

SPREADING THE WORD . . . AND POSSIBLY REGRETTING IT: CURRENT WRITING ABOUT PORTFOLIOS

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Portfolios: Process and Product, ed. Pat Belanoff and Marcia Dickson. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991.

The Whole Language Catalog Supplement on Authentic Assessment, ed. Kenneth S. Goodman, Lois Bridges Bird, and Yetta M. Goodman. Santa Rosa, CA: SRA, 1992.

Portfolio Portraits, ed. Donald H. Graves and Bonnie S. Sunstein. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992.

Portfolio Assessment in the Reading-Writing Classroom, ed. Robert J. Tierney, Mark A. Carter, and Laura E. Desai. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon, 1991.

Portfolios in the Writing Classroom, ed. Kathleen Blake Yancey. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1992.

In just a very few years, the use of portfolios from kindergarten through graduate school has become a phenomenon. Peter Elbow sees it “as a fad—though I hope not *only* a fad”

(Belanoff and Dixon xi). Yet, as fad or phenomenon, portfolios are becoming—a growth industry, if the list of books above is an indication, or the existence of a Portfolio Assessment Clearinghouse with a newsletter, *Portfolio News*. In fact, portfolios can be said to have “arrived” if only because state boards of education—in Vermont and Ohio, to name only two—are promoting or requiring their use as classroom or large-scale assessment vehicles.

This speedy acceptance of a truly revolutionary evaluation and assessment tool no doubt grows out of increasing recognition that learning to write and read cannot be taught as *processes* yet evaluated as *products*, cannot be taught as integrated and interrelated yet tested as itemized and fragmented. (In fact, given the spread of portfolio use in science, mathematics, and other subjects, it’s fair to say this of learning, period.) Portfolios permit teachers and students to see their work over time, to see the growth of their abilities, to assess their best or most representative work, and to reflect on their progress. Portfolios permit “authentic assessment,” which Goodman et. al. define this way: “To be authentic, the tasks must be real ones that could and do occur in the real world outside of school. The language of authentic assessment must be functional, meaningful in a particular social context, and have all the characteristics of natural discourse. . . . [L]anguage is kept whole and integrated with the content being learned” (2).

In other words, portfolios start and end with the premise that “the proof is in the pudding,” that students should be evaluated on what they can *do* with language and learning in a meaningful context. Why this idea should be so revolutionary must be of interest to artists, designers, architects, journalists, and other folk who have used portfolios as centerpieces of their training and professional advancement for decades. Working at the margins of intellectual life as “creative artists” or career-bound preprofessionals, these people escaped the atomizing of their subjects and work into discrete “basic skills” that could be tested in isolation from meaningful use. Instead, they could represent their work as intellectual work that results in tangible, sharable, “authentic” products—paintings, etchings, blueprints, clipped articles—to be evaluated not in isolation but in a body, as a whole.

As always, when one group adopts something that originated with another, changes must take place to make the new piece fit the altered circumstances and to distinguish the new from similar, preexisting things. Defining just what a portfolio is and is not is part of this adaptation process, and the differing ways portfolios are being considered accounts for my title. In one book, portfolios are defined as more than writing folders, a mere collection of student work that is honored more in the breach than in the observance: "Instead of my students throwing their papers in the waste can, they tossed them into the folders" (Newkirk, in Yancey 32). In another, though, the writing folder can be reconstrued as a "holistic portfolio," a theory-based record of students' development as writers (Sommers, in Belanoff and Dickson). For some, the value of portfolios lies in their ability to further self-examination and personal growth, while for others, portfolios represent an alternative to other assessment vehicles. In short, the term "portfolio" embraces a broad range of forms, purposes, and applications that render its use as an umbrella term difficult; reading the essays that comprise these books compels the question, "What's *your* definition of portfolios?"

This question demonstrates for many of the editors of these volumes the richness of the portfolio concept. The breadth of the offerings in most of them attest to the many ways portfolios can be conceived and used successfully, and the authors argue convincingly for the adoption of portfolios in various teaching situations. In the midst of this proselytizing, though, a different note sounds. Kathleen Blake Yancey worries about a "bandwagon effect" that will "reduce" portfolio use "to a set of easily-described steps so that it can be taught to and required of whole faculties of teachers in one or two in-service sessions. . . ." She continues, "Learning to 'do it right,' to integrate this process into one's classroom, live with it through its failures and misfires, hone it, adapt it, transform it, requires really studying, not just being willing to offer it some time" (3-5). Robert J. Tierney cautions, "Ideally, we would prefer that teachers proceed as if they were investigating the possibility of using portfolios for the first time" (xiv). And Donald Graves worries that "there are already signs that using portfolios in education is becoming a rigid process" (Graves and Sunstein 1).

This nervousness seems to have two faces. On the one hand, these writers clearly want the power to define portfolios

to reside with classroom teachers; indeed, the smorgasbord of ideas, articles, and reviews that makes up *The Whole Language Catalog* demonstrates the editors' invitation to teachers to "take responsibility for picking and choosing among the alternatives . . . [and to] feel free to adapt procedures and forms to fit their own situations and their own developing whole language principles" (2). This is a proper stance to take, given the disempowerment of teachers by the basic skills and assessment movements and the pernicious effects of both. On the other hand, several of these collections' editors seem touched by a sort of anticipatory nostalgia, as they look ahead to a time when the ideas they are so forcefully promoting will be accepted—and it just won't be the same anymore. It'll be too easy to do; teachers won't have to work as hard as they did; the rewards won't be as sweet.

Well, maybe so, but if portfolios become as common and accepted, even routinized, in language arts classrooms as they are in the fine and applied arts, where is the loss? Certainly, as Graves points out, the growing popularity of portfolios likely means that in some places, for some reasons, teachers, schools, even states will adopt versions of portfolios that do not reflect their ultimate capability or that reflect a watered-down compromise of the vision that portfolio proponents hold. And in some places, portfolios are being bastardized, their richness reduced to yet another numerical score that permits comparisons among students. But, despite the dangers of mechanical or boneheaded implementation, to ask all teachers to work through the issues and problems of portfolios with the dedication that Yancey proposes is to ask too much—teachers, like everyone else, have differing agendas and interests that lead them to explore various areas related to their teaching. Further, to relegate portfolio use to the teachers in each school or district who have the energy, the personal commitment, indeed the strength to take on a big additional job, often without support from their peers, relegates portfolio use to a minority, when many, if not most, teachers and students could benefit from their use.

Let me illustrate. I work with three teachers in two school systems near Dayton, Ohio. Each of these three teachers has created writing and reading workshops in her English classes and is adopting whole language principles and practices. Each has joined NCTE; each attends regional conferences on writing and language arts teaching. And each teacher works virtually

alone in her building, as the other teachers reject whole language and insist on skills, drills, grammar study, and five-paragraph themes. These other teachers are slowly being forced to change as the state implements a model language arts curriculum that promotes whole language, portfolio use, and integration of language arts instruction throughout the curriculum and across grade levels—but they are unlikely to heed Yancey’s injunction to work hard and study hard, for their rewards will be great. Will their classrooms reflect a bastardized or impoverished notion of whole language? Perhaps in some cases. But over the years I’ve seen too many dedicated, intelligent, caring teachers who are rightly skeptical of educational trends, phenomena, or fads, having seen how hastily-adopted curricula (the “New Math” comes to mind) have harmed the students they teach and care about. These teachers may need to walk through a standardized portfolio curriculum, one amenable to one or two in-service presentations, several tentative times before they decide that it has the benefits these enthusiasts claim.

A second area of ambivalence in these writings about portfolios concerns their uses. What should portfolios measure, and what should they not be used for? Three of the collections (*Process and Product*, *Portraits*, and the *Supplement*) include essays on both classroom uses and other, large-scale uses for portfolios. Two, Tierney’s and Yancey’s, focus almost entirely on classroom portfolios. All five books, though, spend considerable effort positioning portfolios in relation to externally-imposed assessment demands: standardized testing, in the case of elementary and secondary teachers; and proficiency and exit testing, in the case of college teachers and writing programs. Indeed, the authors’ and editors’ needs to discuss the benefits of portfolio assessment over other forms of assessment indicate the extent to which portfolios face an uphill battle for acceptance, despite the “bandwagoning” that the editors simultaneously worry about. As several states, school districts, and universities develop large-scale assessment programs built around portfolios, all the issues that plague assessment in any form (other than Opscan, multiple-guess tests) become magnified: who’s going to read the portfolios, how will they have time to do it, how much will the reading cost, and what will they show? Will educators be allowed to abandon standardized tests, which educators generally agree are “simple-minded and essentially inappropriate indicators of

classroom performance and of the abilities and achievement of most students” (Robert F. Carey, in Goodman et. al. 31)?

As Cherryl Armstrong Smith observes in her essay, “Writing Without Testing,” writing and language arts teachers should actively question the appropriateness of testing writing as “some subject that can be learned, once and for all, and then systematically tested” (Belanoff and Dickson 291). Portfolios used in this way, rather than as part of the ongoing conversation among groups of teachers and students in particular instructional contexts, only perpetuate a fundamental misconception about writing that portfolios offer to correct.

Part of that correction includes the widespread notion that students’ work should be evaluated by teachers alone (what Tierney calls “the power to separate the wheat from the chaff” [108]), a notion that all five of these books unite in exploding. Whether they call it self-reflection, self-assessment, or metacognition, these authors agree that the single most important aspect of portfolio use is the means portfolios offer students to learn about themselves as writers, readers, and students. Indeed, Yancey coins the term “reflective evaluation” to define students’ attempts to think about and evaluate their own work, activity that Yancey believes “is essential to a writer’s growth toward confidence and mastery, in fact is the very stuff of learning” (2). Indeed, in reviewing research on cognitive development, Karen Mills-Courts and Minda Rae Amiran assert that “it is extremely important to create situations in which students must think about their own thinking, reflect on the ways in which they learn and why they fail to learn. . . . It’s clear that the more students are aware of their own learning processes, the more likely they are to establish goals for their education and the more deeply engaged they are in those processes” (Belanoff and Dixon 103). Portfolios, with false starts, rough drafts, revisions, best work, and work that could be improved, offer perfect opportunities for students to come to understand how they go about writing, reading, and learning.

What, then, should teachers wanting to know more about portfolios read? While all these volumes offer a wealth of advice, case studies, and stories about classrooms and students that have used portfolios successfully, each has a different stance toward both its subjects and its audience, so that teachers may choose among them to meet differing needs.

The stance of *The Whole Language Catalog Supplement on Authentic Assessment* is unabashedly argumentative, many-voiced, and at the same time practical. An oversize (11" x 13") paperback modelled, like its namesake, on *The Whole Earth Catalog* of the '60's, the *Supplement* is a good-natured compendium of theoretical essays, practical tips, sample evaluation forms, good advice, and book reviews that is meant to be sampled or read selectively, not cover-to-cover. Its first two sections offer 74 pages of material on "Revaluing Assessment" and "Teaching as Inquiry" that all together argue forcefully for such forms of authentic assessment as portfolios and against current evaluation practices and the teaching and learning models that inform them. "Running features" include a series of essays by Sharon Murphy of York University, "A Closer Look at Standardized Tests," and another series by Ken Goodman on "the myths and metaphors that surround our traditional view of evaluation and . . . how they have led to evaluate misuses" (3). An excellent general resource, this book should be helpful for teachers who need to convince fellow teachers, administrators, and legislators that portfolios are better evaluation tools than many of the ones currently in use—and who like to dip into books, rather than read them linearly.

Ironically, *Portfolio Assessment in the Reading-Writing Classroom*, by Robert Tierney and others, and *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom: An Introduction*, edited by Kathleen Blake Yancey, fall into the same category despite Tierney's book being an example of the sort of codification of portfolio use that concerns Yancey. Yancey's collection focuses on seven teachers, from middle school to basic writing in college, who have adopted portfolios in various forms in their courses. In exploring the different ways portfolios can be conceived of and used, the authors present thoughtful stories about their classrooms and their search for appropriate ways to make portfolios part of them. As they tell of getting started, introducing portfolios, and dealing with the changes in their classrooms the portfolios caused, they provide much information both about the use and management of portfolios and about the ways teachers need to think about their classes in order for ideas like portfolios to take hold. If the *Supplement* offers arguments for teaching as inquiry, Yancey's book provides models.

By contrast, Tierney's book is an unabashed how-to; with the exception of that second chapter on assessment (which offers arguments similar to those in the *Supplement* but compressed and summarized), the book offers explicit advice for teachers at all levels on how to think about portfolios, how to get started with them, how to keep them going, how to encourage students to assess their own portfolios, and how to analyze portfolios and keep good records. A wealth of sample forms, both blank and filled-in, and specific advice on everything from "Introducing the portfolio concept" to "Meeting the needs of next year's teacher" make this a very useful book for teachers who want to use portfolios but need more guidance than stories by teachers who have used them can provide.

The only book that focuses primarily on university writing courses and programs (though 3 of its 23 essays offer perspectives from high schools), *Portfolios: Process and Product* explores the politics of placement and proficiency testing, portfolios in the context of writing programs, and issues of academic freedom in mandating portfolio use as well as nuts-and-bolts advice on how to use and evaluate portfolios in the classroom. Although the most theoretically-oriented of the five, this volume offers college writing teachers—and other teachers interested in what goes on in universities—good insights and advice on portfolios. As a university writing program administrator, I found Jeffrey Sommers's essay on using portfolios in college writing classrooms and Marcia Dickson's piece on academic freedom worth the admission.

I've saved Donald H. Graves's and Bonnie S. Sunstein's *Portfolio Portraits* for last because in some ways I find it the most intriguing of the books. *Portraits* takes a different approach to the need for teachers to rethink their own behavior in order to make portfolios effective. Graves and Sunstein posit that to know the uses and power of portfolios, "we need more policy makers, administrators, and teachers who know portfolios *from the inside*. . . . If the portfolio movement is to remain fresh, we must maintain portfolios ourselves" (5-6). In their view, we define literacy first by our own personal histories as writers and readers and thinkers. Only when we better understand "what we value in literacy" (xvi) can we truly understand how to use portfolios effectively. This premise obviously grows out of the more commonly accepted idea that to teach writing, teachers

must themselves write, but despite my acceptance of that idea, the thought of creating a personal portfolio didn't appeal to me. I didn't have the time, I had several excellent excuses. But, in the process of preparing to do an in-service presentation, I decided to give it a try. I started with a 3-ring notebook and, following their advice, began selecting materials that represented me as a writer and reader: a list of books I'd recently read, my most recent essay collection, a recent scholarly essay, an unpublished children's story, the only poem I've written in years, and a T-shirt from a writing program I'd developed—to show myself in my various roles as writer and reader. In the process of selecting the pieces, I found that I had to review several years of accumulated writing, but I also had to develop categories: just who *is* “Rich Bullock, writer”? I learned from the exercise, even in this truncated form, and I now see the value of keeping a portfolio if I'm going to ask my students to keep one.

In fact, what Graves and Sunstein advocate—that we as teachers do what we're asking our students to do—seems the most likely way to keep portfolios in use in language arts classrooms. It's easy to develop educational programs for others, but when—as I did—teachers feel the effects of programs not only in their classrooms but in their own lives, they are more likely to adopt those programs enthusiastically, rather than begrudgingly or mechanically. By starting with teachers' own literacy as reflected in their own portfolios, Graves and Sunstein may have the cure for Yancey's and Tierney's concerns about the future of portfolios in those teachers' classrooms.