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Writing is Power: Critical Thinking, Creative Writing, and Portfolio Assessment

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Abstract

Portfolios can serve a critical role in helping students focus on expanding their minds through reading and discussion, clarifying their own thinking through writing, and broadening student's creative horizons. Additionally, portfolio assessment allows the flexibility to monitor individual student progress while meeting community, state, and national standards.

Introduction

E. M. Forester once queried, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" This question captures the essence of write-to-learn philosophy in education. Writing can and should be used to help students discover what they know or think about a subject. Writing assignments should be geared toward helping students get to know their own thoughts. The contemporary literature classroom should help students focus on expanding their minds through reading and discussion, clarify their own thinking through writing, and broaden students' creative horizons. Portfolios serve a critical role in meeting these goals.

Critical Thinking and Writing-to-Learn

John Bean (1996) asserts that "[g]ood writing assignments produce…the need to join, in a reasoned way, a conversation of differing voices" (p. 19). Literature is important for each of us because it helps us share our "voices," see one another as equal yet different human beings, and stimulates discussion about ideas. To "appreciate the connection between good thinking and good writing, [one] needs to see knowledge as something other than discrete bits of information to be studied and stored in memory (Bean, 1996, p. 17). In other words, students need to learn to think critically about knowledge and the world—to evaluate information and reach an educated opinion about it, not merely accept it at face value. Students today live in an information-driven society. The challenge for them is to learn how to evaluate and use that information-to find the *meaning* in the knowledge-so that the knowledge can successfully be applied to new situations.

When we write-to-learn what we think, we are practicing critical thinking in its basic form. A letter to a relative, a note to a friend, and a diary entry are all examples of the writing-to-learn theory if the writer discovers what she thinks as she is writing. Write-to-learn assignments capitalize on students' prior knowledge and force them to evaluate that knowledge in order to reach meaningful, personalized conclusions. Hence, such assignments allow students to build on prior knowledge in order to progress to the next cognitive level of maturity. Moreover, write-to-learn strategies generally utilize Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1956), specifically the levels of application, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis.

Creative Writing is Creating Thinking

People are attracted to what interests them, so students will naturally want to explore personal interests. This simple observation is the foundation of creative writing. Ken Macrorie (1980), a renowned writing process theorist, maintains that writing activities should stem from students' interest so that education can take advantage of a natural need-to-know inclination in the human heart. Exploratory writing begins the creative writing process. "Exploratory writing takes practice, but once mastered, it is a powerful tool for focusing the mind on a problem and stimulating thought" (Bean, 1996, p. 98). Like writing to learn, exploratory writing unfolds as the student writes, although exploratory writing is more reflective in nature and open in form. Writing is a process, not a product-oriented task, and expressive writing (i.e., exploratory writing) is a form of communication closest to that of speech. Accordingly, what might begin as an informal, intra personal journal entry could grow—through process revisions—to a publishable piece. Likewise, German writing theorists have long distinguished between two modes of expression in essay writing: "a dealing with versus a setting forth" (Hardison, 1989, p. 12). Writing to learn is an essential method of employing writing in the classroom. However, the abundance of assignments is problematic for the teacher, so portfolio evaluation must be considered as an option.

The Efficacy of Portfolio Assessment

For the educator, the construct is two-fold: producing writing assignments which stimulate students to cognitive growth and freedom of expression, and developing an appropriate assessment strategy which genuinely monitors students' growth as writers yet doesn't quash new-found creativity. Assessment, therefore, must be student-oriented, not teacher-centered. Just as writing instruction is geared toward process, student assessment must be seen in the light of the student as a changing human being and emergent writer. As students become more comfortable putting their pens to paper to discover their own thoughts, they become empowered decision makers about their own progress as writers. The teacher *must* capitalize on this opportunity for students to take charge of their own writing. Self-assessment is crucial.

Portfolio assessment is appropriate for meeting these fundamental objectives of stimulating cognitive development, inspiring creativity, and promoting student

responsibility. De Fina (1992) outlines several student-centered objectives of portfolio assessment: to examine growth over time, to develop a sense of process, to creative a means of self-evaluation, to determine individual goals, to empower confidence as developing writers, to be presented with real-life learning opportunities, and to observe language development (pp. 31-33). The basic procedures for implementing portfolio assessment varies according to teacher, students, course material, and course objectives. The portfolio assessment method is most efficacious as it incorporates multitudinous learning styles, student self-assessment, peer assessment, parent assessment, and finally teacher assessment of selected writing assignments. The students learn and practice the writing process continually: pre-writing, organizing ideas, drafting, revising, proofreading, and publishing. Students, after investing in revision, determine which selections the teacher will evaluate. Cooper and Brown (1992) offer compelling support for portfolio assessment: "When students make tentative selections for portfolios and especially when they compile interim portfolios, evaluate them, and reflect on what they notice, they can reinforce their own learning processes and set goals for future learning. Often, writing about their reflections in such interim portfolios can help them see where they have come from and clarify where they want to go " (p. 45). Moreover, students help determine criteria the teacher will follow when evaluating.

Regarding grading of finished works, Bratcher (1994) emphasizes that "grading" is defined as "communication between teacher and student that is designed to enhance the student's writing" (p. 9). Accordingly, clear standards for evaluation of finished pieces need to be established so that communication is clear about the merits and demerits of student writing in the eyes of the teacher. The student's overall progress as a writer is always the central issue. It follows that not every attempted piece of writing should be evaluated by the teacher, especially when writing is used as a learning tool. After all, a piano instructor, a driver's ed teacher, and an athletic coach would never dream of formally evaluating and scoring a student's performance during *practice* sessions, nor should the teacher of writing mark every paper a student writes. Writing is power, and in order for students to realize that power, they must be given unlimited "penalty-free" attempts to write along with the responsibility to evaluate themselves as writers. Portfolio assessment offers flexibility while facilitating freedom.

Administering portfolio assessment can be as simple or as complicated as the teacher, students, and circumstances dictate. In brief, students keep their writings, and as time progresses, they select pieces to revise. Teachers hold writing conferences with students to aid them in revision strategies. At the conclusion of a given time period (e.g., an instructional unit, a quarter, or a semester), students and teacher formulate criteria for evaluation, and students assemble and submit either the entire portfolio or selected revisions. In this publication state, if time allows, students can offer public readings to the class. Furthermore, computer labs can be used to have classes compile an anthology of students' best works. The library can be given copies of class anthologies to shelve, poetry readings can be organized, creative writing contests can be formulated (and entered) and a school literary magazine can be generated. The possibilities of creativity and the extension of portfolio assessment are endless.

Portfolio Assessment in the 21ˢᵗ Century

The 21ˢᵗ century will undoubtedly bring unforeseen challenges to our information-driven society. People will no longer be expected to simply memorize reams of information that is readily available at the touch of a button. The ability to internalize information and convert it into usable knowledge will become tantamount to success. Students must be stimulated to break free to cognitive comfort zones. Educational pedagogy spanning the 20ᵗʰ century supports the notion that writing as a means of discovering thought—not merely restating information—stimulates cognitive development.

In response to the contemporary movement in education to standardize assessment of knowledge, a project designed to experiment with portfolio assessment has been launched jointly by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA). The New Standards Project (NSP) coordinates with more than twenty states. The goal of NSP is to institute portfolio assessment that is "performance-based" and "linked to a set of high national standards" (Spalding, 1995, p. 2). Spalding (1995) furthermore asserts that "portfolios encourage students to think creatively, critically, and logically;…to set goals for their own literacy learning;…and to demonstrate their ability to use reading, writing, listening, and speaking in an integrated way and for authentic purposes" (p. 2). Moreover, the teachers participating in the field project use the portfolio-based assessment to serve local accountability and curricular needs (Spalding, 1995, p. 2). The nuts and bolts structure of the NSP calls for a "shift from [thinking] of portfolio-as-product to portfolio-as-process" (Spalding, 1995, p. 5). Students work with teachers to set up quantities and types of submissions. Usually about a dozen pieces are submitted, which meet broad as well as specific goals, along with reflective entry slips. Clearly, collaboration at the student, teacher, local system, state, and national levels is required for success.

In Georgia, Faust and Kieffer (1998) launched their own pilot portfolio project in response to the NSP. Firm advocates of NSP, the authors "focused on five areas (process, purpose, community building, learning, teacher practices) with underlying themes of the teacher as learner, connections between evaluation and learning, and equity and excellence for all" (p. 6). The teachers involved in their project each had individual motives for participating in the project, attesting to the range of utility of portfolio assessment. One teacher participant stated: "[C]reating a portfolio…affirmed…the idea that what goes on in the classroom can be important to the students. It's hard to see that one a test or an essay…" (Faust & Kieffer, 1998, p. 7). Faust and Kieffer (1998) most liked the portfolio system because it allows for formulation of local curriculum decisions and flexibility in transferring knowledge about student progress from year to year (p. 7). Finally, Faust and Kieffer (1998) conclude: "From the teacher's perspective, approaching portfolio use as a process can help to distinguish among competing evaluation purposes so that standards may be upheld without, at the same time, perpetuating the illusion that learning can be standardized" (p. 8). Based on the NSP as well as on Faust and Kieffer's project, the portfolio method of assessment may allow for national standards of

excellence without depersonalizing education and extinguishing students' desires to write.

Expressive writing creates comfort and confidence in the mind of the student. Through creating new writing habits, the student overcomes the fear of writing and possibilities for creativity and growth open up. Portfolio assessment places limited boundaries on the role of writing in students' lives and empowers them to take chard of their own learning. Cooper and Brown (1992) offer a convincing final word on the efficacy of portfolio assessment:

> We have come to believe that, when students become more conscious of the many decisions they make in order to improve their writing, when they begin to be aware of the processes they must engage in to produce effective writing, and when they finally look over a body of their work, judging it against a set of criteria they have developed and internalized, they are engaged in the kind of thinking characteristic of writers (p. 45).

Engagement, critical thinking, and self-assessment are necessary for educating people in today's world. Portfolio assessment allows the flexibility to monitor individual student progress while meeting community, state, and national standards.

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