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Getting Started with Writing Portfolios in the Classroom

Jeanette Nassif

Several years ago I became aware that something good was happening across the hall. Some students hung around after class talking excitedly to the teacher. Other students came out of the class still talking about the papers clutched in their hands. Even more students hurried into the class early every day.

I had had many of these students the previous year, and although I knew them to be good students, this year they seemed much more actively interested in their learning. Since I really wanted to know what was going on, what was causing all this interest, I approached the teacher, Dr. Susan Goering. She explained that she was undertaking a project with classroom writing portfolios. After telling me what they were and what students were expected to do, I could understand why students felt so involved. When she asked me if I was interested in joining her by extending the project to my room, I jumped at the chance.

Since that day my classroom has not been the same. It too is full of the excitement and energy of students, coming to class ready to write and being involved in their own learning.

Susan Goering, who got me involved and was my "guide on the side" as a fellow teacher, had a lot to do with this. She was the support I needed to get started. She answered many of my questions such as: How do I start? How will using portfolios benefit my students? In what ways will

this change my classroom? Who else needs to know what we're doing in order to support portfolio use in my classroom?

I discovered through Susan that the classroom writing portfolio is more than a container full of stuff. It is a history of a student's learning in my class throughout the year, a container of student work and accomplishments not unlike a series of snapshots. I learned that classroom writing portfolios provide an opportunity for students to collect, reflect on, select, and modify their own work. This portfolio became a systematic and organized collection of evidence used by me and my students to monitor their growth over time.

To get started, I decided to involve only my ninth grade Academically Gifted Class. I felt if the project did not work out as I had hoped, these very flexible students would be able to continue without too many problems. It turned out to be an excellent choice because these students got very involved, and I learned a great deal from them that helped me make modifications later. I started by setting aside a specific day each week because I wanted to be sure to make room for writing in the schedule. On those days we brainstormed, jotted, wrote, peer-edited, revised, and rewrote.

Because I wanted the students to be empowered and to take ownership, we set guidelines together from the start. Through classroom discussions we decided to use the curriculum as the basis for our writings because students did not

want to feel as if this was an "add-on" requirement unrelated to anything else. Thus assignments would be generated from the material we read. In addition, they accepted the idea that individual writings would not receive a specific grade at the time of the writing. Instead, pieces would accumulate in their working portfolios and be graded at the end of the semester as part of the working portfolio grade. Another guideline students agreed to was the importance of meeting deadlines. We decided, however, that they could submit a late paper, but that it would earn a penalty grade at the end of the semester.

Students were concerned about parent reaction to papers without grades. One student suggested that a letter be sent home to inform parents of the project. So they would not be concerned about the absence of grades. I sent a letter to the parents which required a signature to indicate they were aware of the project.

Since it was the beginning of the year and I wanted to know something about my students' writing, I asked them to write the history of themselves as writers. They were to tell me such things as what they remembered about beginning to write, their best and worst memories of writing in school, what they wanted to improve in their writing, and how they felt about themselves as writers.

The writing process was my guide as I structured these writing days. For each writing assignment students did, I required them to not only edit, proof, and revise it but also to date and label each step. We used peer editors as a second reader to provide feedback in the editing stage. A great deal of modeling and guiding was done on the overhead before this step was introduced. By reading a piece of writing together and talking it through together, we learned to respond to others' writing as well as offer criticism and editing comments.

After each step of the writing process was completed, I provided some feedback. Sometimes I made a verbal comment, wrote a short note on a post-it, engaged in a mini-conference, or wrote a letter. Other times I tape-recorded a message on a cassette which the student provided. I always included a positive comment about the work first and then offered ideas about areas that needed

improvement. This constant flow of communication between the students and me seemed to be a very important part of making this approach work. Students knew I was excited about and involved in their writing, and that seemed to matter to them.

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When the finished paper was completed, students included it in their working portfolio with all the previous steps of the same paper. Thus, as the semester progressed, they accumulated many examples of each step of the writing process in their portfolios.

The step which seemed most important in helping students become better writers was the step which asked them to reflect on what they wrote and the process they used to write the piece. Students completed one of these reflection sheets at the end of each writing assignment. It had general yet thought-provoking questions such as: What did you learn? What did you like about this assignment? What did you dislike about the assignment?

At first the students would put a one-sentence answer down, but by the end of the semester they were writing one or two paragraphs about each of the questions. From four to ten questions were asked after every assignment, but they varied from assignment to assignment. This step, which involved the students in the metacognitive process by getting them to think about their own thinking, made them aware of their own learning and thus helped them become more involved in it. They could see that they were part of the learning process, that learning wasn't something imposed on them by others. All of this writing and reflecting was called our collection and reflection stage.

At the end of the semester students selected any piece that they felt could be their "best" work for the semester. I would offer suggestions about the one I thought represented their best writing,

but it was ultimately up to them. They revised that piece based on all the suggestions made throughout the semester. Since we had many mini-lessons on such things as grammar and punctuation, when they revised, proofed, and edited this final piece, it was to be error-free. This piece was to be a "showcase" piece, an example of their best work for the semester which would receive the writing grade for the semester. That writing was placed in their "showcase" portfolio.

They also did a final reflection paper that was to represent their thinking about all the writings and the experiences they had had that semester. I based the reflective paper on three areas: Why did you select this piece? What have you learned? What do you plan to do in the future with your writing? This reflection paper was also submitted with their "showcase" piece as were all the drafts of the piece. In addition, I required that they include a table of contents because I wanted them to recognize that organization is an important part of their work. As such, it contained listings of all the drafts they did to complete each step of the writing process. This was called the selection and reflection stage.

At this time the students went back to their original working portfolio which we organized together in class. Each set of papers was to be placed in the following order: prewriting, rough drafts, peer editor sheets, final drafts, reflection sheets, and the teacher feedback sheets. To organize it all, students created another table of contents.

Our final step was to have the working portfolio and the "showcase" portfolio read and commented on by any adult selected by the student. They were to confer with the adult about the project, the process, and the procedure. The adult was to write them a letter which was to be included in the "showcase" portfolio. This proved to be an important step because it offered the students an opportunity to communicate with someone outside of the classroom who provided another audience for their work.

The students then submitted both the working portfolio and the "showcase" portfolio for a grade. We devised a rubric at the beginning of the semester which included guidelines for how each of the two portfolios was to be graded. The work-

ing portfolio grade, based on contents, organization, and meeting deadlines, made up sixty percent of their writing grade. The "showcase" portfolio grade, based on best piece, reflection paper, and adult response, was worth forty percent of their writing grade.

The project was so successful that the second semester I tried it with my regular tenth grade Practical Writing Class. Because I teach at an inner city high school and deal with some students who don't seem to care about school, I was not sure how they would react to the idea of writing portfolios. I wondered if they would see growth in writing as an important educational goal. But that semester proved to be very exciting because the students bought into the idea and did get involved. Because they were being asked to think about and reflect on what they were doing, they began to assess themselves. They started to realize that they could be successful with writing, and that much of its success was based on their own contributions.

Now, I am into my fourth year of working with portfolios and use them in all my classes. I have two Academically Gifted classes, two English as a Second Language classes, and an American Literature class that span grades nine through eleven. I cannot imagine any other way of working on writing with students. Even though the students change, the curriculum and procedure remain fairly similar. Although each class changes this project a bit by making modifications or suggesting additions, these changes don't seem to affect how successful students feel. Many parents have indicated how pleased they are with their children's involvement in writing, but many are especially happy with the idea that, as parents, they have been included as part of the process of writing.

For the past two years in the workshops I have been doing on writing portfolios in my district and around the state, I have met many teachers who are very interested in improving their own teaching and in helping students improve their own work. Many of these teachers are already working with writing portfolios, but just as many teachers would like to use portfolios but don't know where to start, since the task can seem overwhelming.

For those teachers, I have several observations I will offer as advice.

First, there is no one best way to work with portfolios in your class. Each teacher will do it in his or her own way and add his or her own touch. Second, there are many Sues and Jeanettes out there who would be more than happy to be a partner, a guide, a coach, a support. Look for one or two other teachers in your building to work with on this project. There is safety and support in numbers, since tackling a project by yourself may make it seem like a chore instead of like fun. Third, although it seems like it would demand

more teacher time to become involved in writing portfolios, it's really just a different allocation of time. Instead of red-marking papers, I'm spending time responding to papers. It's certainly more satisfying. Fourth, if you think you can't find one more minute of class time to actually allow students to write and work on writing, you're probably right. I did have to let go of some of the things I loved to teach, but I found out it was worth it. Chances are you will be happy being involved with writing portfolios, but, more importantly, your students will probably love it.