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Creating Writers Through Portfolio Assessment: Revision and Reflection

Lois Rosen

Assessment is the nemesis of the writing teacher. Trained to be supportive coaches, responsive readers, fellow-writers, we must eventually set aside these nurturing classroom roles to judge and grade our students' work, a shift Peter Elbow labels one of the "contraries" in teaching (143). I often hear teachers lament, "My work would be so much easier if I could just read and respond to their writing without always having to give a grade." Part of the popularity of journals lies, I suspect, in the fact that teachers are free to respond to these entries rather than grade them.

Writing classrooms are often excessively over-graded, creating a marking burden for the teacher as well as a constricting environment for the grade-conscious student. In some cases, teachers grade every paper a student writes. In a class that moves students through stages of the writing process, points may be given for drafts, revisions, final editing, and peer response sheets, putting an even heavier burden on the composition teacher who wants to reward process as well as product.

The end result of all this grading may be less than we hope for: a grade-oriented writing classroom; students motivated by "wad ja get?" instead of "wad ja write about?"; teachers focused on making the grading criteria for each paper clear instead of helping students grow as writers and thinkers. In addition to this, the paper grade usually stops any further work on that paper unless revision is done to "raise" a poor grade, just the opposite of the continuous process of re-seeing and refining that professional writers consider basic to their work.

I once attended a conference session in which a composition instructor described his use of grading criteria sheets created for each writing assignment. They were the focus for whole-class discussion of model essays; they were the feedback sheets for peer groups to use on drafts; they were the self-evaluation forms for the writer; they were the grading sheet for the teacher. The instructor gave us copies of his grading criteria sheets and described ways we could create similar forms for our own assignments. At first, I thought this was a great idea—students and teacher would know exactly what was expected of each piece and the crite-

ria that would be used to grade it. Reflecting on the session later, I recognized how absolutely his classroom revolved around writing for the grade, and how limiting that perspective could be to students' multifaceted growth as writers.

Using portfolios as the assessment tool in a writing classroom "establishes a writing environment rather than a grading environment in the classroom" according to Burnham (137). In a portfolio classroom, student as writer becomes the focus of classroom activity. But even more important, portfolios are the one form of writing assessment in which the elements and activities of the assessment process actually enhance writing development instead of merely judge it. Portfolios have a strongly positive influence on the very growth they measure, encouraging students to think and act like writers, and to engage in the complex processes that lead to successful pieces of writing as well as continuous growth. Portfolios, in effect, don't just assess writing; they help create writers.

What processes are we talking about here? Let me explain. For many years now I have used portfolio assessment in all my writing classes: basic writing, freshman composition, advanced composition, and the writing methods course for pre-service English teachers which includes a substantial writing component. I have also worked with teachers in the schools who are using portfolios. As I experimented with portfolios, observing students' responses to the process I and other teachers used, I realized that the value of portfolios for the student writer lay in four essential activities—Collection, Selection, Revision, and Reflection—processes that turned the standard writing folder into an assessment portfolio, but activities that also led developing writers to engage in the writing and thinking processes described by professional writers.

Collection

A portfolio, first of all, is a collection of all the student's writing. I tell my students on Day One of the semester to save everything, from jottings on napkins in restaurants to peer comment sheets and drafts of papers. Eventually the stu-

dent ends up with a rich assortment of finished and unfinished pieces of all kinds plus the accompanying notes and drafts: a body of writing unique to the writer, with all pieces available for review and further work at any time.

Donald Murray talks about working on multiple writing projects at the same time. If he gets stuck on one piece, he turns to another, always having several works-in-progress. This is true for writers in portfolio classrooms, also. As the body of work grows, so does the student's flexibility in choosing what to work on; and any piece can be re-worked if inspiration strikes. Drafts can be set aside to "cool" for a few days or for most of the term, allowing for a more objective reading when picked up later. Experiments can be attempted and filed away. Informal writing can be examined for possible use in longer, polished pieces. Professional writers talk about the need to produce much more writing than they can ever use, to produce lots of garbage in order to find the gems that become finished work. In building a writing portfolio, the student writer also comes to understand that not all the writing he or she produces will be of value; but that the more one writes, the more likely it is that good pieces will emerge. Another factor here is the growing accumulation of pieces characteristic of the writer—a rich picture of his or her ideas and insights, voice and style, the personal elements of writing that become apparent even in classrooms where topics and forms are dictated by the school curriculum. Reading over a fat folder of one's own work offers a picture of the self, no matter what kind of writing course is involved, and gives the developing writer a chance to observe his or her own growth over time in ways not easily accomplished with other means of assessment. Time—time to think and draft, to re-read and re-plan—is another important factor in the success of portfolios in helping students see themselves as writers.

Selection

The second beneficial aspect of portfolios is self-selection of pieces to work on. Just as the professional picks and chooses what pieces are worth developing for publication, the classroom writer building a portfolio and structuring it for assessment selects pieces he or she really cares about and sets aside those pieces that are not going well. In classes where every piece counts equally because everything is graded, a weak paper penalizes a student, often keeping better writers from attempting something that might not be a success, forcing students to struggle with pieces that they know are poorly conceived from the start. Selecting pieces to work on throughout the term, and eventually selecting best pieces to become the centerpiece of the

assessment portfolio puts students in control of their own work, creating a strong sense of personal ownership and investment. This process also forces students to evaluate their own work as they select pieces for revision and for final evaluation.

Revision

Building a portfolio and preparing selected pieces for presentation are important parts of portfolio assessment. But the heart of the portfolio process—its most fundamental strength—lies in the opportunity for revision. I am aware that any writing classroom can provide time for revision, and nowadays many do. Students create a draft, share it with peers or the teacher or both and then revise based on readers' comments. What makes portfolios unique is the opportunity for ongoing revision accompanied by time to let a piece rest before looking at it again with new eyes. And this is where the portfolio-based classroom can most closely duplicate the working life of a real world writer.

Donald Murray's *Learning by Teaching* is based on the premise that "Writing is rewriting. Most writers accept rewriting as a condition of their craft; it comes with the territory. . . . Rewriting is the difference between the dilettante and the artist, the amateur and the professional, the unpublished and the published" (72). Portfolios of their own work invite students to move closer to the writer's craft, to review and revise at will, to come to realize the important differences that can be accomplished between the rough first draft and the polished piece ready for publication, assessment, or both. An additional advantage for the classroom writer is the ability to apply new learnings as they occur in the classroom, incorporating insights gained from instruction on points of writing or from reading other students' pieces.

The appendix contains examples of the type of on-going revision possible in a portfolio-centered classroom. Reginald Clarke and Lucinda Warren, two students in a developmental writing class, produced multiple drafts of a piece of writing during one semester, each draft incorporating the new concepts about writing that were being introduced over the course of the term.

Reginald and Lucinda were doing what writers do—taking a sketchy first draft, developing it, focusing it, crafting it until they were satisfied with meaning, form, and language. The multiple revisions over time that led to these final drafts are possible because this writing course is based on portfolios. But even in portfolio classrooms that don't provide for ongoing revision, the selection of papers for final assessment necessitates similar revisions of self-selected pieces.

Reflection

An important element of any portfolio-based classroom is reflection, both the reflection that occurs naturally as students select pieces to work on, and assigned written reflections that require students to review and evaluate their own work. In "Teaching the Other Self: The Writer's First Reader," Donald Murray declares "writers report they write for themselves," and cites several examples (164-165):

"I write for me," says Edward Albee. "The audience of me."

"I am my own first reader," says Isaac Bashevis Singer.

"Writers write for themselves and not for their readers," says Rebecca West.

"I don't think I have ever written for anybody except the other in one's self," says Edmund Blunden.

Asking students to re-read the entire body of their own work and reflect on what they see, permits them to engage in a dialogue with this "other self," to examine the sight and sound and sense of their own writing self as it appears on the page over time, thus developing a consciousness of who they are as writers. This is often accompanied by awareness of their own writing growth as well as their individual strengths and weaknesses. Here is part of Reginald's final reflection about his work in English 109:

In the beginning of the term, I was a terrible writer. I could not form a complete sentence. Then Mary sat down with me. She showed where I am having the most trouble in writing. With her help, I developed the use of using detail like the story of the person who influences me the most. I still need work on verb tense and missing words.

I feel writing is becoming less difficult for me. Techniques I learn in English 109, clustering, free writing, and making a list helped me come a long way.

My favorite piece is about my mother. It show how far I came in English 109. Most of all it show my feeling toward my mother.

My goal was to work on my verb tense and words. I have not met my goal but I am going to work on them in English 110.

Lucinda also shows she has developed a sense of her own capacities as a writer when she reflects on the term's work. In this case, she centers most of her discussion on her favorite paper. She says:

In "The River by Grandpa's Farm" my use of imagery is good. My favorite imagery phrase is "moss would squash between our

toes." This is also my favorite paper because I enjoyed writing it. . . . It was hard to set up a mood in my introduction but I believe my introductions are improving. I used words and phrases that contribute alot in the latest introduction like "calm," "quiet," "remember," "troubled thoughts away," and "place in time." The first introduction wasn't as interesting to the reader. My wording is very much improved. This is a pretty clear and organized paper. In the original paper, I moved off the subject with the family trip to Wheeler Damn so I cut that paragraph. I continued to write more on similar ideas of the river itself.

My coherence can still use improvement and I am continuing to make clearer sentences. I am continuously learning the language of the written word.

In this reflection, you can see Lucinda moving back and forth from comments about the specific improvements she made on this paper and the way these revisions illustrate the strengths and weaknesses she sees in her own writing.

When we ask students to reflect on their work, we are offering them opportunities to engage in behavior that enhances their development as writers by making them more consciously aware both of what they have accomplished and of what they must continue to work on. Assessment, then, becomes a process in which students have some ownership and can learn from, rather than a mysterious activity performed by the teacher, over which they have no control.

How does this work in a classroom? Here are the procedures I have found most effective for managing portfolio assessment in my own classes and in working with other writing teachers.

Steps in Effective Portfolio Assessment of Writing in the Classroom

- Goal-setting:
 - personal writing goals
 - course goals
- Writing and revising:
 - building the portfolio
- Mid-term:
 - portfolio self-evaluation and reflection
 - review of personal and course goals
 - teacher's mid-term evaluation
- More writing and revising
- Selection and revision of key pieces to be "showcased" for evaluation
- Final portfolio self-evaluation and reflection
- Final portfolio evaluation by teacher

In summary, we create writers through portfolios: young people learning that the writer's craft is part creative intuition, part skill, but mainly just good, hard work on drafts and re-drafts. It is the unique mode of evaluation in which the assessment model makes growth possible in ways not possible under standard grading procedures. It is not only authentic assessment; it moves beyond that to encourage authentic growth, stemming directly from the processes of building and evaluating a portfolio.

I am reminded of a student in one of my composition classes who told me when he handed in his final portfolio, "I stood in front of the mirror last night after I finished putting this portfolio together and said to myself, 'You're a writer. You really are a writer.'" I believe that his portfolio contributed a great deal to this realization.

Appendix

Multiple Drafts of Student Writing:

- * Reginald Clarke
- * Lucinda Warren
- * Used with permission of the student

*Reginald Clarke, English 109, College Writing Workshop

1st draft, "Special Person," September 18

When I think of a special person who have a big influence in my life is my mother. She is woman give great expect. She never turn you away. She will give you her last and give more if she could.

My mother had a big influences. She always tell me to make something out of your life. she encourage me to stay in school. She tell me not settle for less. She say believe in God and you can do all thing a set you mind to.

It wasn't for her praying asking God to look over me, I ~~no be~~ would be lost.

I love my mother just because she is her. she not the type who never understand. ~~my~~ Anything you want talk about she's there. ~~my~~ She is a very religious woman. ~~By her being religious~~ I like that she really into God because I don't worry about her being a drug addict or a alcoholic. My have great trust in me. She trust me with her car anytime I ask. She trust me with be responsible. And ~~she~~ my mother and I love each other very much we are so close that we go to end for each other.

Classroom focus: writing introductions, using paragraphs, writing for a reader.

In his second draft, Reggie divides the initial rough draft into several paragraphs, each centered on a specific idea about his mother. He begins to add details and to clarify his writing for readers.

2nd draft, "Special Person," September 25

~~When I think of~~ A special person who had a big influence in my life is my mother, Jessie. She is person I respect deeply. She never turn you away. She will give you her last and give more if she could.

I love my mother just because she is herself. She not the type who never understand. Anything you want talk about, she's there. I like that she really into God because I don't worry about her being a drug addict or an alcoholic. My mother have great trust in me. She trust me with her car anytime I ask. She trust me with big responsibilities. I like how she trust me with her money to pay her bills and buy groceries.

My mother had a big influences in my life. She always tell me to make something out of your life. She encourage me to stay in school to become an accountant. She tell me not to settle for less. If it wasn't for her praying asking God to look over me, I would be lost. My mother and I love each other very much we so close that we go to the end for each other.

Classroom focus: developing ideas fully.

In his third draft, Reggie works on using detail and description to develop and clarify his ideas.

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3rd draft, "Special Person," early November

A special person who had a big influence in my life is my mother, Jessie. She is a person I respect deeply. She never turns you away. She will give you her last dollar and give more if she could spare it.

I love my mother because she do not go out and gossip, she just herself. She not the type who never understands. Anything you wanted to talk about, such as relationship, world event, school, etc. and etc. she's there willing to talk about anything. My mother is a Baptist. I like that she is really into God because I don't worry about her being a drug addict or an alcoholic. My mother have great trust in me. She trust me with her car anytime I ask. She trust me with big responsibilities. She has me go to church with her. she I attend concert that the church choir sing. She trust me with her money to pay her bills and buy groceries.

My mother had a big influences in my life. She always tell me to make something out of your life, to farfill my goal in life of been an accountant. She encourage me to stay in school become an account. She tell me not to settle for less, go for the gold. If it wasn't for her praying asking God to look over me, while I go through the day and at night while I sleep, I would be lost. My mother and I love each other very much. We are so close that we go to the end for each other.

Classroom focus: Centering a paper on a main idea or message to the reader, writing a conclusion, proofreading and polishing a final draft.

Reggie continues to develop his ideas in a 4th draft, adding a description of his mother, and increasing the details that demonstrate her influence on his life. In the final version below (his 5th), he has given the paper a thorough proofreading and added italics to indicate how special this piece is to him.

Final Portfolio, "Special Person," December (italics are the student's)

My mother, Jessie, has auburn red hair. She has light brown eyes which are wise and twinkle when she looks at me with love. She also has a small nose and a wonderful smile, plus dimples that are beautiful to me.

She has a big influence in my life. She never turns me, or anyone else, away. She will give me her last dollar and would give even more if she could spare.

I love my mother because she does not go out and gossip, she is just herself. She is not the type who never understands. Anything I want to talk about, such as relationships, world events, school, etc., etc., she is there willing to talk about it with me.

My mother is a Baptist. We go to New Jerusalem Full Gospel Baptist Church. We attend church concerts. Every New Year's Eve, we welcome in the new year at church. I am glad that she made God head of her life because without God we could not make it. She always tells me to remember God and He can make a way. She tells me to be obedient to my elders and never turn a stranger away; they might be an angel. She also tell me to never look down on people because you never know when you might need them or will be in their situation.

My mother has great trust in me. She trusts me with her brand new car, a Grand Am, anytime I ask. She trusts me with big responsibilities such as when she gives me \$100 in cash plus her checkbook to pay her bills and buy the groceries. She has taught me to always be honest. I will never let her down.

My mother has a big influence in my life. She encourages me to stay in school and become an accountant and to fulfill my goal in life. She tells me not to settle for less, go for the gold. If it was not for her praying to God, asking Him to look over me while I go through the day, and at night while I sleep, I would be lost.

My mother and I love each other very much. We are so close that we go the end for each other.

***Lucinda Warren, English 109 College Writing Workshop**

1st draft, "Alabama Waterways," September 15

In Alabama there are a number of different types of water areas like calm shallow rivers, deeper calm rock bottom rivers, and deeper rushing waters. These Alabama Water Areas bring back memories of when I was young. All the kids in my extended family would wade and swim in the Alabama streams and rivers. We were overwhelmed by the Alabama ports and areas directly around them.

Classroom focus: using detail and description.

Lucinda begins to add specific details to her first draft:

2nd draft, "Alabama Waterways," September 21

In Alabama there are a number of different types of water areas: the calm shallow rivers, the deeper calm rock bottom rivers, and the deeper rushing waters. These Alabama waterways bring back memories of when I was young. All the kids in my extended family would wade and swim in the Alabama streams and rivers. Sometimes, we could go down to the dam and go out on the walkway to see large cargo ships come into the locks. From the walkway, we could see a huge whirlpool in the middle of the man made lake.

Classroom focus: writing good introductions, developing ideas fully, using paragraphs, becoming aware of the reader's needs.

For her third draft, Lucinda makes her introduction more meaningful, adds much more detail to her paper, and begins to develop the three different kinds of waterways she introduces in her opening paragraph:

3rd draft, "Alabama Waterways," September 29

The Alabama Water Areas bring back memories of when I was young because they were so much fun. The waterways really created some good childhood memories for there are so many different types of water: calm shallow rivers, deeper calm rock bottom rivers, and rushing deeper waters from the Gulf of Mexico.

My Grandpa Thomas has a shallow river branch that is fed by a fresh water spring. When my cousins and I were about seven, we would wade out up to our calves and chase the water bugs. There were some bugs that looked like spiders yet the bugs lived on the surface of the water. My cousins and I would herd them up like cattle which we learned from my grandpa and his cows. We herded them with sticks into a corner of the water so the water bugs would occupy us for hours.

I remember swimming in the deep river with rock bottoms that were located on the back of my grandpa's property. You could feel the smooth rock with the moss growing on it at the bottom under your toes. The river was always more green than blue because it must have been filled with bacteria. I wonder why us teenagers never got sick yet it was still very beautiful to my eyes.

We went on a family trip to Wheeler Dam in Huntsville, Alabama. It was huge for ships would come in, also there was a huge whirlpool. I was told it was a natural whirlpool caused by the convergence of two tides. The water was rapidly rotating and so the violent mass was big enough to swallow a ship. I was even scared of it because my brother would lean so on the railing. I was afraid he would slip right over the rail but it was an awesome family trip.

I enjoyed the waterways that were located around Alabama. They really helped build some good childhood memories as it built family ties too.

Classroom Focus: Centering a paper on a main idea, writing a reflective or analytical conclusion, polishing a final draft.

Lucinda decides to focus the entire paper on memories of the river running through her Grandpa's farm. After two additional drafts focused on these childhood memories, she polishes a final version (her 6th), working especially hard on language and imagery to convey her feelings, and adds a conclusion exploring the meaning these memories now have for her as an adult:

Final version, "The River by Grandpa's Farm," early December

We all have a place in time that we can go back to for a calm moment. These still and quiet places take our troubled thoughts away. In my mind, a place I remember is located in and around a river which runs through my Grandfather's farm. All of his grandchildren waded and swam in that winding river and its branches.

There is a shallow branch which runs nearby my grandfather's house. When my cousins and I were about seven, we would wade out up to our calves and chase the water bugs. The water bugs looked like spiders but lived on the surface of the water. My cousins and I would herd them up like cattle which we learned from watching our grandpa herd his cows. We herded the bugs with sticks into a corner inclosed by land at one side and us with sticks at the other side. These water bugs would occupy us for hours.

This branch ran into a deep river located across a field and through some woods past my Grandfather's house. As teenagers, we would all get together in the back of someone's pick up truck to go down to the river. After we got out of the truck, we would throw off our clothes and jump in the river. We could feel the smooth rock with moss growing on it under our toes. The moss would squash between our toes but soon it would be washed away by the water. The river was always more green or brownish than blue probably because it was full of dirt or algae or something. It was still one of the most beautiful rivers that my eyes ever saw. The sun always lit up the waves and ended in the shade of the trees.

There was one tree which I remember well. We would swing down into the river from a rope connected to the oak. The tree and its rope were more fun than any diving board. For years, the old oak must have stood there. From the bank, we would climb up the side of the tree. The first six steps were made on boards which were nailed to the oak. The next few steps were made on the limbs. We would sit on one of the bigger branches while someone threw a long thick rope up. All of us teenagers would hang on tight, get off the branch, and swing off into the water. Usually, each of us made a huge splash into at least eight feet of water. When we got out of the water we ran back to the oak or sat around on the bank.

The bank had a cleared spot out of the middle of the forest and weeds. All the teenagers got together in an area off to the side of the big oak where the big boulders sat. The boulders were used to throw towels and clothes on. People would talk over in this area since there was nothing else to do. Some of my cousins would smoke cigarettes there or gossip therefore I avoided this area. Being more active, I would be out in the river swimming or climbing up that old oak.

My grandfather's farm was a place for me to play then and it is an escape for me now. I can appreciate my dad and my mom for taking me there because it was a simple place and time. The simple family vacation built some childhood memories for me along with strong family ties.

About the Author

Lois Rosen is Professor of English at the University of Michigan-Flint where she teaches courses in English education and composition. She is presently Director of UM-Flint's new Thompson Center for Learning and Teaching.