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The Learning Portfolio: Promoting Intentional Learning

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As teachers, most of us have goals for student learning that go beyond the mastery of discipline specific facts and principles. We want to help our students to become critical thinkers and adept writers, to make connections between different fields of knowledge, and to prepare for future careers. To these somewhat elusive yet practical objectives many faculty add a number of holistic goals such as helping students grow as individuals, become engaged citizens and develop skill and enthusiasm for life-long learning.

But how do we incorporate these broader objectives into the fabric of our course? How do we translate what's essentially a shaping of attitudes and dispositions into assignments and classroom interactions? And finally, how do we assess that such learning has taken place?

One way of addressing these larger goals is to make them explicit and to encourage students to consider the larger purpose of their education. One can ask them periodically to reflect on their personal values and priorities and on how a particular course helps achieve these. At the very least, such reflections remind students of the active role they play in shaping their time in college. At best, they can help students become more intentional about their learning.

Interested in finding out more about your implicit goals for student learning? Go to Teaching Goals Inventory at <http://www.uiowa.edu/~centeach/tgi/index.html>

The Learning Portfolio is a rich tool for fostering such intentionality and selfawareness. It allows students at the end of a course or a curriculum to document what they have learned, to recognize what is meaningful to them, to plan how to use what they have learned and to set goals for future learning. "As written text, electronic display, or other creative projects the portfolio captures the scope, richness, and relevance of students' learning" (Zubizarreta, 2004, 16).

In my own course "Critical Approaches to Young Adult and Children's Literature," I assign a learning portfolio in lieu of a final exam. I instruct students to select as many as five pages from their writing, indicating the source (e.g. reading journal, class notes, paper, toolkit posting, team meeting notes, etc.) They then write a five-to seven-page introduction to this collection explaining what it as a whole means to them and how it reflects the changes in their thinking about the course material.

To prepare my students for this final assignment, I give them ample opportunity throughout the semester to flex their reflective muscle in reading journals and response papers. In the portfolio, students use these introspective exercises together with their standard papers as evidence for the argument they present in

the final essay. To get them started, I give a list of questions and let them choose two or three to guide their reflection. Examples include:

- How has your writing evolved? Which assignments were more comfortable and productive for you? Why?
- Identify major ideas and themes in your writing and analyze how they have developed over the course of this semester. What is their significance for you?
- How do your ideas connect to those you developed in other courses? How does this course fit into your overall undergraduate education?
- How do your insights connect to your life, your personal values and convictions? What are your plans for using what you have learned in the future?

One common concern about learning portfolios is that the assignment produces mandated confessionals and that it may encourage students to “schmooze” or hide behind shiny rhetoric. As a safeguard I add this warning: “As was the case for all previous projects, this is not the place for flattery or arguments you don’t believe in. You will be evaluated for the depth of your critical and reflective thinking. You will receive an A for an essay demonstrating that you have not learned anything in this course if the argument is compellingly written and evidence-based.” In addition, I encourage my students to seek peer feedback before they hand in their portfolios, offer them models of successful portfolios written by former students, and share with them evaluation criteria such as these (adapted from McGregor, 1993, 102):

In reviewing the essay I will look for the following as they apply to the questions you choose:

- Critical analysis of how your writing and thinking about the subject of the course has changed (or not changed)
- Evidence of your preparedness to take an active role as a participant in the discourse of our field of study, including accuracy of discipline-specific facts and principles
- Ability to connect the course material to other fields you have studied and to your personal interests in different areas of your life
- Depth and specificity of reflection
- Persuasiveness of your evidence-based argument
- Clear organization; engaging and comprehensible style; correct grammar and vocabulary

I have found that if I set the tone of reflective inquiry throughout the semester and clarify expectations, students will challenge themselves to produce meaningful, authentic self-reflection, which makes for an exceptionally rewarding reading experience. I am always surprised how individual the responses are, how every student identifies a unique area of growth – most of the time one that I and the student would have never suspected.

Reflecting on her experience reading Carolivia Herron’s *Nappy Hair* and bell hooks’ *Happy to be Nappy* as well as on the controversy sparked by the first book, an African- American student majoring in psychology writes: “Reading the two books brought back so many memories for me of being a child very uncomfortable in her

skin. Memories of longing to be White, longing for straight, blonde hair, and longing for acceptance came rushing in. Why were parents [who threatened a teacher for using Herron's book] in such an uproar? Did they realize that these two books were dealing with some of the most important issues that a Black child faces?" The student then describes how her questions spilled over into her life outside of the classroom, into conversations with parents raising minority children. "One day, while visiting, I began to tell [an acquaintance] about our class and what we were reading. Being African-American and having a daughter slightly younger than myself, she said that when her daughter was younger, it seemed that the genre was just beginning to take off. She went home and brought me back a stack of books that she had shared with her child."

Those new conversations lead her to formulate a new goal: "In the future, I am pretty certain that I will continue to explore the field of literature written for minority children . . . using the skills I learned in this class to take on the task!"

Among the most inspiring pieces are those of students (often fourth-years) who (re)discover their own voice through personal reflection. In her learning portfolio, an English major who seemed disenchanted throughout the semester gives me a glimpse into how she struggled to recover her love for literature:

Reflecting on this semester and completing this essay had been, perhaps, one of the most honest and personal things I have done in a long time. For too long, I have been caught up in the typically disaffected nature of academia. . . . I tend to read literature with a certain disregard for the ways it truly affects me, at least for class. Writing in a journal, posting responses online, class exercises – all of these have both forced and allowed me to more fully consider the literature that we have read, in ways that I rarely have time for. I have begun connecting themes and ideas of different works, and I have begun to think critically of books in ways that I never did before.

And finally, there are contemplations about the limits of discipline-specific knowledge mixed in with a compassionate exploration about what it means to grow and be human:

When I came to college, I expected to be taught, not to learn that I must teach myself, find meaning in the world myself, and experience the world for myself. I didn't have enough confidence in my own abilities to find that charge appropriate or safe. In college and in this class, however, I have learned that we all must traverse our lives alone to the best of our abilities. It is the charge that God gives humans, the responsibility and burden of free will. Anthropology charges forward and demands that we question what we think we know, and, as I have discussed, that can be quite unsettling. Literature provides an opportunity for humans to commiserate about the difficulty of being human, and is more sensitive to our feelings of rupture and brokenness.

A regular practice of reflection can encourage students' self-awareness and renew their commitment to their education. Rather than thoughtlessly going through the motions, they begin to see how what they learn connects to their own ambitions and aspirations. By asking students to construct a narrative about their own learning, we give them permission to articulate what's meaningful to them and to

formulate their own learning goals in life.

Works Cited

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