Writers' Reflections: The Rest of the Story

Patricia Shelley Fox

Having taught seventh grade for the past twelve years, I have personally run the evaluation gamut from what seems now to have been a kind of dark ages of assigning narrow topics and grading every paper with a split grade for content/mechanics to an age of relative enlightenment with the gradual incorporation of portfolio assessment over the past several years. Yet all evaluation, I've concluded, is finally a kind of storytelling. In the past, I have been the narrator of my students' stories of effort and achievement. More recently my students have taken on the narrator's role to tell their own stories. In fact, the key difference, as I see it, between portfolios and more traditional kinds of assessment centers around this idea of storytelling and storytellers.

As the growing body of work on portfolios and written reflection (Belanoff and Elbow, 1991; Graves and Sunstein, 1992; Yancey, 1992; Smith and Ylvisaker, 1993; Yancey, 1998) continues to demonstrate, practitioners who have looked long and hard at portfolios value them precisely because they recognize the evidence that, by comparison to the rich narratives of learners and learning that portfolios can offer, other more traditional methods of assessment are at best partial. My purpose here, then, is to examine the relationship between storytelling and assessment as they are represented in student writing portfolios. In particular, I want to explore the role that writers' reflections play, and towards that end, I would like to begin by selecting two stories from my own teaching portfolio and reflecting upon their impact

on what I now see has been the gradual evolution of a portfolio pedagogy.

Two Stories of Teaching and Learning

I can see now, in retrospect, that something in me longed for the idea of a portfolio long before I could name it. Two moments, in particular, stand out in my mind.

The first occurred almost twenty years ago. At the time, my middle son was a student in a Montessori program in which I was a once-a-week parent volunteer. My job (a foreshadowing of my later role as teacher-researcher in my own classroom) was to sit inconspicuously and interact at appropriate moments, but generally to observe the goings on and to record my observations in a small reporter's notebook. On this particular morning, I had been watching three-year-old Paul drawing for fifteen or twenty minutes with tongue-biting intensity. As he chose colors from the ample crayon bin in front of him and registered audible delight with each precise selection, he leaned his tiny shoulders with eloquent body-English into his work. His eyes glistened and narrowed as he pulled back at intervals to assess his progress, then hunkered down again. Finishing with a flourish, he picked up his picture and bounced two steps towards Nancy, the Montessori directress and lead teacher, who had been sitting nearby listening to Bo's cataloging of objects beginning with the letter *t*.

"Look!" Paul erupted in a burst of enthusiasm.

"Oh," Nancy responded turning to him, "tell me about your picture."

The moment caught my attention . . . and gave me pause. I think I had expected his enthusiasm to be matched, even overshadowed, by hers, and his picture received with some version of the usual teacherly praise. Instead, Nancy turned the moment back to Paul.

"It's the Number One fire engine at the Hyde Park Station," he bubbled. "See? I used the silver to make the bumpers and the lights shiny like chrome. And look at the ladder and how I put the hose right there . . . 'cause that's how it goes."

"Oh, I see, the shiny bumpers and the ladder and the hose."

"Yeah, but I messed up this wheel," he lamented, noticing a less-than-round back tire.

"Hmmm," Nancy replied, "and what will you do now?"

"I have to fix it," Paul explained over his shoulder, already on his way back to the crayon table.

Words I could not name at the time come to me now to describe the scene. The issue at the heart of the exchange was ownership, and the activities the teacher's response had prompted: reflection, self-evaluation, and revision. There had been a story hanging in the air at that moment waiting to be told, a story about effort and achievement, a story which in most classrooms would have been a teacher's story about a student's work: "Good job, Paul." Yet in this instance, Nancy, honoring his ownership and providing a prompt and the time for reflection, had left Paul to tell his own story and thereby teach himself what he needed to know.

The second moment occurred some dozen years later. In 1986, I was a teacher-researcher under the protective wing of Glenda Bissex in Northeastern University's Institute on Writing and Teaching at Martha's Vineyard. To get us started on the research we would carry out during the following year, Glenda had suggested that we look for our focus in the anomalies that we sensed in our classrooms and our teaching—those moments that struck us, that we wondered about, and that both invited and pushed us to look further at the life in our classrooms and the lives of our students as learners.

Something that had struck me during the previous year had been a contrast that I had seen between the writing experiences of two students, Matt and Alexis. In the casual teacher talk that is a constant in our faculty lounge, I had discovered a surprising discrepancy between my history colleague's and my own evaluations of these two student writers. Until that time, it had always seemed to me that students who wrote well in history predictably wrote well in English, too. However, Matt, according to my colleague, wrote fine history essays while in my class he

kept a thin, uninspired, and finally inarticulate reader's journal. Alexis, on the other hand, apparently struggled to write in history but was one of my most sensitive, insightful, and eloquent journal writers.

As with so many forehead-slapping epiphanies, insights that were striking at the time but seem so embarrassingly obvious to me now, I remember thinking clearly for the first time that the differences between Matt's and Alexis's respective performances in these two writing tasks must be evidence that there was no monolithic construct of writing ability. What was called into question for me at that moment was the magical thinking notion that someone was simply either a good writer or a bad writer. It occurred to me that the ability to write well was contingent upon a multiplicity of variables, which included the task, the context, and the writer. And at that moment, I discovered that the only way I could begin to make a valid judgment to assess the work of Matt and Alexis and my other students as writers was to look at their writing in different classes and contexts. But I still didn't know then about portfolios, so here's what I did. I asked my students to gather together samples of all the writing that they had done that year in and out of class so that we could begin with a sense of the range and scope of writing that they engaged in. Next, I asked them to consider all the writing they had done and from that to choose pieces of their best and worst writing for the year. And at that moment lightning struck again.

As we began this collective research, I was feeling pretty progressive and enlightened because I felt I was establishing a collegial relationship in which, by inviting them to become co-researchers, I was sharing authority with my students. "Choose your best and worst pieces of writing," I instructed them, "and tell the story behind your writing of each piece: Under what conditions and in what context did you write it?" Simple enough. But then one of my students, Etai, hijacked my study and took it in a direction I had not anticipated with the following question: "Best and worst pieces of writing according to whose standards—yours or ours?" And I was again given pause . . . Are they

different? Could my students have their own ways of valuing their writing? Could they have standards and ideal texts that were independent of my teacherly judgments? So I asked them, in their stories about their writing, to include a discussion of their evaluation of each piece—how they valued it and why—and to comment on their sense of the teacher's evaluation where the piece had been given a grade.

I learned through that study that my students did indeed have ways of valuing their own writing that were often independent of my own, and that the alternative to my teacherly standards and evaluation was neither apathy nor anarchy, but rather student ownership and authority over their own work. I discovered that there was more to this story of writers and writing than I had reckoned—critical information that I learned only after I, as Nancy had with Paul, invited my students to tell me more.

Student Portfolios and Writers' Reflections

What links these two moments in my mind is the strong voice of learners telling their own stories of learning. When Nancy asked Paul to tell the story behind his work, his reflection led him to self assessment and new learning. When I asked my students to tell the stories behind their writing, they taught themselves and me not only about the contexts and conditions that had supported their best writing, but also about what they valued in their own work. And it is these moments when teacher and students reverse traditional narrative roles—when the learner rather than the teacher becomes the storyteller—that distinguish portfolios from more traditional modes of assessment. Portfolios, by changing narrators, change narratives and offer richer, fuller accounts from the point of view of those who know the story behind the story. Traditional assessment measures share certain narrative features, which differ in fundamental ways from the narrative features of portfolios. The features for both, however, center around the following issues:

Who tells the story? to whom? for what purpose?
About whom or what is the story told?
When and under what conditions is the story told?
In what form? Which details are included and which are left out?

Traditionally, stories of assessment have been told in a third-person, institutional voice about learners and learning. That is, they are typically stories of learning told from the outside by observers. And curiously, it often appears that the more these stories have been stripped of context and narrative detail, the more they focus on features of product, the more distanced the teller is from the tale both physically and temporally, the more institutions value them as hard data, objective, scientific: "Good job, Paul" is okay. "A" is good. "90" is better. "91st percentile," the best.

Foucault asserts that this tendency towards "infinite objectification" has historically served the institution's purpose of ranking and sorting. "Each individual in his place . . . . He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (200). This in contrast to a Freireian liberatory pedagogy in which learners name their reality in a process of continuous growth and transformation. In this same Freireian spirit, Kathleen Blake Yancey sees writers' reflections as the site "where the de facto curricula come into contact with the school curricula: where students are the agents of their own learning, where they know and describe and like and critique and revise their own writing, their own learning, where we learn from and with them" (203).

Human learning is by nature idiosyncratic, subjective, soft, and unscientific—grounded in the details of context and personality. Portfolio stories capture this complexity in rich, first-person narratives. When writers tell their own stories of learning from the inside by selecting representative pieces of writing and reflecting upon them, they tell us things that we and they would not, could not have known if we hadn't asked.

In my students' portfolios, writers' reflections are the narrative threads that tie them together. It is important to note, however, that while portfolios turn both authority and responsibility for storytelling about learning back to students, they can also invite a particular kind of story and particular ways of thinking and talking about writers and writing. Ken Bruffee has said that when we structure our classrooms "we should contrive to ensure that students' conversation about what they read and write is similar in as many ways as possible to the way we would eventually like them to read and write. The way they talk . . . determines the way they will think and the way they will write" (642). While my students tell their own stories of learning, when I define the features of the portfolio and frame the reflective questions I ask them to consider, I "contrive to ensure" a particular kind of narrative. The ways in which my students speak about writing and their work as writers is different from the ways in which they have been asked to speak about it in the past. (If, indeed, they have been asked to speak about it at all.) And, when they write and speak about it in ways that I have asked them to, they come to think about it in those ways, too.

Because they frame the portfolio narratives that students tell, writer's reflections have become, for me, the *en soi* of student writing—the thing itself. They tell the stories of learning that I want to hear. They set me up as an audience to respond to a student's pieces of writing by situating them within the context of the writer's life and work and within each writer's evaluative framework of success and failure, vision and revision. But more importantly, they tell the stories that writers need to tell, not only to me but to themselves as well—stories of growth and learning, of investment and accomplishment.

Evaluation Stories

Portfolios, as they live in my classroom, are informed by my respect for students' voices and my eagerness to hear their stories. To give you a glimpse, I'd like us to look together at the work of one of my students from two perspectives: first, from a traditional

stance of teacher as narrator/evaluator, the reader of texts; then from a portfolio perspective of student as narrator/evaluator, the reader of his own texts and of his life as a writer.

In addition to a full-year English course, seventh-grade students at my school participate in a semester course in writing, a daily period of writing workshop during which they have access to computers. The portfolio excerpts which follow come from that class. I'd like this to be participatory (if videos can be interactive, why can't texts?), and to that end, I ask the reader at this point first to play a traditional teacher's role. I have used these excerpts from Nick's portfolio in teacher workshops, so I will try to set this up now as much as possible as I do then. What you are about to read are three pieces of writing, excerpts from the portfolio of a seventh grade writer.

Before you read, however, I want to introduce Nick and tell you what I observed of him as a writer over the course of a semester in my class. Nick was a bright seventh grader in what seemed to be the throes of an especially awkward bout of adolescence. Painfully self-conscious, yet longing to be cool, he had just recently made his way to the edges of the in-crowd and his energies seemed tapped out between the activities of physical growth and a struggle to find his social niche. Because writing class demanded a measure of risk-taking and individual initiative to find topics and work independently, he seemed to find it especially demanding. We typically began each day's class with a focused freewrite to generate ideas. There was generally a choice of three topics and the option to generate your own. Nick would usually write with some investment during this time, but he seldom shared, and he never seemed to carry over the energy from these short writings into the rest of his work. As I observed him during the first weeks of class, he would sit in front of a blank page or a blank screen for what seemed like agonizing hours at a time. At intervals he would start writing, but soon abandon the piece. We were both frustrated, and I was puzzled. We talked about brainstorming. He appeared to be looking for a kind of writing to do that he could not seem to find, yet he was reluctant

to try much of anything. Frankly, I saw his reaction as whining, laziness, and a lack of intellectual and creative energy. Several weeks into the class, as I distributed the guidelines for writing portfolios, Nick, at first, looked more angst-ridden than ever. But, after he read the portfolio guidelines, he seemed almost immediately to shift gears. Granted, as a student who is concerned about his grades, he may very well have seen a deadline as a wake-up call. But, to go from days of nothing to the busy productivity that he now evidenced said to me that something else was going on.

When he turned it in, Nick's completed portfolio contained eight pieces, two which he considered "unsuccessful" and six which he considered "successful." He tells the story behind each piece in his writer's reflections, which you will see later, but right now I would like to look at three selections. Read through each of the following pieces, and feel free to mark them and respond in any way that feels natural to you.

A. HI

It was 7:00 and I had just woken up. I was on my way out to the kitchen to get breakfast. It was Saturday and I was planning to go to my friends house. I called for my parents and nobody responded. I decided that maybe they had gone to the store and began to make breakfast. Later I opened the door to go to my friend Scott's house. As I stepped outside all around there was nothing but a huge desert with no trees or grass. At first I thought I was dreaming and then I began to scream. After running out of breath I tried to calm down. I decided that I would go to see if there were any people and what had happened.

B. February 2, 1993

Dear Anyone,

I think these Myers Briggs tests are pointless. I do not understand why anyone would need some crazy psychologist to tell them what type of personality they are. Just because you take one of their stinking tests, they think they can actually tell what type of person you are. I also think it's dumb that people would care or even take the time to do this. How do these guys know more about your personality than you do?

It also angers me that the money to buy this test and all those stupid tapes was probably paid with my tuition money. If I had my way I would not spend money or time on that stuff. I would put it to good use and spend it on things like class trips, new air conditioning or anything. It's pathetic that they give all OUR time and money to those dumb quacks so they will give a bunch of meaningless letters that mean nothing to me and should hopefully mean nothing to anyone else. I also think it's stupid that I have to write about the test for homework and spend two days in class discussing them. I mean I could name about a hundred important other things that I could do during my only free time.

In the end I guess I would have to give credit to the psychologists who are probably paying for their B.M.W.s with the money that they get from selling these tests.

Sincerely Yours,
Nick, INTP

C. Caught

It was five-o-clock at night when Randy called and asked if I wanted to go to the mall. I said yes and told him I would be there in thirty minutes. I put on some baggy clothes because we were probably going to try to steal something.

We met at the arcade and then decided to go to the candy store because they had lots of candy there that could easily be taken. We walked into the store and as usual there was only one sales person so we got a few candy bars.

We then walked to a big clothing store that sold real expensive clothes. I really liked a shirt I saw but it cost $40.00 and there was no way I could buy it. I had never stolen anything over $10.00 nor had I ever taken clothes. I looked around and saw no one so I slipped the shirt under my jacket. I quickly got Randy and left the store.

After walking around a little we went into a store that sold all kinds of weird things. They had some cool bottle openers. Randy got one, but I think the people were getting suspicious so we left quickly. We were getting a little worried because the people at the stores seemed to be staring at us. We decided that we had better leave or else we may get caught.

As we hurriedly ran to the exit it happened. Two security guards came up to us and told us to come with them. They led us back to the clothing store. I was really scared and my mind was racing. I felt the tears building up in my eyes. They asked Randy and I to empty our pockets. I pulled out the shirt and to my surprise Randy took out a wallet and an expensive lighter that I did not know he had taken. There was no way we could get out of this.

They put us in a car and drove us to the Youth Detention Center. I looked over and saw that Randy was crying. Seeing this made me begin to cry also. They called our

parents and told them to pick us up. It turns out that we had taken over a $100 worth of stuff. That meant that it was a felony and we would have to do several hours of community work. This will also be on my police record for the rest of my life. Not to mention what my parents are going to do to me. This is the last time I will ever steal anything again.

Now, having read his texts, what story of writers and writing, of learners and learning might you tell? You may want to think about the following questions:

What did you notice?
What did you wonder about?
What evaluation story would you tell about Nick to another teacher? to Nick?
What do you feel you still need to know?

Of course, because these selections were part of a portfolio, there's more to this story of writing. What follows are Nick's reflections on each of the three pieces above. Again, read them and respond in whatever way feels comfortable, but this time, as you do, compare Nick's evaluation story to your own.

A. Writer's Reflection
HI

As with Summer, my other bad story, I just started writing this one with no plan. I'm not really sure where I got the idea or where I thought I could go with the story. I think one night when I was going to bed I thought about this T.V. show . . . about the world getting blown up and only a few people surviving, and for some reason I thought I could write a story about that. I was wrong . . . .

This story really did not fulfill my intentions at all. I thought I could write a pretty good story that was interesting but after starting this one, I quickly ran into problems. The first

problem I ran into was trying to decide what to do with the story. Would there still be people left besides the one boy, who would they be and how would they act? If there were no people, what would be the plot? Well the list went on and I had no answer to all the questions . . . and in the first place the story did not seem to be very good. If I could get some decent answers to those questions I would maybe start writing this again.

I learned that writing really is hard and there are many questions that may come up when writing stories that may be extremely hard to answer. I learned that I can much more easily write stories about things that I know about, because when I do those difficult questions do not come up.

B. Writer's Reflection
Myers-Briggs

I decided to write this piece when I was told to write about what personality type I was. I decided that I really was not interested in writing it, so I wrote this letter instead. I had no second draft, and I did not get any advice from my peers, basically because it was all my opinion.

I said that I thought the Myers Briggs tests were a waste of time and money. I fulfilled my intentions completely in writing a story that expressed my opinions of the tests. I think the strengths of the piece were that it was well-written and I argued my points well . . . . I decided that if I wrote more it would just start to ramble on and not be as good as my first draft.

I learned that for me writing my opinions is very easy, and usually if I have something decent that bothers me I can almost always write a pretty good letter. If I was evaluating this piece of writing I would say it was well-written and was a good argument.

C. Writer's Reflection:
Caught

I got the idea to write this piece from several different places. First I know someone who had just gotten caught for stealing and almost taken to Y.D.C., the Youth Detention Center. Also several people I knew had started stealing and the thought had crossed my mind, but I knew that whatever I wanted would not be worth spending the night in one of those jails. So I decided to write a story about stealing, simply because it was something that was on my mind.

No peers actually gave me advice on the story, but as I said before it was something that was going on with my peers, and I guess if it hadn't I would not of written the story.

As with almost all of my other stories there is no second draft. I think I never have second drafts because I always spend hours contemplating my stories before I write them, and so when I do write them I know exactly what I am planning on writing without having to add more or change things around.

I guess in this story I said that even if you think your really slick and can never get caught there is still a chance that someone will see you and if they do you'll be in big trouble. I think that it is pretty interesting. It is no masterpiece, but I think it is pretty good. I wrote a story that was not completely stupid to me, which is what I wanted, so I guess I pretty much fulfilled my intentions.

Now, after reading his reflections, what can you say about Nick's sense of himself as a writer? Compare the two stories of evaluation—yours and Nick's. What do his reflections allow you to see that your reading of his texts did not?

There is still more to Nick's story. After they had assembled their portfolios, I asked my students to bring them to class the day they were due. My purpose was to give them some distance from

their work and a final opportunity to reread, all at once, the work they had chosen to represent them and what they had been able to say about it. The assignment during that class was then to reread the portfolio and write a final reflection which would serve as an introduction to a reader. This, I knew from experience, would be a final act of reflection and synthesis, the moment that might crystallize learning and self-discovery. In response, Nick wrote the following:

> Writer's Reflection
> Introduction
>
> It has been a long, hard fourth quarter in Writing class. Though it has been a difficult one and sometimes very depressing, I think I have learned alot about myself as a writer.
>
> First, I learned that probably the most difficult and straining thing for me to do is start a story that really interests me and that I find meaningful to write about, so examples of me starting a story and then quickly realizing that it was stupid to me are "Hi", "Summer", "Hour", and "Teach". I would say that I have learned that about 1/5 of the stories I write are actually finished by me. I have learned that I am much better at writing stories that are based on true things. Examples of this are "True Stories of Spring Break 93", "Caught", and "Europe." I also learned that I am good at writing my opinions and arguing my points. I do this in stories such as "Protest" and "Myers-Briggs".
>
> I have also found my weaknesses this quarter. I would say my main weakness is my being a perfectionist. Some would say this was a strength, but because of this it was hard for me to write a story without stopping it or spending hours contemplating what to write next. I would say that was the major downfall of this quarter. I also have trouble trying to make up stories just out of nowhere. I usually get stuck on

> things like making plots, and deciding where to go next . . . .
>
> I have learned how I write best this quarter and how I should try to approach stories. Hopefully what I have learned will be useful in my future writings. I guess that my portfolio shows that a quarter of basically bad, but occasionally pretty good writing may be a shock but an educational one at that.

In his portfolio, Nick told the story of his life and work as a writer in the pieces he selected and in his reflections. He told it because I asked him to, in ways that I asked him to. But finally, the story he told was his own, a narrative which is both analytical and personal, critical and evaluative. It is, as reflective writing is meant to be, metacognitive—writing about writing, thinking about thinking, and significantly, in Nick's case, a kind of writing and "storytelling" that he values. When Nick and his work become the subject of his story, he is finally content and productive because here he has found "the kind of writing I can do," a kind of writing which he feels is worth doing. As he concludes in his introduction, "I have learned that I am much better at writing true stories . . . stories that are based on true things." If, as Lil Brannon has said, "We compose our lives by the stories we tell about them," Nick's portfolio is indeed a composition in which he has discovered not only a way to revise his writing, but also a way to revise himself as a writer.

Back in the dark ages, when I was the lone evaluation storyteller in my classroom, I was never quite sure who was listening or how much they heard. Now that my students have taken on the roles of storytellers in their portfolios, I'm convinced that more of us are listening, and what we hear are stories of growth and discovery, told by narrators who know, who look back on effort and achievement and forward to new learning.

There is, however, a final irony in all this. As institutions would have it, my job as teacher was to have the final word. The

story of Nick's life and work as a writer in my class is recorded in his official school record. It reads, "80."

WORKS CITED

Belanoff, Patricia and Peter Elbow. *Portfolios: Process and Product.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991.

Bruffee, Kenneth. "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" *College English* 46 (Nov 1984): 635-652.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish.* New York: Vintage, 1995.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: Continuum, 1986.

Graves, Donald E. and Bonnie S. Sunstein. *Portfolio Portraits.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992.

Smith, Mary Ann and Miriam Ylvisaker. *Teachers' Voices: Portfolios in the Classroom.* Berkeley: National Writing Project, 1993.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom: An Introduction.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1992.

——. *Reflections in the Writing Classroom.* Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1998.