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Introduction to Using Portfolios in the Classroom

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Chapter 1. The Types of Portfolios

As more and more educators use portfolios, they increasingly recognize that the process has the power to transform instruction. Some teachers, however, are confused by the many types of portfolios, their different uses, and the practical issues surrounding storage, ownership, and the like.

The three major types of portfolios are: working portfolios, display portfolios, and assessment portfolios. Although the types are distinct in theory, they tend to overlap in practice. Consequently, a district's program may include several different types of portfolios, serving several different purposes. As a result, it is important for educators to be clear about their goals, the reasons they are engaging in a portfolio project, and the intended audience for the portfolios.
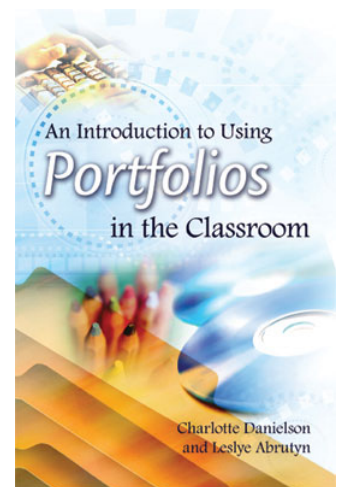
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Working Portfolios

A working portfolio is so named because it is a project "in the works," containing work in progress as well as finished samples of work. It serves as a *holding tank* for work that may be selected later for a more permanent assessment or display portfolio.

A working portfolio is different from a *work folder*, which is simply a receptacle for all work, with no purpose to the collection. A working portfolio is an intentional collection of work guided by learning objectives.

Purpose

The major purpose of a working portfolio is to serve as a holding tank for student work. The pieces related to a specific topic are collected here until they move to an assessment portfolio or a display

portfolio, or go home with the student. In addition, the working portfolio may be used to diagnose student needs. Here both student and teacher have evidence of student strengths and weaknesses in achieving learning objectives, information extremely useful in designing future instruction.

Audience

Given its use in diagnosis, the primary audience for a working portfolio is the student, with guidance from the teacher. By working on the portfolio and reflecting on the quality of work contained there, the student becomes more reflective and self-directed. With very young children, however, the primary audience is the teacher, with the participation of the student.

Parents may be another important audience of a working portfolio, since it can help inform parent/teacher conferences. The portfolio is particularly useful for those parents who do not accept the limitations of their child's current skills or do not have a realistic picture of the way their child is progressing compared with other children. In such situations, evidence from a portfolio can truly "speak a thousand words." In addition, a portfolio can serve to document the progress a student has made, progress of which a parent may be unaware.

Process

A working portfolio is typically structured around a specific content area; pieces collected relate to the objectives of that unit and document student progress toward mastery of those objectives. Therefore, sufficient work must be collected to provide ample evidence of student achievement. Because diagnosis is a major purpose of the working portfolio, some of the pieces included will show less than complete understanding and will help shape future instruction.

The working portfolio is reviewed *as a whole* and its pieces evaluated—either periodically or at the end of the learning unit. Some pieces may be shifted to an assessment portfolio to document student acquisition of instructional objectives. Other pieces may be moved to a student's own display (or best works) portfolio or celebration of individual learning. Still other pieces are sent home with the student.

As students move pieces from a working portfolio into either an assessment or display portfolio, they describe the reasons for their choices. In this process of selection and description, students must reflect seriously on their work and what it demonstrates about them as learners. As students and their teachers look through the portfolio, they set short-term objectives for achieving certain curriculum goals. The portfolio thus provides evidence of strengths and weaknesses and serves to define the next steps in learning.

Display, Showcase, or Best Works Portfolios

Probably the most rewarding use of student portfolios is the display of the students' best work, the work that makes them proud. Students, as well as their teachers, become most committed to the process when they experience the joy of exhibiting their best work and interpreting its meaning. Many educators who do not use portfolios for any other purpose engage their students in the creation of display portfolios. The pride and sense of accomplishment that students feel make the effort well worthwhile and contribute to a culture for learning in the classroom.

Purpose

The purpose of a display portfolio is to demonstrate the highest level of achievement attained by the

student. Collecting items for this portfolio is a student's way of saying "Here's who I am. Here is what I can do."

A display portfolio may be maintained from year to year, with new pieces added each year, documenting growth over time. And while a best works portfolio may document student efforts with respect to curriculum objectives, it may also include evidence of student activities beyond school (a story written at home, for example).

There are many possibilities for the contents of a display portfolio. The benefits of portfolios were first recognized in the area of language arts, specifically in writing. Therefore, writing portfolios are the most widely known and used. But students may elect to put many types of items in their portfolio of best works—a drawing they like, a poem they have written, a list of books they have read, or a difficult problem they have solved.

Audience

Since the student selects her or his own best works, the audience for a display portfolio is that student and the other important individuals, such as parents and older siblings, to whom the student chooses to show the portfolio. Other audiences include a current teacher or next year's teacher, who may learn a lot about the student by studying the portfolio.

In addition, a student may submit portfolios of best works to colleges or potential employers to supplement other information; art students have always used this approach. The contents of these portfolios are determined by the interests of the audience and may include videos, written work, projects, resumés, and testimonials. The act of assembling a display portfolio for such a practical purpose can motivate high school students to produce work of high quality.

Process

Most pieces for a display portfolio are collected in a working portfolio of school projects. Sometimes, however, a student will include a piece of work from outside the classroom, such as a project from scouts or a poem written at home. Students select the items to be included in a display portfolio. Their choices define them as students and as learners. In making their selections, students illustrate what they believe to be important about their learning, what they value and want to show to others.

Assessment Portfolios

The primary function of an assessment portfolio is to document what a student has learned. The content of the curriculum, then, will determine what students select for their portfolios. Their reflective comments will focus on the extent to which they believe the portfolio entries demonstrate their mastery of the curriculum objectives. For example, if the curriculum specifies persuasive, narrative, and descriptive writing, an assessment portfolio should include examples of each type of writing. Similarly, if the curriculum calls for mathematical problem solving and mathematical communication, then the display portfolio will include entries documenting both problem solving and communication, possibly in the same entry.

Purpose

The primary purpose of an assessment portfolio is to document student learning on specific curriculum outcomes. As such, the items in the portfolio must be designed to elicit the knowledge and

skill specified in the outcomes. It is the assessment tasks that bring the curriculum outcomes to life; only by specifying precisely what students must do and *how well they must do it* do these statements of learning have meaning.

Assessment portfolios may be used to demonstrate mastery in any curricular area. They may span any period of time, from one unit to the entire year. And they may be dedicated to one subject or many subjects. For example, a teacher may wish to have evidence that a child has sufficient skills in a content area to move to the next level or grade. The criteria for moving on and the types of necessary evidence must be established. Then the portfolio is compiled and assessed.

Audience

There are many possible audiences for an assessment portfolio, depending on its specific purpose. One audience may be the classroom teacher, who may become convinced that the objectives of an instructional unit have been mastered or who may decide to place a student in advanced classes or special sections. Alternatively, the audience may be the school district or even the state, seeking documentation of student learning, and permitting a student to move to the high school or receive a diploma. A secondary, though very important, audience is always the student, who provides evidence of significant learning.

Process

There are eight basic steps in developing an assessment portfolio system. Since portfolio entries represent a type of performance, these steps resemble the principles for developing good performance assessments.

1. Determine the curricular objectives to be addressed through the portfolio.

2. Determine the decisions that will be made based on the portfolio assessments. Will the assessments be used for high-stakes assessment at certain levels of schooling (for example, to enable students to make the transition from middle school to high school)?

3. Design assessment tasks for the curricular objectives. Ensure that the task matches instructional intentions and adequately represents the content and skills (including the appropriate level of difficulty) students are expected to attain. These considerations will ensure the validity of the assessment tasks.

4. Define the criteria for each assessment task and establish performance standards for each criterion.

5. Determine who will evaluate the portfolio entries. Will they be teachers from the students' own school? Teachers from another school? Or does the state identify and train evaluators?

6. Train teachers or other evaluators to score the assessments. This will ensure the reliability of the assessments.

7. Teach the curriculum, administer assessments, collect them in portfolios, score assessments.

8. As determined in Step 2, make decisions based on the assessments in the portfolios.

Challenges

Assessment portfolios raise many important practical and technical issues, particularly if they are used for high-stakes decisions. Portfolios can be used to establish that students have mastered the essential elements of the curriculum, and high school graduation can be contingent on demonstrating this mastery. In cases like this, it is essential that the procedures used to evaluate student work in the portfolio meet standards of validity and reliability.

How will student products be evaluated if student writing or mathematical problem solving is included in the portfolio? How will practitioners be sure that the products are good enough, that the work is of high quality? By what criteria will student work be judged? To answer these questions, educators develop scoring guides, or rubrics, with clear criteria and descriptions of different levels of performance. And to ensure inter-rater agreement, they collect samples of student work at the different levels (called *anchor papers*) and conduct training sessions for assessors.

But even in a classroom environment where the stakes are lower, assessment portfolios are more formal affairs than those designed to diagnose learning needs (working portfolios) or to celebrate learning (best works portfolios). In an assessment portfolio, the content matters and it must demonstrate and document what students have learned. The origin of an assessment portfolio may be quite external to the student and his world. The mandate may come from outside the classroom—for instance, via curriculum committees and board action, or directly from the state department of education. Moreover, the eventual owner of the portfolio's contents may be someone other than the student. In addition, the selection process is more controlled and dictated, since the portfolio entries must document particular learning outcomes. And there may be no opportunity for the student to "show off" his or her portfolio.

Innovative Uses of Portfolios

A major contribution of portfolios is that they allow students to document aspects of their learning that do not show up well in traditional assessments. Some examples follow.

Community Service

Community service is now required in many schools. Since this type of activity is not well suited to traditional assessments such as tests and quizzes, portfolio assessment provides an excellent vehicle for assessing the goals of a community service curriculum. Students can collect examples of service, select the best ones, reflect on their experiences, and determine future goals. The entries in such a portfolio might include research, narrative summaries of activities performed, pictures, videos, projects, and the like. The community, in addition to the school, may be an audience for this portfolio.

Interdisciplinary Unit

An interdisciplinary unit of study that includes many different content areas is often difficult to evaluate using traditional methods of assessment. A portfolio can provide a way to include many types of work that indicate proficiency in various disciplines. Entries might show evidence of growth in a single content area or a combination of areas. The cumulative effect of work in many disciplines, all relating to a single theme or topic, can be illuminating to the student as well as to others. An interdisciplinary unit on the rainforest, for example, could culminate in a portfolio containing samples of student accomplishment in writing, math, social studies, and art.

Subject Area Portfolios

Student learning in some areas is greatly enhanced through the use of portfolios to document learning. Portfolios are well established in writing. But there are many other excellent applications of the technique. A foreign language portfolio could have cultural artifacts relating to religion, art, and celebrations, as well as evidence of written and spoken proficiency in the language. A social studies portfolio could have interviews, projects, models, and reports. And art portfolios are well recognized as the optimal means of capturing the best of student performance in the arts, with drawings, slides, and examples of music composed or performed.

College Admission

Many colleges now request samples of student work from candidates for admission. Portfolios of best works are well suited to this purpose. Anything may be included in such a portfolio, including written work, videos, or projects, and the contents may be customized to suit the purposes of the student and the institution. The goal of assembling a portfolio for college admission has the additional benefit of providing powerful motivation for students during their high school years.

Employment

Some employers request samples of work from prospective employees. As with portfolios prepared for college admissions, students can use employment portfolios to document those features of their preparation that they believe would best convince an employer of their expertise in areas such as basic skills, problem solving and adaptability, and collaborative work skills. This movement toward employment portfolios is being fueled, in large part, by the national school to work movement, through which employers are insisting on a better-educated workforce (U.S. Dept. of Labor 1991).

Skill Area Portfolios

It is often desirable to demonstrate that students have acquired skills in specific areas, such as public speaking, problem solving, or the use of technology. Because these are assessment portfolios, attention must be paid to establishing relevant criteria, setting acceptable standards of performance, and selecting pieces that meet those standards. Because these skills also cut across disciplines, educators must determine whether students may demonstrate the skills in any manner they choose, or whether specific tasks will be established for them.

Summary

Portfolios may take many different forms and may be used for many different purposes. They may be used to diagnose, document, or celebrate learning. Regardless of their primary purpose or audience, they have the power to transform the learning environment in the classrooms where they are used. The magic of portfolios lies not in the portfolios themselves, but in the process used in creating them and the school culture in which documented learning is valued.

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