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Assessing the Transition Between High School and College: Portfolios as Artifacts of Student and Curricular Growth

George H. Cooper

When I went off to college, I was happy to close the door behind me. Not only did I leave my home and my high school, I left the state, not because the school I headed for was so spectacular, but because it was far enough away that without a doubt, I could sever my ties with home and all the more quickly, I presumed, declare myself an adult. — Just like a kid.

The transition between high school and college is perhaps as natural as growth itself, a passage through which a person is transformed, abandoning the lessons of the past so as to better embrace future adventure unencumbered. But really, is this what we want to happen in the transition between high school and college?

I have taught college writing for fifteen years and periodically ask students to reflect on what they learned about writing in high school, about what they learned as a whole in their past education. To hear them tell it, they learned frightfully little; and how would I know to doubt them, my years of high school so far behind me, and the media so set upon propounding the weaknesses of public education.

Assessment: To Sit Beside

Since 1992 at the University of Michigan, we have been assessing the writing of incoming students through a sample of their work contributed in a portfolio. We ask for four pieces of writing, three of which we assume they already have written and need not produce upon their acceptance

to the university: a piece of writing that responds to something you read, a piece of writing from a class other than English, a piece of writing that you like a lot or consider most representative of your ability. The fourth piece of writing, a reflective piece, they have to write fresh for the portfolio, and they use it to explain the other pieces in the portfolio, as well as to explain why they might have submitted writing beyond the guidelines we request.

In writing this I don't mean to say that portfolios are perfect. To say these portfolios are an exhaustive representation of four years of high school writing would not be accurate. Moreover, we use the portfolios to place students into one of three categories, the middle category (Introductory Composition) receiving the vast majority of these students, 85 percent. Some people have argued that the sophistication and expense involved in portfolio assessment is wasted on such an indiscriminate and seemingly disproportionate placement pattern. Indeed, such a wide range of students enter into Introductory Composition as to make the few on either end of our placement, practicum or exempt, the products of the worst sort of tracking — the bottom group stigmatized as the worst of all writers, or equally problematic, the top group, the extraordinarily best, in whose skills the institution has found nothing to question and who, by extension, might never question or possibly employ their own writing ability again. In any case it can be reasonably argued that ability sort-

ing into categories such as these could probably be effected by other, less expensive and equally accurate, means.

Having just introduced a thorny issue of Michigan's assessment, I wish to leave it for another time, in order to bring up one useful offshoot to the problematics of portfolio measurement. An effect of portfolio assessment is that we can learn more about the gap or transition between high school and college, indeed, the various stages of growth students enjoy and in response to which teachers at all levels prepare themselves. Such a record of what a student has learned can offset the "gap" mentality that students bring to college, and help them correlate and utilize what they learned in high school with what they learn in college. Moreover, teachers at both levels can better focus on what skills students need to learn in high school, whether college bound or not; on what skills students need for college writing; and finally, on what skills need to be cultivated and perfected at the college level.¹

In the portfolio assessment process at Michigan, the day begins with standardization of the readers—in our case, college graduate students and faculty. We read two portfolios, individually identify their features, record and score them, and then compare and discuss scores as well as reasons for them. In doing this, our standards come into line for the day, and for many days, to help us keep our testing instrument reliable over time. During standardization and the ensuing discussion of student writing, a great variety of features of writing, as well as education, are covered. Participants discuss student writing in a manner usually reserved for accepted works of literature, elements of voice, synthesis of evidence, nuance of style, control of metaphor. In their effort to evaluate and accurately place a student, readers will use textual elements to speculate on a great variety of students' cognitive attributes, educational opportunities, and even personality types. In addition to the writing itself, the portfolio provides information on the name of the school, its location, the assignments to which the students have responded, the range of writing opportunities the student enjoyed across the curriculum, and in all of this, a glimpse of the general quality of writing instruction the student has been afforded over at least the high school years, if not their whole educational career.

Assessment: A Means of Outreach and Understanding

Recently, we read a portfolio with high school and some college teachers as part of the Red Cedar Writing Project at Michigan State University. Not

surprising, though nonetheless profound, were the ways in which the conversation among high school teachers compared to the conversation among college teachers regarding the same portfolio. A discussion of those conversations here documents the gap between high school and college, as well as the possible bridging of it, that I referred to above.

It was a sunny and warm day in Lansing. Janet Swenson, co-director of the Red Cedar Writing Project, had facilitated my request to work with members of her group for one morning. Two colleagues of mine, Ann Russell and Margaret Willard, and I brought Laura Gronseth's² portfolio with us to share, hoping to learn more about how our assessment was perceived by teachers in Michigan, as well as to compare our view of criteria for assessment and the assumptions at their foundation to what high school teachers think. Along with the reflective piece, Laura's portfolio contains a piece on Mark Twain, the goal of which was to "select an author, analyze several works of literature written by the author, and develop an arguable thesis from the research"; a piece on high school athletics, the goal of which was to "discuss the importance of high school athletics"; and a short story, that was written to imitate the style of Edgar Allen Poe.

The teachers at the Red Cedar Writing Project began their assessment impressed by the "creative piece," the imitation of Edgar Allen Poe. They remarked that the piece was "accomplished—the piece centers on a character I believe in." The piece contains "details, background, and economical construction." The writer "maintains tone relevant to the style she is imitating," "establishes a convincing plot," and "includes elements appropriate for a short story." The piece is "right on from the start," and contains "appropriate dialogue." "The Poe piece matches what the writer says about it in the reflective piece." One teacher remarked about how such a piece of writing requires a lot of time, both on the part of student and teacher, and that she had tried and abandoned an assignment such as this because it was beyond the reach of her and her students.

Important to note here is that the Poe imitation was last in the portfolio, and the Red Cedar teachers' attention to it signaled the achievement it represented for a high school student and teacher as well as for its entertainment qualities.

The second piece discussed (and the second piece in the portfolio) was the one on high school athletics. The topic on athletics grew out of personal experience and expressed the view that "the foundation of educational athletics be sportsmanship." Teachers thought it was "weakest of the

three," that it "captures [the] idea of good winning and losing, sportsmanship." The topic struck another teacher as difficult and one that was "hard to make convincing, yet the writer does."

The first piece of the portfolio, but the last one discussed, was the piece on Mark Twain. Red Cedar teachers observed that it "loses focus." "Paragraphs seem tacked on." There are "some problems with argument, but not surprising given the degree of difficulty being attempted." Another teacher agreed that it was a good topic and credited the writer for integrating four of Twain's writings in this analysis. One teacher, whose assessment was perhaps not so benevolent, indicated that the piece ought to be this good, since "the student had all term to complete the project." A last comment that in its generality possibly sums up the view of the whole: "it is readable."

College teachers began their discussion of the same portfolio with the Twain piece that analyzed a number of his writings. Among the features the teachers addressed were that the piece was "not particularly well organized but clearly had a purpose." The "collected information is not well synthesized, but it is well chosen." Another reader thought the evidence could be more convincing. Another said that the writer "went for a complex thesis, the difficulty of which might have discommodulated his overall composition. This counted both for and against the writer." There was also a general concern about attribution in the Twain piece, although the writer had made the nature of the sources she consulted quite clear in the reflective piece.

After discussing the Twain piece, the college readers then moved on to discuss alternately the sports piece, the Poe imitation, as well as the portfolio as a whole.³ One said that the "sports piece didn't help." Another said the Poe piece was "very Poe-like." The reader went on to say that she anticipated a kind of B movie, slasher ending, but was pleasantly surprised as the narrative was, especially toward the end, "infused with very Poe-like characteristics." Another reader then defended the sports piece. Although offended by "in your face" transition words, the reader said, "We have seen a lot of pieces like this. They have no specifics; this one actually had some meat." Overall, another reader said, the portfolio possessed a "decent, flowing style, especially the Twain piece. There was a global, purposeful feeling to the whole thing." A final comment in the college teacher session regarded models and, in conjunction with that, what we expect from students at the college level. The reader said that in conceiving of and writing the Poe piece, the writer had a model to match, "whereas students don't neces-

sarily [have models] for a critical analysis. The Twain piece is what we teach; therefore, we pay attention to it."

Assessment: A Rhetoric of Ridicule

At least since the Harvard Report on Composition and Rhetoric in 1892 and 1897 college teachers have been in the business of blaming high school teachers for weaknesses in student writing. It happens in secondary school and middle school as well. The teachers at the higher learning level blame those just previous to them for student weaknesses. It's natural, you might say. It's natural and appropriate, especially when students are in fact not well prepared. But it is not natural when the teachers (let's say college teachers) begin blaming their predecessors (let's say high school teachers) for deficiencies in skills that college teachers are supposed to impart. Moreover, it is not natural or appropriate when the college teachers know next to nothing about what students do in high school, and have done little to find out. Lucille Parkinson McCarthy observed in her 1987 study, "Stranger in Strange Lands," that students (in general) will not bring to the next level all of the skills they learned at the earlier educational level, leaving them dormant until drawn upon by a discerning, conscientious teacher. College teachers can corroborate in this silent sleep by assuming that the neophyte college student knows nothing, obviously, having just arrived from high school, and will not be ready to bear ideas until at least mid term, by which time they will have benefited from the ingestion of the rudiments of college type thinking.

Let me try to ground this in what the last college reader said of the Twain piece, as well as the process of reading the portfolio described above. College teachers value critical thinking. A 1987 internal survey of faculty at Michigan reported that critical thinking and writing was highly valued, taught and expected.⁴ Although there are many incarnations of critical thinking, the discussion above indicates that what college readers value as critical is thinking in which a writer employs multiple sources (critical views) and manipulates them harmonically and technically so as to reveal multiple angles on a single text or author. The value college teachers place on this kind of writing is revealed as well in the fact that their discussion of the above portfolio begins with and centers on the Twain piece, valuing "synthesis," "purpose," and "complexity." The Red Cedar teachers by no means devalue the analytical features of the Twain piece and, on the contrary, address characteristics of its "argument," integration, and organization. The Red Cedar teachers, like the college teachers,

credit the piece and even excuse some of the weaknesses because of its degree of difficulty; nonetheless, I don't think there is an equivalence in the language used by each group.

Not only is there difference in the language used to talk about the same thing, but qualities are attributed with value according to what the evaluators are familiar with. The Red Cedar teachers began their discussion with the Poe imitation, even though it was the last piece in the portfolio. Also punctuating their discussion was the fact that an imitation such as this is so difficult and time consuming to teach that the success witnessed here is rare. The college teachers, on the other hand, began with the Twain piece, and though noting the high quality of the Poe imitation, did not value its degree of difficulty, arguing that with a model, the task of writing was easier. Indeed, analytical skills are necessary for a writer to carry off a successful imitation. A writer has to identify and understand features of style before she can use them. A writer has to identify and understand the pacing of "a sense of foreboding" before she can pace her own images as effectively. A writer has to identify and understand how subtlety of language can lead to suspense, or else go straight for the juggler with a slasher type ending.

Assessment: Artifacts of Student and Curricular Growth

My point here is that although college teachers don't recognize it, there is a genuine and effective amount of critical analysis going on in Poe imitation. Moreover, it is a kind of intellectual work that high school teachers value highly because it involves a young writer in a "real" enterprise of literature, but also because young writers enjoy this kind of work. On the other hand, the use of secondary sources in high school research often results in report-like work, even if assigned under the rubric of analysis. And the research paper, an assignment of considerable history as well as burden, is assigned primarily as an instrument to get students to read more secondary material, to get to the library and collect information, rather than as an occasion for a student to explore, to inquire, to express themselves in their own critical voice. Colleges, by and large, do not require research done in this way.⁵ The quality of the Twain piece that the college teachers liked and centered in on, and that the Red Cedar teachers noticed but did not specifically articulate, is the use of secondary materials as multiple perspectives to illuminate aspects of Twain and his literature rather than more simply to report on the multiple perspectives.

I don't mean to suggest there is anything out

of the ordinary here. But I do mean to draw attention to what is happening. That college teachers and high school teachers might both appreciate critical analysis, but appreciate it in different ways, is not surprising. That they should be so out of touch with what the other values strikes me as typical but unacceptable, and the more I think about it, preposterous.⁶ I began this essay using my own life as an example of how I did what I could to escape my past as I moved from high school to college. This included leaving behind some of the knowledge and many of the skills that I cultivated as a youth in high school. Would I have been better off if someone had read a portfolio of my writing to learn something about what I had learned? Would I have been better off if my teachers in college knew what to challenge in my silence and what to cull out of my little voice, knowing it was there because from reading portfolios, they had an idea of what high school teachers valued. On the other hand, would I be better off if my high school teachers had known that when I got to college, when I entered the work world, my ability to report on material would not be as valued as my ability to assess situations and render those assessments in writing? Would I be better off if my high school teachers, instead of leading me repeatedly step by step through the topic, the content, the paragraph order, and the paper length, had assigned just one piece of academic work, that left choices (in content, style and form) up to me?

I can't quite say, but I do believe that we at the college and we in the high schools should be in greater contact over what we expect from students and what we teach. Such conversations happen sometimes at conferences, and have happened this summer, at National Writing Projects. Although these activities are ongoing and institutionalized within our profession, they do not alleviate the reality I hear about nearly every time I visit a school to talk about college and high school writing. After a recent visit to Dexter High School, Ellen Doss wrote to say, "Strange as it may seem, we rarely make the time to all come together and discuss actual classroom practices." It's not that teachers don't talk on a regular basis; it's that when they do, their conversations entail a lot of other baggage.

Is it possible that through a conscientious and reflective use of portfolios, we can achieve more than just assessment, and perhaps use that information to bridge the gap between high school and college? I would say so. Moreover, to be healthy, assessment instruments need to do more than rank and sort students. They need to, in Pat Belanoff's words, offer "a way of integrating testing, teaching, and curriculum" (20). A portfolio, in

its material form, offers a foundation to do this; but we as teachers, especially as we represent teachers of different levels, need to attend to this foundation and learn from what it offers.

Notes

1 I recognize the possibility of this being a false set of categories, since those "skills for college," might also be relevant for use in the world, and vice versa. Moreover, it could be argued that the psychological, logical, and tactical skills involved in writing should never be separated into categories of age appropriateness, as they are effectively inseparable from each other.

2 I want to thank Laura for her willingness to talk about and share her work. When I contacted her about my interest in her writing, she was grateful. She wrote back to me the following: "I worked very hard on my portfolio and I am proud of the writing I submitted. I am interested in your request as well as the feedback other teachers have towards my writing. You have my permission to use my portfolio as well as my name. My only request is that I would like to hear some of the responses to my writing so I may grow as a writer through the experience."

3 As I will discuss later, the order in which the pieces were discussed is of importance. The fact that the college readers at some point began to discuss the portfolio as a whole, or pieces alternately, was most likely caused by the college teachers being in a frame of mind of having to evaluate the whole portfolio, whereas the Red Cedar teachers were part of a workshop and not genuinely assessing the portfolio as a whole for placement.

4 Percentages vary across disciplines and course level, but in general, the survey concluded that 46 percent of all courses at the University required some kind of critical analysis (45).

5 No doubt this is a generalization that will be proven wrong in specific cases. Should I say, it is not required at Michigan? I can qualify this generalization by saying that most introductory composition courses, most survey courses used as electives in the first two years, do not require such papers. And when such research is required, the students are asked to juxtapose their own voices, their own viewpoints into the secondary material they employ.

6 I can take such a stance until I remember the arrogance and territory issues that arise in the study of literature on all levels, at which point, I have to agree that these communication breakdowns are unavoidable, although one can wish they would change.

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