USING PORTFOLIOS TO EVALUATE TEACHERS: LEARNING FROM OURSELVES

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For evaluating writing, portfolios have been touted as an assessment method with advantages over other methods; portfolios allow teachers a window on a writer's work in process, and they allow writers the opportunity to reflect on their own work (Larsen; Belanoff and Elbow). Portfolios have also been adapted for the evaluation of teachers and their teaching. In a recent American Association for Higher Education publication (Edgerton, et al), the authors describe how teachers can develop a written record of their teaching through assembling a teaching portfolio. Just as the teacher evaluation process parallels in many ways the evaluation of writing, so the teaching portfolio can be seen as parallel to the writing portfolio. In this article, I will explore how what we have learned from writing portfolios can help us to design teacher evaluations using teaching portfolios.

Mary Ellen Weimer in her book *Improving College Teaching* emphasizes that if teacher improvement is the desired outcome of a teacher evaluation program, teachers must voluntarily participate in the process. We know this with our writing students; we can make suggestions for revisions, but unless they truly

want to improve a piece of writing, nothing we say will matter. All teachers should be invited to participate in any teacher evaluation program, but each teacher should be put in charge of his or her own instructional improvement plan. Individuals should decide the extent of the changes and the means employed to accomplish the changes. The evaluator, then, serves as a resource person, just as the writing teacher serves as a resource person, making suggestions for change but ultimately allowing the student, or in this case the teacher, ownership of his or her own improvement process. When we are working closely with teachers in a coach-improver rule, we see them weaving a "text" of their own teaching, just as we see writers weave a text as we coach them through subsequent drafts. A teacher's woven "text" can be captured in the form of a teaching portfolio.

Portfolios seek to capture the complexity of teaching and writing and, furthermore, to encourage the portfolio's compiler to self-reflect on the meaning of its contents. The AAHE document calls this "reflective practice," the necessary precursor of improvement. They do, however, point out as well that we need to carefully determine the needs and purposes for teaching portfolios: needs which range from "evaluating a candidate for promotion and tenure to facilitating good conversation about teaching" (7). Once we have determined our purposes, then decisions about format and content of the portfolio can follow.

Edward Kearns points out this same confusion of purposes in writing portfolio assessment. If our purpose is to assess writing competency, say Kearns, it makes sense to establish appropriate criteria and to assess whether or not students are able to meet those criteria: "the question of a student's 'best' writing is irrelevant" (51) in competency assessments. If, on the other hand, our assessment purpose is for placement of students into appropriate courses, "then we wish not only to exempt some students from unnecessary course work, but also to direct others toward needed courses and services" (51). Kearns points out that for placement purposes what we need are representative rather than best writing samples. In his article, Kearns argues that writing portfolios serve neither the competence nor the representative assessment purposes; rather, they fulfill a third purpose or goal: "to help students become independent and personally empowered" (52) writers.

Similarly, we often have a confusion of purposes when assessing teachers. What are our reasons for evaluating teachers anyway? What do we hope to accomplish? Two related but conflicting goals underlie most teacher evaluation: one is the goal of accountability (achieved through summative evaluations of performance); the other is the goal of improvement in classroom teaching and learning (achieved through formative evaluations of performance). Too often in teacher evaluation, the two goals are conflated.

To illustrate this confusion of purposes, I would like to recount an incident that occurred at the Breckenridge WPA conference in the summer of 1992. One of the keynote speakers was Pat Hutchings, who has done considerable work with teaching portfolios in conjunction with the AAHE's teaching initiative. Pat asked the conference audience whether any of them had used teaching portfolios at their schools. I was very surprised when no one from the contingent who teach writing at a large research university raised her hand. I was under the impression, from conversations with the writing program director, that this particular university used teaching portfolios extensively when evaluating writing faculty. In later conversations with some of those writing faculty, I discovered that what the director called "teaching portfolios" the writing faculty called "tenure dossiers." The writing faculty did not consider these dossiers as teaching portfolios at all because their purpose was to document their own teaching abilities for tenure and promotion decision-making (a summative purpose) rather than for improvement of teaching (a formative purpose).

The terms formative and summative evaluation were introduced by Michael Scriven in a 1967 AERA monograph (as cited in the *American Educators' Encyclopedia*). Formative evaluation is defined as "assessment that takes place during the developmental (formative) stages of a program or a product" (226). Information gathered during a formative assessment "may then be used to alter a program, to revise materials, to restructure a program design, or to reconsider goals and objectives" (226).

In contrast, summative evaluation is defined as "the assessment of the overall effectiveness of a program or a product. Unlike formative evaluation, which is carried out during the development of a program, summative evaluation takes place after a program is fully developed and implemented" (551). The

encyclopedia points out that "the results of summative evalua-
tions usually are a major concern for policy makers, and the
results of formative evaluations are of particular interest to . . .
those working in the program" (552).

As I am using these terms, formative evaluation of teachers
occurs as they are teaching and is designed to provide infor-
mation that may help them to alter their teaching in ways that
improve student learning; similarly formative evaluations of wri-
ters occur as they are drafting, often through peer or teacher
conferencing, and are designed to help the writer improve a
particular piece. In contrast, summative evaluations of teachers
occur as a one-time assessment to judge overall teaching per-
formance with the purpose of "summing up" the effectiveness
of that performance, usually as a way to guide administrators
in personnel decisions. Similarly, summative evaluation of writing
occurs when the student turns in a finished product and the
teacher evaluates it for a grade. Most assessment instruments,
and the resultant data, including portfolios, can be used for
either formative or summative evaluation purposes.

Too often in portfolio assessments, because the formative
is not separated from the summative, the two goals of account-
ability and improvement are used as though interchangeable
when in fact they may not even be compatible. For example, a
summative performance review of the dossier of a teacher who
has received numerous complaints may have as its purpose the
documenting of that teachers' inadequacies for purposes of
terminating his or her employment. We shouldn't delude our-
selves into thinking that such an evaluation is meant to help the
teacher improve. On the other hand, a formative evaluation
using a teaching portfolio is intended to provide the teacher with
valuable feedback that can be used in self-improvement efforts.
In formative evaluations, one gets another chance, an oppor-
tunity to "revise" one's performance. And a serious effort at
formative evaluation may mitigate the necessity for extensive
summative evaluation, because the evaluator is able to see the
shaping of a teacher or a writer over time in a rich and varied
context.

I would like to turn now to a discussion of the formative
uses of portfolios, with the attendant goals of teacher and writer
improvement. Bonnie Sunstein in her introduction to the collec-
tion *Portfolio Portraits*, says that "Portfolios mean more than

evaluation or assessment. They are tied to our definition of literacy. When we read and write constantly, when we reflect on who we are and who we want to be, we cannot help but grow. Over time, portfolios help us identify and organize the specifics of our reading and writing. They catalogue our accomplishments and goals, from successes to instructive failures . . . We need to allow portfolios some growing and breathing space before we freeze them into a definition or a standardized mandate" (xii). Although Sunstein was speaking specifically of writing portfolios, I would argue for giving teaching portfolios similar growing time and breathing space before using them summatively in what Pat Hutchings calls high-stakes employment decisions.

Because of the similarities between teaching and writing portfolios, it is instructive to apply some of what we have learned about effective practice with writing portfolios to teaching portfolios. Donald Graves in Chapter 1 of *Portfolio Portraits* outlines "seven principles to insure growth," when using portfolios. Each of Graves' principles can be constructively applied to formative uses of teaching portfolios as well:

1. INVOLVE THE [TEACHERS] BEING EVALUATED.

"The portfolio movement promises one of the best opportunities for students to learn how to examine their own work and participate in the entire literacy/learning process" (4).

When we evaluate teachers, we have typically approached it the same way that we have approached evaluating students— top down. We know from Weimer and others that teacher improvement will occur only when the teachers are not only involved in the process but also ultimately have control over their own improvement agendas. Weimer points out that faculty often resist efforts at instructional improvement, especially when they are imposed from "above." First, faculty feel threatened because the "need to improve implies incompetence in professional arenas where they see themselves as experts" (17). Second, they feel threatened because attention to their teaching makes them feel personally vulnerable and open to scrutiny and criticism. Sometimes faculty resistance can be overcome in the context of support for any and all efforts to improve, but it would be naive to suppose that all faculty will cheerfully sign on.

Just as students need to be encouraged to reflect on their writing and learning, teachers need to be encouraged to reflect on their teaching. A number of methods are helpful to faculty, everything from peer coaching programs to master teacher mentoring programs, to videotaping and self-critique, to teaching portfolios. The literature suggests that one of the main problems with efforts to improve teaching is the breakdown between ideas learned by faculty at workshops and seminars and the actual implementation of these ideas in the classroom. I would venture to guess that a similar breakdown might occur once a teaching portfolio has been developed. We need to work toward a cycle of learning, self-reflection, and performance feedback for improvement actually to take hold in the classroom.

2. HELP THE STAFF KEEP PORTFOLIOS OF THEIR OWN.

"Professionals engaged in portfolio study [who have not kept portfolios themselves] are not unlike professionals who teach writing without writing themselves" (5).

Administrators who are in the role of evaluating teachers should be encouraged to keep portfolios of "reflective practice" on their own work. In this way, we can all become better at explaining our work to ourselves and to others. Administrators, myself included, are notoriously devoid of reflective practice. We also have a hard time explaining our administrative work— for example, where is the evidence for what I do as a WPA and as an Assistant Department Head? The AAHE document suggests that what should be included in a portfolio are samples of actual work: "syllabi, daily assignments, special reading lists, laboratory exercises, student papers, student examinations . . . all the ARTIFACTS of teaching" (9). What are the artifacts of an administrator? Reports, memos, proposals, curricular outlines, all the daily writing that administrators produce while about their business. A portfolio reflecting on such artifacts could help to document an administrator's otherwise "invisible" work.

3. BROADEN THE PURPOSE OF PORTFOLIOS.

"I had found that portfolios caused people to experiment, though I was not sure why" (6).

If evaluation typically does one thing, it is to kill experimentation and creativity. Think about the times when you have been evaluated; if you're like me, you chose the tried and true, not the innovative and imaginative. In connection with a faculty review, I was recently observed in the classroom by the academic Dean of my college. Once I knew that he was coming to observe, I made certain that I would be "teaching" that day, so there would be something for him to watch. I had to drag out a lesson which I had used successfully before, even though it was not totally relevant to the research writing class I was currently teaching. Because I teach writing, many of my class periods are taken up by peer group work, student oral reports or readings of works-in-progress, activities that require my behind-the-scenes orchestration, but may look to the uninitiated as though I'm not really teaching.

In contrast, using a portfolio as the ongoing site of reflective practice can promote rather than stifle creativity. In a portfolio, I would discuss my attempts at innovation and how they were working with my students. I could show the constant adjustments that must take place when a teacher is sensitive to both the needs of the students and the demands of the subject. As well as including the products of good teaching (syllabi, course outlines, student creative work, etc.) the AAHE document suggests that portfolios should include material from oneself: "descriptive material on current and recent teaching responsibilities and practices . . . Descriptions of steps taken to evaluate and improve one's teaching" (8). By reflecting on our practice, we can enhance our creativity.

4. KEEP INSTRUCTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES OPEN.

"Make your portfolio a collection of all different kinds of things you've learned . . . In this way a portfolio provides a history of learning" (9).

Teachers and administrators should take a similar approach to documenting a history of their own learning about what they do. They shouldn't cut off non-academic areas of their lives, but use their learning in all spheres to inform their practice. Active, alive teachers are active, alive people. They are in tune with their political and social context; they are avid readers who follow current affairs with interest, often becoming passionately

involved with causes. One of our teachers ran the campaign of a local politician, another is active in women's health issues, a third in environmental causes, and so on. Rather than compartmentalizing their lives into "academic" and "private" selves, teachers should be encouraged to bring their life-long learning to bear in the classroom. Portfolios should include information from others as well as from ourselves: students, colleagues, and others, such as parents, employers, or community members who come to us because of our reputation or expertise (Edgerton 8). All can provide evidence of our effectiveness as educators.

5. REEXAMINE ISSUES IN COMPARABILITY.

"Most evaluation structures do not inform teaching. Rather than set benchmarks, research ought to reveal potential for more effective teaching and learning" (10).

The same issues of comparability in writing portfolios are present in teaching portfolios. How do we compare portfolios of a literary critic with a Writing Program Administrator, for example? I would urge that we not mandate teaching portfolios in promotion and tenure decisions until we have done a better job of solving the reliability problems that confound summative uses of portfolios. Rather, all teachers could be encouraged to keep a teaching record wherein they reflect on their classroom endeavors. As one who serves on such promotion and tenure committees, I have found most useful those self-reflective pieces that discuss a teacher's attempts at innovation and reactions to how new ideas "worked" in the classroom. Student evaluations can provide the motivation for a teacher's dialogue with herself about how students perceived the teacher's efforts and subsequent plans to adapt less-successful methods. But the very process of assembling and reflecting upon teaching portfolios goes a long way toward helping teachers improve because "they enable faculty—indeed REQUIRE them—to become more important actors in monitoring and evaluating the quality of their own work" (Edgerton 5).

6. STUDY THE EFFECT OF SCHOOL POLICY ON PORTFOLIO PRACTICE.

"Perhaps we ought to consider policy as a reflection of what

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works. For those teachers and students who demonstrate effective work in the classroom with portfolios, a process of gradual expansion might be considered until policy becomes a reflection of what is already working" (11).

We need to take a go-slow approach; As Sunstein suggests, let's look at what we're doing with portfolios, but let's allow portfolios time to blossom rather than make their use a rigid formula. At our university, we are encouraging teachers who are tenure-track to begin writing down their thoughts about their teaching in a "teaching log," which may or may not be included in a tenure dossier. However, such logs are extremely helpful for tenure committees who have a chance through reading them to overhear a teacher's conversations with herself regarding teaching. This process is analogous to the writing teacher being allowed via the writing portfolio to overhear a writer thinking through his or her learning processes.

7. ENLIST THE INGENUITY OF TEACHERS.

"Teachers, more than professors, administrators, or policy makers, will determine the success of portfolio practice" (12).

Encourage and support any efforts by both teachers and writers to improve what they are doing. Evaluators can make suggestions, but the "ingenuity" of those developing the portfolios should be allowed free-reign. Evaluating teachers is an enormously complex task with competing purposes, goals, and methods. We need to view teaching as a complicated, expressive human activity deserving of a sympathetic, thoughtful, flexible response.

Deborah Tannen, in her book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, cites a small survey conducted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that asked six university professors why they had chosen academic careers. The two women in the survey both answered that they went into academe because of a desire to teach. The four men answered that the independence and freedom afforded them in an academic profession was their primary motivation. Tannen uses this survey as evidence that the women focused on connection to students as their primary motivation, whereas the men focused on their freedom from others' control (43). Putting the gender differences aside, both perspectives are right. Teachers want the freedom and independence to be able to influence

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positively their students' learning. Portfolios, used formatively, can help with this goal.

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