodate portfolios better than others?

At the outset, it should be noted that portfolios are not necessarily the most efficient path to learning—especially not compared to methods that

treat students as inhalers of knowledge. When students simply breathe deeply of the wisdom that fills the room and then exhale on command, they move in a direct line from point to point. Whether or not the inhale/exhale method makes use of their past experiences, curiosities, or special talents, however, is of no consequence.

On the other hand, in classrooms that honor students as participants in their own learning, the learning is no longer one-way or exclusive of individual commitments. In fact, individuals are expected to care, to keep tabs on, and take responsibility for their progress because they are asked to do the following:

- actively build knowledge, not just consume it;
- read and write everyday with their peers and their teacher;
- and think about and evaluate their own work.

Classrooms that ask students to be centrally involved in their own learning answer to a number of names: constructivist classrooms, learning communities, or interactive environments. They are the kind of classrooms that nourish portfolios, earning them yet another name: portfolio classrooms.

What do these classrooms look like?

Knowledge Building in Portfolio Classrooms

When students treat their learning as a personal endeavor that demands their significant contributions, they are less likely to watch from the sidelines. They are key players in writing, thinking, researching, experimenting, and debating.

Jan's Classroom

Jan Bergamini, a California high school teacher, asks her students to be authors of their own learning. When the students arrive in September, they receive two folders. The first is their writing folder. All of their writing goes into this folder, every scrap and draft. In Jan's class, the second folder is the portfolio. Every so often students choose a piece from their writing folders and put it in their portfolios. Jan asks them to write about why they picked that paper and what they intended when they wrote it. She may also ask them to write about how they wrote it, what special problems it posed,

and what they learned about writing. In May, the students submit their portfolios to the English department. They write a letter of introduction to the portfolio, justifying each choice and talking about themselves as writers, their strengths and weaknesses. In other words, the students have the main responsibility for preparing and presenting their work for evaluation. They may revise their work as often as they want to get it ready. Jan works with them all year on the writing and on the specific things the other teachers will be looking for when they read the portfolios.

The next year the portfolios follow their owners to their new classes, where once again they fill them with the writings they choose as most representative of their work. By June of their senior year, these students have more than a diploma or a string of grades. They have a whole portfolio of their writing accomplishments and of what they learned. They leave as authors with a collection of their best writings (Murphy and Smith 1991, 11–12).

It is worth noting that in Jan's portfolio classroom, there are established procedures and containers and deadlines. But significantly, the classroom culture demands much more than simple adherence to the rules. Rather, it demands students to be thoughtful: to take themselves seriously. Their choices count. Their revisions matter. Their work stands for something—for their accomplishments and aspirations, for their progress, for their ability to select and assess markers of excellence.

In other words, portfolio classrooms invite students into the thick of thinking, into living their literacy rather than just rehearsing it. "To get beyond Thinking Appreciation," Dan Kirby and Carol Kuykendall explain, "students must be actively involved in purposeful tasks that engage mind, eye, and hand in sustained effort toward some goal that matters today as well as tomorrow. Furthermore, those tasks must be rooted in a context that is both engaging and meaningful—a context that holds intellectual work together so that students can make sense of it" (Kirby and Kuykendall 1991, 37).

Joni's Classroom

Joni Chancer, a California elementary teacher, provides another example of a classroom in which students actively build knowledge. After months and months of mini-lessons and writing workshops and writing conferences and book clubs—when the children's writing folders are bulging—she demonstrates what comes next in the process of constructing portfolios of their learning:

With my fourth and fifth grade students, the purpose of the first portfolio commonly focuses on showing several things: best work; a range of work; revisions and process pieces; first drafts, second drafts, final drafts and published books; and often the pieces the student cared about the most. I want my writers and readers to be impressed with themselves, to say, "Wow! When I show you this body of work, there will be no doubt that I am a writer and a reader!" And so we brainstorm together what kinds of selections they might make in putting together the portfolios.

Frequently, I share my own portfolio with the students and I talk about the reasons behind my selections. I read them my own letter of introduction to the contents I have chosen. Sometimes I show them copies I have made of student portfolios from previous years. I am very careful to share several varied portfolios that clearly demonstrate a range of possibilities. Looking at and hearing aloud the introductory letters written by other students is critical. Students need to hear from other students. It makes a powerful statement about ownership . . . The children quickly come to see that there is no single "right way" to put together a portfolio. (Chancer 1993, 41-42)

In this portfolio classroom, Joni uses her own experiences with portfolios as a resource for students. She also discusses the work of former students, making writing and thinking and ultimately, portfolios, a matter of collaboration as well as personal responsibility, of open field running as well as defined expectations, of analyzing choices as well as simply making them.

Joni exemplifies, too, the importance of teachers in portfolio classrooms—of their potential as role models and as companions in learning, in being open to different possibilities. This potential, according to Geof Hewitt, has a direct effect on students:

If a teacher is timid, afraid to experiment, the students are unlikely to take risks. The same principle applies to portfolios. If the teacher dictates an official portfolio format, then tells the students which pieces of their writing to include, the students are likely to sit back and let the teacher manage their portfolios. Most teachers I know don't have that kind of time. (Hewitt 1995, 65)

Rather than manage, teachers in a portfolio classroom design, in the best sense of the word. They set the tone, the openness to learning—through modeling, through immersing students in reading and writing, and through working with their own literacy.

Jane's Classroom

Jane Juska, a California high school teacher, issues a written invitation to her seniors to actively build their knowledge. In it, she asks students to

think about their learning as a continuum, rather than as a series of discrete, isolated assignments:

Portfolios due at the end of the semester. No grades till quarter time and those only a report of progress, then no grades again till semester. Semester grade based on the quality of work included in the portfolio. Why, you are asking. Why can't we do like always: hand in papers and get comments back and grades and then we'll know how we're doing and we won't have to worry and wonder if we're passing and what're we supposed to tell our parents, huh? Why can't this class be like my seventh grade English class which was my favorite . . .

Now, calm down. You and I will work our ways through different kinds of writing, different kinds of literature. You will give me drafts of your writing, the record of which I will keep in my grade book, and I will comment on the drafts with an eye to helping you revise. You'll be writing comparison/contrast papers, definition papers, argumentative papers, personal experience/reflective papers, stories, poems—and you'll be rewriting them to get some or all of them ready for the portfolio. You will be learning and relearning throughout the semester, and in the end you will put together a demonstration of your proficiencies in writing and in understanding and appreciating literature. That demonstration we will call a portfolio. You will be proud of it. (Juska 1993, 63-64)

Notably, Jane reassures her students about their upcoming portfolio classroom. “You and I,” she says, designating that learning is not confined to the ranks of students. “Learning and relearning,” she says, defying the idea that learning is for once and for all. No real grades until semester, she says, goading the group into thinking beyond a single unit of curriculum. She might also say, “No worksheets. No underlining the subject once and the predicate twice.” Clearly, she has rejected notions that learning can be charted, mastered, and recited on demand. Rather, learning can be a way of proceeding.

In other words, Jane intends to carry students beyond the value of “doneness” (that moment when students gratefully abandon their work into the hands of the teacher for some kind of evaluation). This portfolio classroom recognizes a life beyond the lunchbell, the end of the quarter, or any other school-designated period of learning, as well as a reward greater than grades.

Relying on grades to motivate students, Catharine Lucas points out, has limits when it comes to inspiring more than superficial efforts:

Beyond the extrinsic motivation of test scores and grades must lie some intrinsic reward, some freedom to feel curiosity, if a student—or any other performer—is to muster the long-range commitment that makes deep and lasting learning

possible, and with it the kind of deepening perception, steady concentration, critical thinking, and creative imagination that we hope our students will aspire to. (Lucas 1992, 3)

Portfolios, whether or not they are graded, can upgrade the notion that learning is an event or an assignment. In a classroom like Jane's, one event can trespass on another in the interest of extending learning.

Mary Kay's Classroom

Mary Kay Deen negotiates with her Mississippi second graders about what it means to build knowledge. They are hesitant, she discovers, and they need her encouragement:

We agreed on three purposes for developing the portfolios: to help the students see their growth and development as writers over a period of time; to help the students develop self-confidence by celebrating their accomplishments as writers; and to help the teacher see the students' growth as writers.

Our first struggle with change came when we began talking about the selection process. I realized how little power my children assumed they had, for they did not even consider that they could make their portfolio selections. However, with more discussion about writers and the choices and decisions they make in the process of writing, the children realized that writers know their own work better than anyone else. Writers know which piece is their best, their most important, and their favorite. Since the children were the writers who were developing portfolios, of course they should select the pieces! As a security net, I asked their permission to make a selection. They granted my request, and they also gave their parents an opportunity to choose a piece for their portfolio. (Deen 1993, 52)

Children learn all too early, as Mary Kay illustrates, that they are unworthy of having opinions, ideas, choices. Portfolio classrooms depend on the alternative: that children will learn, with the support of teachers like Mary Kay, that their knowledge is viable and valued and at the very least, a solid starting place for discovering and claiming even more knowledge.

Donald Graves shares Mary Kay's concern that children not be denied the opportunity, and therefore the ability to make informed portfolio selections:

Students need to learn to evaluate their own work. When I first began to teach writing thirty-five years ago, I allowed my students just one day of writing a week, corrected the daylight out of what they wrote, and knew I was the only one with enough sense to judge their work. They wrote for me, and I was proud of my standards. They feared my red pen; I called their fear respect. Worse, I

called their fear learning. Not once did I ask them to evaluate their own work. Consequently, they developed little skill in reading their own work. (Graves 1992, 85)

Graves suggests that with the teacher's guidance, young students practice making choices from their writing folders and labeling those choices with words such as "like," "hard," "surprise," "promise," "keep going," and "burn." Some papers may merit several labels and these multi-dimensional papers may look attractive to students as choices for their portfolio. The point is that students are learning about different ways to value their writing (Graves 1992, 93-94).

In Mary Kay's classroom, second graders grow steadily as portfolio decision-makers. Young Amy notes that she is good at "making the beginning, middle, and ending of my story . . . I can all so do revision very well." She especially appreciates the "sloppy copy" draft as a place where "I can jot down everything that flashes throw in my head." At the end of the year, her teacher says that Amy is "a little girl who knew the joy of learning" (Deen 1993, 57-58).

These stories teach us some of what it means to build knowledge in portfolio classrooms. Not everything they describe is neat or comfortable or even the same from class to class which, of course, makes us believe them. Portfolio classrooms are not like tract houses. One blueprint will not do for everyone. But at the same time, the teachers using portfolios share some common assumptions. For example:

- Portfolios are basically selections of student work for a purpose or purposes. The purposes can vary tremendously. In Jan's classroom, for example, portfolios exist to show growth over time and to give students the deed to their own learning. In Jane's class, they provide a respite from weekly grading and a reason to collaborate, revise, and move from one kind of writing to another.
- Portfolios contribute to learning best when they are under-invented. That is to say, if portfolios ask students to represent their own thinking, then students can no longer rely on the kind of "hand-me-down" requirements that put boundaries around their thinking. In Mary Kay's classroom, little eight-year-olds are treated as responsible and capable. Rather than being confined to what the teacher knows or requires, they qualify as members in good standing in a community of learners.

- Portfolios are, in fact, a tangible symbol of the construction of knowledge. Portfolios are actually built, piece by piece. In the process, they are nailed together and pried open and examined and nailed back together numerous times as students make and justify their portfolio decisions.

Reading and Writing in Portfolio Classrooms

In portfolio classrooms, teachers and students work together as readers and writers, researchers and learners, partners and mirrors for each other. Two different classroom stories—a high school and a primary school—illustrate this kind of culture.

Jan's ESL Classroom

I spent a year visiting Jan Bergamini's second period English class at Mount Diablo High School in Concord, California. All the students in this class were second language learners with two or three years of English under their belts. They came from Vietnam, Mexico, and Central and South America.

In Jan's class, they continued to learn English by being readers, writers and speakers of the language. The class in no way resembled what I remember from my high school experience with trying to learn a second language—an experience that can be described as “accuracy first, genuine communication second.” As I remember, we were all terribly self-conscious when it was our turn to write or talk. Our fondest wish was to become somehow invisible.

Jan's students started out with the same wish, I'm sure. They were shy, reluctant to expose their awkwardness with the language, uneasy voyagers on a precarious sea. Immediately, Jan asked them to keep learning logs, to record sentences or passages from their reading and respond in some honest way: “I don't understand,” they might write, or “this reminds me of . . .” or “this makes me feel . . .” From the learning logs, students began to talk to each other, to share papers, to take parts in plays, to ask questions. Most important, they paid attention to each other. In fact, the focus changed from frightened individuals who were turned inward, protecting themselves from any embarrassment, to an inclusive community of readers and writers who were turned outward, learning together and often from each other. The students began insisting that even finished projects be shared. The desks were constantly in motion, it seemed, forming small circles and then

large circles and then no circles—just a swap meet, with papers passing from student to student.

Jan worked backwards. She had her students read novels before they read short stories. She had them write to real people who lived outside the classroom before they wrote to her. So they became real readers and writers without having to pass through the ordeal of school reading and writing.

For example, Jan found a young reader medal novel called *Children of the River*. It is about a seventeen-year-old Cambodian girl named Sundara who comes to the U.S. alone, without her immediate family, to live with her aunt and uncle. She speaks no English and has no experience with American customs. In the course of the story, she attracts the attention of an American boy named Jonathan, who is equally ignorant of Cambodian customs, but who has his sights set on Sundara. Jan's students, especially the girls, read fervently. Here were their very own fantasies of adolescent love mixed together with their very own experiences as immigrants. Jan invited the students, once they finished reading and talking about their reading, to write to the author. Jan would write with them.

They gobbled up the invitation. Read what one student wrote, in part, to author Linda Crew:

Dear Ms Crew

Hi! My name is Tien. I am sixteen years old and I am in 11th grade. I came from Vietnam, but I am Chinese. My grandparents were born in China. They went to Vietnam because of the war, so my parents and I were born in Vietnam.

Now, let me tell you about my experience as an immigrant in the United States. In 1989 I arrived in America. I was about twelve years old and I was in the seventh grade. I remember the first day I step my foot to the new school. My fear of starting a new school did not subside. I feared not being able to fit in, not knowing my way around the new school in America, and not getting used to the different teachers who have different techniques of teaching. While I was looking for my first period class the bell started ringing and all the students came rushing past me. There were no familiar faces. Most of the students were white, black, Mexican and others, but not Vietnamese or Chinese.

By the time I found my class the tardy bell rang and I was late. When I walked into the room everyone was starting at me and I didn't comfortable at all. For the whole day I was sitting in the classed not knowing or understanding what the teachers were saying. I felt like I was stupid. The students even treated me like I am stupid too. Sometimes they make fun at me. This fear kept following me through the whole year and I was not able to concentrate in my classes, because I did not understand anything.

The first year in America and in school could be the worst year of my life. I hated to be an immigrant to a different country and to be a new student in a different school. I was so sad, but I still go to school everyday, because I want to learn English well to understand what they say and I want to show them that I am not stupid at all. Now, my English is not well yet, but at least I can understand what the teachers are saying.

The things that I liked this book is I told us the situations of the immigrants in this country and how hard for us to survive. Your novel is so similar to my life as an immigrant. And now I would like to ask you some questions. Do you really know Sundara? Can you please tell us what happen after she went out with Jonathan? Did they get marry?

Sincerely,
Tien

Let me comment on Tien's letter in this way. I came to Jan's class to learn more about second language acquisition. Yes, I was also curious about how portfolios worked in this kind of classroom, and I was also just plain curious. Tien asked me early on why I was visiting. "To learn from you," I said. "Well, you should have come last year when we still behaved," she said.

Indeed, they did behave—like extraordinary human beings and like readers and writers—behavior that makes portfolios possible. Try to imagine portfolios that would represent less than who you are, less than your achievements as a reader and writer—a portfolio of worksheets, for example. To bother with a portfolio is to bother with what makes a portfolio: a classroom culture that creates a common currency of reading and writing, a culture that encourages turning outward for genuine communication, and a culture that messes up the desks in the name of creating a community of learners and risk takers.

Lois's First Grade Classroom

Lois Brandts gives us a picture of what readers and writers look like in a first grade portfolio classroom, beginning with a description of the comings and goings of her young students:

. . . this first grade consisted of twenty-eight children, five of whom were bilingual. Eight of the children were sent to the reading specialist for a daily half hour of instruction, two went out for speech and language instruction twice a week, five saw the English Second Language teacher three times each week, and two saw the school counselor on a regular basis . . .

Overall, the class was wildly exuberant and often volatile. The yard duty personnel and other teachers frequently had to intervene in confrontations. Several of the boys worked at the art of rug-rolling, practicing it with determined

persistence. During nondirected instructional time the noise level often became unacceptable, prompting a substitute teacher to leave me a note asking if I had changed the class rules from “Speak in a soft voice,” to “Yell whenever you get the chance.”

Not visible on first appearance was how the culture of the classroom had evolved to bring the children to an understanding of themselves as participants in their own learning. From the first day of school, I incorporated community building activities and daily writing time. In September I sent each child a personalized letter at home welcoming them to school, and I invited each child and parent to join the community of first grade readers and writers. I also invited them to bring a favorite book for me to read during the first few getting-acquainted days. (Brandts 1993, 108-109)

What do we have here? A community that invites parents to be partners with their children in the process of becoming readers and writers. Lois asked the parents to write to her about their children, using an approach she learned from Lucy Calkins: “I want to fall in love with your child,” she told the parents in her note to them. “You have had several years to get to know one another intimately but I only have a few months to be with your child. Tell me all the wonderful things about your child. You can brag to your heart’s content.” Lois also asked the parents to stop in and browse through their child’s writing folder and to sign up for a home visit. It was this kind of contact that helped Lois to know her students more personally, to know what they might read and write about.

The children participated eagerly in the class writing workshop; so eagerly that one of them complained, after Lois had been absent, “We didn’t like it when you were gone. We didn’t do writing workshop *once!*” In the process of their workshop, they made portfolio selections three times during the year and dictated their reflections. Their final selections in their showcase portfolios, and their final reflections, went home with them, along with a letter from Lois asking each member of the family to thoughtfully read the portfolio and write a letter to the child about it.

And so the parents became readers and writers in concert with their children. One parent wrote:

Dear Alisha,

I just read your work from your writing portfolio. I really enjoyed your stories!

Your spelling has really improved since the first day of first grade. So has your handwriting.

I found out more about you by reading your stories and I always like finding out more about you!

I look forward to reading more of your stories in the future. Keep up the good work. You are a great author.

I love you, Mom

P.S. I like the story about Cally's babies and about Jessie and Lacey. (Brandts 1993, 115)

What Lois and her students and their parents teach us is that the power of portfolios lies behind the scenes: in the rug-rolling, the choosing of topics, the exchange of letters between home and school, the writing conferences between teacher and student, in short, in the community of readers and writers. Everyone can be a learner and a decision-maker in this classroom culture.

Notably, there are some absences from Lois' classroom. Absent are any kind of anti-thinking devices: packaged or standardized portfolios, generic writing assignments, formulaic representations of the writing or reading process, as if these could be superimposed on every child in every literacy situation. No, this classroom is living proof we do not need to purchase decisions. The price is too high. We would be denying ourselves and our students the fundamental value of being educated: the opportunity to think and solve problems and look critically at what we do. And in the case of portfolios, they would eventually starve to death in a classroom where thinking is out of favor.

Are there, then, essential features of a classroom in which portfolios thrive? According to Linda Rief, yes:

First, students must be immersed in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Second, they need to be given time in large blocks. Third, they need to be allowed choice as to what they are writing and reading—for their reasons, their purposes. Fourth, they must receive positive response to their ideas. (Rief 1992, 145)

Reflection in Portfolio Classrooms

In the case of portfolio classrooms, reflection means inviting students to analyze and evaluate their own learning.

In Jan Bergamini's class of second language learners, the students set goals for themselves, goals that they could later use as criteria for evaluating the work in their portfolios. Notice that their goals may be somewhat different than those of native speakers:

- Jose from El Salvador is not proud of his portfolio because it lacks long words, a goal for him. “In the real world,” he says, “You use long words. I should start to, right?”
- Yen from Vietnam writes that her goals for the year were to “write an accomplish paragraph and I have to pass my writing test but this year I have done just one part of my goals.” She sets her goal for the next year “to pass the writing test that I have fail on this year,” and she also takes note of her other needs as a writer: “I sometime confused about vocabulary and about match sentence and verb.”
- Tien, whom we have met before, laments that she, too, has not perfectly accomplished her goals: “By this time in my life I feel my writing is not good enough, because the way I write is not terse, I have to make a very long sentence to make people understand me, but there is one thing that I like about my writing is my detail, because I give a lot of example to make people understand. The goals that I working on are to make my writing to be terse and my grammer to be correct, I think I am getting better on this, better than last few years, but I want to be more better. Base on my writing I think people will know that my English is not well enough.”

From goals like these, the students make selections for their portfolios throughout the year, reflecting as they go on what they are learning and what helps them learn. By the end of the year, they are ready to make final choices and to present them to the entire English department at Mount Diablo High School. Here is the way one student evaluates her portfolio.

Miyuki is Asian and Latin. Her English, as you will see, is exceptional. She told me once when we were walking together on a field trip to the Berkeley campus that her next goal is to learn Japanese. She was asked to introduce her portfolio by addressing:

- what you like about your writing,
- what your goals were this year and how well you accomplished these goals,
- how someone would describe you based on your writing,
- and what helps you to do your best writing and how your next year’s teacher can help you.

Miyuki writes:

Dear English Teacher:

My name is Miyuki and I'm sixteen years old now. I came to the United States in December '91 and this was my first year at Mt. Diablo High.

In this portfolio I have five different pieces of writing that I've made throughout my junior year, especially the second semester.

About my writing I like everything. I like how I can develop a complete essay from a little idea or just the fact that I can write in English and others can understand what I'm trying to say.

My goals in this class are similar to everyone else that is learning English. I want to perfect my writing in spelling, punctuation marks, and the construction of stronger paragraphs and sentences. I've been reaching the beginning of my goals little by little with the passing of time, but I think I still need to get to the finish line.

By looking at my writing someone, I believe, would describe me as a responsible person who needs inspiration and encouragement to write strong, complete pieces of writing.

To do my best writing it helps me to have time to think about the issue and write a rough draft.

Sincerely,
Miyuki

Then for each piece of writing, Miyuki writes a separate introduction. For example:

The next piece was an assignment we did about courage. We were reading the book called "The Old Man and the Sea" and as you may know Santiago, the main character challenges the sea and goes beyond human boundaries of strength. He manages to survive because of his courage.

The purpose was to express what we knew as courage, or what courage meant to us at that time, using Santiago's example. You can look for expanded ideas, more details and stronger paragraphs.

I wasn't satisfied with the writing because it didn't show a well developed essay. It was only three paragraphs long and it didn't have strong content.

Notice that she provides a context—in this case, an assignment arising from her reading of a particular novel and the purpose of that assignment. She tells us what she was trying to accomplish and how the writing could be improved.

Most important, however, Miyuki has to make something of her writing and learning. It is not enough to simply produce and pick out pieces of writing, to slap together a table of contents and to check off requirements. In a portfolio classroom, the student is as responsible as the teacher for being a thoughtful observer and critic of her work. In effect, the student

reconstructs her efforts, rethinking the decisions and processes that went into the writing, and interpreting the results. In turn, these interpretations inform the teacher and often, other students as well. Learning becomes a collective enterprise, a pooling of experiences, information, and research, without the kind of limits that occur when only one person in the classroom—the teacher—is sanctioned to know something. To put it another way, no one is exempt from commitment, from thinking, from sizing-up learning.

Patience may be the watch word, however, as Rob Tierney warns us:

Don't expect a rapid return. It may take time to develop the necessary trust with your students and time before students become connoisseurs of their efforts, improvement, and process and effective self-monitors of their progress and future goals. We have found that students' evaluations initially may seem rather glib and limited. Over time, however, they do develop in scope and depth. Their involvement in the process may be what counts more than their diagnostic skill (Tierney 1991, 109-110).

As teachers, we need to be patient with ourselves as well. Few of us were ever the beneficiaries of a school or classroom that encouraged and taught choice, selection, and reflection. On the bright side, we may be free of preconceptions; we can be genuine partners-in-learning with our students.

Creating Learning Communities

Assessment, including portfolios, has often been called the tail that wags the dog. According to conventional wisdom, if we mandate another test, we will improve teaching and learning.

This is not so, and never has been. Simply hurling portfolios into classrooms will not magically transform teaching and learning anymore than rearranging the chairs will guarantee collaboration among learners. In any case, a classroom learning community, which is at the very heart of the assessment matter, cannot be mandated. To build such community, most of us need models and firsthand experiences.

Professional organizations like the National Writing Project, in their summer institutes and school year programs, engage teachers in the construction of knowledge so that the abstract concept "learning community" becomes more concrete and personal. Rather than skimming the surface of a discipline ("covering curriculum"), these programs invite teachers to dive deeply into their disciplines, to write themselves, to conduct classroom

research, and to demonstrate and debate practices that support student success in writing.

Any teacher who is experimenting with a new classroom culture deserves to work with other colleagues, or at the very least, with one trusted friend. Just as students can break out of isolation in a learning community, teachers can cast-off the school-imposed isolation that too often prevents them from taking on the role of learners. By collaborating with other professionals—whether in planning together, watching each other teach, developing class projects, or reading each other’s portfolios—they can create learning models for their own classrooms.

Another approach to developing a classroom of thinkers and learners may be for the teacher to wear as many hats as possible:

- the *we’re-in-this-together hat* that prompts teachers to collaborate with colleagues and with students to construct an inclusive environment where each person has a valued role and an acknowledged responsibility for advancing as writers and thinkers;
- the *participant/observer hat* that allows a teacher to teach and learn at the same time, to ask questions that are equally desirable for students to ask: what are we learning? what helps us learn? what do we need to learn next?
- the *disposable hat* that gives teachers, and therefore students, permission to experiment with new ideas and structures, to pile the counters with boxes and muddle through a system for picking up or passing out folders of writing. To establish a shaky truce with change, knowing that it will feel like a third arm for a while. To wave a white flag and start over when it is time to regroup, with the same determination but perhaps, a new set of conditions, informed by experience.

Clearly, none of us is going to create a hospitable home for portfolios by simply reading a book or following a checklist. On the other hand, if teachers’ learning takes place in the classroom, along with the students’, the character of everyone’s learning changes. It becomes “authentic”—a word that refers to authoring. When every classroom resident is involved in authoring—in planning, reading, writing, researching, collaborating, decision-making, and evaluating, chances are that learning will be both an individual and a communal enterprise, a collective construction of wisdom.

Questions about Portfolio Classrooms

How can we prevent portfolio classrooms and their advocates from fossilizing and proselytizing? Portfolio classrooms could be an endangered species if they become “the answer.” As with other “good ideas” in education, they could move predictably through a cycle that begins with thoughtful exploration, but soon gathers hard and fast converts, only to be used to separate teachers (traditional vs. progressive, cutting edge vs. sliding slope). In the final stage of the cycle, portfolio classrooms could be “dummied down,” reduced to easy steps that barely resemble the original idea.

How can we keep portfolio classrooms alive and dynamic? Claude Goldenberg gives sound advice when he asks teachers not to throw out all their old strategies when new ones come along. Portfolio classrooms, with their constructivist notions are “seductive.” But they are not a reason to ban teaching techniques like giving explanations and providing information:

Even Vygotsky advocated direct teaching. There is abundant evidence that when done well, explicit teaching aids learning . . . We should expect professional teachers to have at their disposal a wide range of skills and knowledge and be able to use specific strategies and techniques for well-defined purposes. Principles suggested by constructivist conceptions hold considerable promise; some argue they can revolutionize schools. But it would be unwarranted to give up instructional tools of demonstrated utility. The challenge is to achieve a productive balance and to use techniques and approaches strategically, not monolithically. Otherwise we risk constructivism’s deconstruction. (Goldenberg 1995, 3)

How can we keep the focus on portfolio classrooms rather than on portfolio furnishings like folders? According to Dennie Palmer Wolf, Eunice Ann Greer, and Joanna Lieberman, if portfolios are to be “worth their manila,” teachers and administrators may need to reorder their priorities:

In the years of working together, we have learned that you cannot collect, honor, and discuss student portfolios for very long without saying, “Why, oh why, didn’t we realize that you need to rethink teaching, curriculum, and learning before you rush about collecting and scoring their results?” (Wolf et al. 1995, 4)

How do we extend portfolio cultures beyond individual classrooms and into whole schools? Are there models of schoolwide learning communities? Central Park East Secondary School in East Harlem is one model. Its teachers and students unify every school and classroom endeavor around

five “Habits of Mind.” These habits include weighing evidence; taking into account different viewpoints; making connections between ideas, people, circumstances, and time periods; predicting or imagining various possibilities or alternatives; and assessing value to people and individuals. These goals are “neither academic nor vocational.” They are inclusive of academies and families and streets. They guide teaching, learning, and assessment. In short, they are “intellectual habits” that do not stop at the door of any single classroom, but rather, apply to life in school and out (Darling-Hammond and Ancess 1994, 7-8).

As powerful as the Habits of Mind seem to be, it is the process of creating them that is even more powerful. When professionals sit down together to decide what they want for their students, when they work together in exactly the same manner they want their students to work, they are establishing a learning community throughout their school. The model here is not the finished product. To superimpose it on some other school would not have the same effect as developing it. How we extend a portfolio culture is a question of how to enable teachers to design that culture.

How can we keep portfolio practices focused on real learning? How can we protect the initiative and investigative attitude they seem to foster? Real learning demands a “let’s see what happens” attitude. If we can resist nailing down a single answer for teaching or a single way of defining portfolios, we may be able to resist narrowing our options or defending a particular practice. Instead, we will give our students and ourselves the permission and power to candidly reflect on our work and to revise as often as necessary. We will increase our capacities, both individual and collective, to learn from our experiences, to be resourceful in creating new options, and to be courageous enough to decide on our own bright futures.