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BUILDING AWARENESS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN WRITING: PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

Diane Hamstra

An assessment of students' mastery of writing seems to be the first, logical step in knowing what to strengthen in our writing programs. We may be forgetting, however, the nature of the process we are assessing and how our students learn. The writing process itself is recursive and is not formulaic. It is developmental over a lifetime. Furthermore, students first have to be aware of what they are doing before improving and attempting to gain mastery of any process.

In many schools and school systems, portfolio assessment is seen as an alternative, summative assessment of students' mastery in writing. The real beauty of the writing portfolio assessment, however, is that it is a reflective process of awareness for both students and teachers. Once students form a clear picture of themselves as writers, a metacognitive step, they can set goals for future performances. Then, teachers can use portfolio assessment as a formative, diagnostic tool to determine what they should do to help students reach their goals. Since the writing process is a very non-static, developmental process, and since mastery of it is never reached, using portfolio assessment as a formative rather than just as a summative tool can help us guide students to improve their writing.

We began our portfolio assessment of students' writing at Park Tudor's middle school and high school levels with some underlying questions. Answering these questions helped us to design an assessment of students' awareness of writing.

Our first questions demanded that we explore what underlies students' improvement in writing. We think that in order to improve, writers must be aware of the writing process and "become more conscious of the many decisions they make in order to improve their writing" (Cooper and

Brown 45). Furthermore, "when they finally look over a body of their work, judging it against a set of criteria they have developed and internalized, they are engaged in the kind of thinking characteristic of writers" (45). Consequently, we should give student writers the opportunities to conduct an assessment of what they are aware of and what they do and do not do as writers. If they know and we know how they perceive themselves as writers, then we may be able to foster their improvement on the basis of that information.

Another type of question that we asked concerned the kind of assessment teachers and students would find beneficial. An assessment that causes student writers to determine their strengths and weaknesses by comparing pieces of their work is helpful because, as Marna Bunce-Crim explains, "when you allow them to discover their own strengths and weaknesses, you also allow them to control aspects of their own learning— and that kind of empowerment leads them to more enthusiastic writing" (26).

Believing, then, that students must be actively engaged in their learning and have some control of it, we looked for a type of assessment that would actually be authentically characteristic of the writing process as well as instructional for the student. Student self-assessment and goal-setting on the basis of their own analyses seem appropriate in a program aimed toward improvement. Since "portfolios offer a framework that is dynamic and grounded in what students are actually doing" (Tierney et al. 42), students' keeping and periodically assessing portfolios would allow students and teachers to develop realistic goals for classroom focus. There is no point of conducting an assessment if the results do not influence instruction and students.

In other words, we at Park Tudor felt that the first steps toward our goal of improvement included looking at what students do as writers, our own influence as teachers, and what that influence should be in terms of instruction. In the spring of 1991, we asked our students to tell us how they viewed themselves as writers. Then, we looked at their responses to guide us in determining what we should teach them as individuals and as a class the next year (1991-92). We decided that we should base what we do on students' perceived strengths, needs, and self-determined goals, something the innovative portfolio assessment process afforded us. Consequently, we thought about what we do in the classroom and recognized that portfolio assessment,

used as a formative tool, could improve our teaching as well as our students' writing.

In many classrooms the English teacher evaluates individual pieces of writing rather than assessing whole bodies of work. In the evaluation of these individual papers, the teacher also tells students what they do and do not do well as writers. As a result, students are in the position of choosing whether to accept or reject the teacher's evaluation and advice. When students are given the responsibility for conducting an evaluation, on the other hand, the step of accepting or rejecting is eliminated because they are actively involved in establishing what is true about themselves as writers on the basis of what they recognize. The importance of recognition is critical in the writing process. If writers recognize part of their writing as good, they usually keep that part and may even build on it. If they recognize that part of the writing is bad, then they have the option to change it. We all want our students to grow as writers, so they must be sure of their ability to make evaluative decisions. We believe that student writers must have practice in evaluating their own writing not only of individual pieces but of whole bodies of work over a period of time and that portfolio assessment can help students view themselves as real writers.

At Park Tudor, therefore, we were faced with several needs:

1. to give students the opportunity to evaluate their own writing
2. to gather information about students as writers
3. to view what students were learning about writing
4. to determine some possible directions for instruction on the basis of how students perceive their needs and strengths

We were lucky in that we had students collect their writing over a period of three years in working writing folders that were passed on from year to year. Consequently, their self-evaluation was based upon a large body of work for our first assessment. At the same time, we had the same limitations that everyone else has: time, energy, and a desire to accomplish too much in too little time. We did not have the time to conduct a primary trait or holistic scoring of sample writings that students included in their portfolios.

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES

Our students' first portfolios included three prose writings selected by students, an assessment procedure sheet, and the portfolio assessment sheet (a self-evaluation sheet). These portfolios would travel with them from grade to grade beginning with grade 5 and ending with grade 12. It is important to note that students were asked to include one weak, early paper (so that we had a starting point paper) and two strong papers (so that a view of improvement could be determined by both the student and the teacher). Since students had collected three years of writing, choosing only three pieces of writing forced them to make evaluative decisions about their strengths and weaknesses as writers.

After the first assessment and for each of the following years, we decided to ask students to select two pieces of strong writing only to add to their ongoing portfolio collection because they already had one weak, starting point paper by which they could evaluate their growth. Our plan was to conduct school-wide, grade-level assessment once every three years to help us in setting goals only for our individual classrooms. It should be noted that each year, whether for individual classroom assessment or for school-wide assessment, students consider the entire portfolio in evaluating their strengths and weaknesses and in setting their goals.

Students are given a procedure sheet (see Appendix A) that explains two reasons for them to evaluate their writing: to see how much they have grown as writers and to determine a goal to work on the next year. The procedure sheet then directs them to identify (1) changes that they notice between their weak papers and their strongest papers, (2) strengths that are demonstrated in their selected papers, (3) weaknesses that they still have and would like to change, and (4) one major goal for the next year's writing. The directions also ask them to provide a specific example for each listed change, strength, and weakness by indicating its presence in a specific paper. Finally, after conducting the analysis of their writing, students are asked to describe a writing goal for the next school year.

After explaining the process to students in our classes, we all looked at a student model of a completed portfolio (see Appendix B). The student model came from pilot runs on the sixth and tenth grade levels. Providing a model helped students to visualize the process. In discussing a model with students, teachers pointed out the specificity of the listed strengths and

weaknesses and the references to specific papers for validation. The purpose of the references to a specific paper was to emphasize the importance of the selection of representative papers to be included and the importance of an actual close analysis of those papers.

We affirmed to students that the portfolio assessment was not a test and that this was their opportunity to view themselves as writers and to set one goal for the next year on the basis of analysis. Therefore, during the entire process, we encouraged students to collaborate with other students in conducting their self-assessments. Furthermore, we told them that we would compile their goals as a group and individually. We felt that there was no point in conducting an assessment if the results were not applied to instruction and learning. My observation of students in my classroom was that they took the task very seriously and actually seemed to enjoy it, perhaps because they sensed some empowerment.

COMPILING RESULTS

To help us set school-wide (i.e. grades 5-12) instructional goals for writing, a committee of teachers from grades 6, 8, and 10 tallied students' responses on the portfolio assessment sheet for each grade level. A rubric was used to categorize and tally students' responses to the prompts of "Changes," "Strengths," "Weaknesses," and "Goals" so that we could glean some meaning and trends and so that we could set grade level teaching goals. The rubric was an adaptation of NCTE's rubric for the fiction and non-fiction writing of their national writing achievement contest for juniors. Changes were minor and were made to include all student responses. We included two more categories than the NCTE rubric: "Revision/Editing" and "Miscellaneous." The need for these additions became apparent after the committee applied NCTE's rubric to sample student responses independently and as a group. Our rubric follows on the next page.

CATEGORICAL RUBRIC AND DESCRIPTORS FOR ASSESSMENT TALLY

CONTENT	(Ideas, fresh insights, writer's involvement)
PURPOSE/AUDIENCE/TONE	(Audience and tone fitting purpose)
WORDS: CHOICE AND ARRANGEMENT	(Expression, readable, clear)
ORGANIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT	(Logic, support, elaboration)
STYLE	(Sentence variety, figures of speech, point of view, imagination)
TECHNICAL QUALITY, MECHANICS	(Grammar, spelling, neatness)
MISCELLANEOUS	

What dawned on us as we adapted the rubric is that even though there were some responses commenting on revision and editing, meriting the need for such a revision category, there were relatively few in comparison to other types of responses. We realized that students were conducting a product analysis rather than a product and process analysis. If we wanted them to comment more on their writing processes, then our prompts would have to be altered and all of their writing in their yearly working writing folder and in their portfolio samples would have to include all drafts. We found that some classes did include all drafts, while others did not. At this point, our entry point, we decided to stick with a product analysis. Teachers have not yet agreed to require that students include all drafts of selected papers, but most are. Consequently, in the future we may have to revise our assessment to allow for and encourage a process analysis as well. In turn, a process analysis would eventually foster and include metacognitive journals written as students are composing their multiple drafts. This is what I would like to see happen, and this is an example of how assessment can affect instruction.

A tally of categorized responses for each grade level was written so that we could see trends across grade levels. As a result, we did acquire much information about what students were aware of in their writing. For example, we found that across the board, students seldom mentioned purpose,

audience, and tone. This does not mean that we did not work with these things in our classes but perhaps not enough or not clearly enough. In addition, these are elements that a writer thinks of most immediately during the writing process and that students always need practice in even when interpreting what they read. Furthermore, the assessment sheet did not address audience, purpose, or tone directly. Nevertheless, the staff is very conscious of helping students to realize and employ these elements. Furthermore, each grade level team did an analysis of the results and determined goals for teaching writing to their grade level on the basis of the information. Consequently, the assessment not only caused students to become reflective of themselves as writers but also affected our instruction.

There were weaknesses in our first attempt. In the future we need to conduct validity studies by doing several other things even if we stay with the product analysis. We need to actually check, map, and evaluate the correspondence of students' stated examples and explanations of a characteristic's presence in their papers. In short, we need to analyze how well students are able to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their writing. We also need to analyze how well they determine goals on the basis of their stated analysis. One technique that might help us to check the correspondence of their characteristics and examples would be to require them to circle the presence of a stated characteristic in the cited paper in addition to explaining it on the assessment sheet. This would expedite our analyzing how well they evaluate their writing's strengths and weaknesses. In effect, we let students assume that we were checking their examples and how well they analyzed their writing. The requirement of their citing examples led them to this assumption. We really should assess, however, how well students do their jobs as evaluators so that we have an even firmer basis for determining grade-level and classroom goals and so that we are reminded of the necessity of giving students multiple opportunities to evaluate their writing throughout the year.

While there were weaknesses in our first assessment, many of us observed that the students did take the task seriously, that they seemed to enjoy the process and collaboration, and that we did get enough specific responses from them to influence our instruction and to meet their expressed needs.

To see if my instruction, based upon students' goals, had an impact on my tenth grade students, I conducted an action research study at the end of

the instructional year (1991-92). I also decided to do this so I could better understand the relationship between assessment and instruction.

After the spring of 1991 assessment's findings, grade level teams of teachers constructed lists of grade level goals for the next year's teachers. Each teacher received these goals at the beginning of the 1991-92 school year for his or her grade level. I shared the grade 10 goals with my students and asked them if the stated goals were a reflection of what they felt they needed to work on as writers. They told me that they were. Of particular note was the goal of employing purpose, audience, and tone since all of my students had demonstrated little awareness of these characteristics. To address this goal, I required them to list their purpose, audience, and tone and to include their personal writing goal on every paper that they gave to me. I then had the real opportunity to guide them in my comments toward reaching their personal goals, as well as the goals of the class. In addition, whenever I conferenced with them on a paper, I asked each to tell me his or her personal goal, and we discussed ways of reaching it. We also worked on the classroom goals in each conference. In other words, I actually attempted to help them reach the class' goals and their individual goals all year.

At the end of the year, I asked through a survey (see Appendix C) if they had reached their goals "to a great extent," "better than before," "somewhat," or "not at all." The survey's statements reflected the instructional goals for the tenth grade class. In nearly all categories—ranging from topic selection and organization to mechanics and spelling—over 80% of the students believed they had made extensive or moderate progress. In no category did more than 4% (2 students out of 48) determine that they had not improved. I felt comfortable in concluding that my sophomore students did recognize the improvement that I had observed and that teaching toward student-determined goals was not a bad idea. The results gave me encouragement to continue my efforts in helping students to build portfolios, conduct self-assessments, and set goals.

As I look at the project from a wider perspective, I see that an advantage of conducting a school-wide assessment has been that all English teachers were involved in its formulation, execution, and application of results through committee work and grade-level, goal-setting teams. As a result, teachers at Park Tudor are beginning to recognize the importance of conducting a portfolio assessment and, most importantly, affording students the opportunities for self-assessment and setting their own goals. Students are also

recognizing the power of being able to evaluate their own writing just through having the opportunity and through collaboration with others. As teacher, I am gaining greater insight into the importance of peer editing, peer evaluation, self-evaluation, and honoring the processes of the student writer. Overall, the evolution of a more student-teacher tailored system that ties assessment to instruction has begun. Students are beginning to think of themselves as writers who create goals and seek methods of reaching them.

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APPENDIX A

**PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT DIRECTIONS FOR WRITERS'
NON-FICTION AND FICTION PROSE WRITING**

EXPLANATION: There are two reasons for you to evaluate your non-fiction and fiction prose writing: 1) for you to see how much you have grown as a writer and 2) to determine a goal to work on the next year. Please follow the directions below.

1. Review all of the writing in your folder, any writing from other classes, and writing conducted for personal reasons.
2. From your writing folder, select one paper that is a weak paper and one or two papers that are your strongest.
3. Put your selected papers in the provided portfolio folder. Label these papers in the upper left-hand corner: 1 (the weakest paper), 2 (one of the strongest) and 3 (if you include another strong paper).
4. List characteristics of the following on the attached "Writer's Portfolio Assessment" sheet.
 - A. Changes that you notice between your weak paper and your strongest paper(s).
 - B. Strengths that are demonstrated by the enclosed papers.
 - C. Weaknesses that you still have and would like to change to strengths.
 - D. One major goal for next year's writing improvement and why you selected that goal.

Provide a specific example for each change, strength, and weakness in your list by explaining its presence in papers 1, 2 or 3. Also, be as specific as you can in stating your goal and reason for its selection. (Note: a model of a student's assessment is attached to the back of this packet to help you visualize the self-evaluation process.)

While you are working on completing the assessment sheet, feel free to ask a classmate for advice and to help him or her. Check each other's listings

to see if they make sense and reflect what is true about the papers in each portfolio. Make additions and revisions where necessary.

5. Put this list and the selected papers in the front of the portfolio folder and hand it to your teacher. Your teacher will pass on your portfolio to your next year's teacher so that you and your new teacher can begin work on your goal in August.

Appendix B

STUDENT'S PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

NAME X GRADE 10

DIRECTIONS: On the basis of your selected pieces, list characteristics of your writing addressing the following categories and supply an example for each.

CHANGES BETWEEN YOUR WEAK PAPER AND YOUR STRONG PAPER(S)

EXAMPLES (State paper #.)

Thesis statement

- In paper #1, I do not have a thesis, and in paper #2, it is very confused. In paper #3, however, what I am going to write about is clear

Transitions between paragraphs

- In paper #1, I skip from subject to subject, but in paper #3, I connect subjects.

Sentence variety

- In paper #1, my sentences are short and repeat the subject-verb pattern. In paper #2, they are long, short and structurally varied.

STRENGTHS IN ANY SELECTED PAPER(S)

Supported points

- Paper #3's points are supported by examples and reasons.

Use of images

- Paper #2 has many images to paint the picture of my story.

Clear introduction

- Paper #2's introduction catches the reader's attention right away.

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WEAKNESSES THAT YOU STILL HAVE AND WANT TO CHANGE

Awkward wording	- Papers #1, #2 and #3 have some phrases that seem difficult to read.
Tense consistency	- In paper #1, I had no idea what tense consistency was. Paper #3 shows the first time I paid attention to it.
Connecting support to point	- While I support my points, I do not always really connect examples and reasons to them.

ONE GOAL FOR NEXT YEAR:

To learn how to rephrase awkward wording.

REASON GOAL SELECTED: I want the reader to understand what I mean.

Appendix C

END OF YEAR FOLLOW-UP SURVEY

SOPHOMORE CLASS SURVEY OF MEETING PERSONAL GOAL AND CLASSROOM GOALS WITH TALLIES AND PERCENT AGES (48 Respondents)

DIRECTIONS: Write the number of the most fitting response to the left of each numbered prompt, and write in the requested information of #1.

RESPONSE RATING SCALE

- 1 - to a great extent
- 2 - better than before
- 3 - somewhat
- 4 - not at all

_____ 1. I have made progress in reaching my personal goal.

Write your goal _____

Response Scale	# of Responses	Response Percentages
1	11	23%
2	22	46%
3	15	31%
4	0	0%

2. I am able to choose effectively a topic, purpose and audience for writing.

<i>Response Scale</i>	<i># of Responses</i>	<i>Response Percentages</i>
1	13	27%
2	24	50%
3	10	21%
4	1	2%

3. I can write well organized and well developed papers.

<i>Response Scale</i>	<i># of Responses</i>	<i>Response Percentages</i>
1	7	15%
2	29	60%
3	12	25%
4	0	0%

4. I can employ the following effectively in my final drafts:

Tense Consistency

<i>Response Scale</i>	<i># of Responses</i>	<i>Response Percentages</i>
1	19	40%
2	19	40%
3	9	18%
4	1	2%

Agreement

<i>Response Scale</i>	<i># of Responses</i>	<i>Response Percentages</i>
1	17	35%
2	23	48%
3	7	15%
4	1	2%

Punctuation

<i>Response Scale</i>	<i># of Responses</i>	<i>Response Percentages</i>
1	16	33%
2	24	50%
3	8	17%
4	0	0%

Spelling

<i>Response Scale</i>	<i># of Responses</i>	<i>Response Percentages</i>
1	27	56%
2	12	25%
3	7	15%
4	2	4%