Using Portfolios to Assess Student Writing

Barbara M. Olds
Colorado School of Mines

Introduction

Portfolios as a qualitative assessment tool are nothing new—art, architecture, and writing students, for example, have long used portfolios to showcase and evaluate their work. However, portfolios have become increasingly popular over the past few years; they are now used to assess everything from student outcomes to faculty accomplishments. In this paper I focus on the use of portfolios for feedback to individual students in writing or writing-intensive classes such as engineering design. I briefly outline the most common ways in which portfolios are used in such classes, discuss some of their advantages and disadvantages, and conclude with some suggestions for those considering using portfolios to assess writing. When appropriate, I include some of my own experiences using portfolios in classes ranging from introductory writing-intensive courses in the humanities and social sciences to senior-level engineering design. Currently I am working with faculty from across campus at the Colorado School of Mines to design a four-year longitudinal portfolio assessment for students in our McBride Honors Program.

What Is a Writing Portfolio?

A portfolio is usually defined as a collection of writing by an individual student. The writing included in a portfolio may be selected by the student or assigned by the teacher; it may cover an entire college career or a single semester; it may include samples from only one class or from an entire curriculum; it may include peer or student commentary or evaluation, or it may simply include the student's work. Any of these approaches may be successful if the instructor has a clear purpose for asking students to maintain portfolios and if this purpose is clearly articulated to students. In the best cases, portfolios help students reflect on their growth as writers, help students to interact with peers in the discussion of writing, and help faculty and students to discuss ways in which students may become better writers. In addition, a portfolio may serve as a "performance," a way of selling potential employers on a student's versatility, language abilities, and critical thinking skills. On the other hand, a "portfolio" which is only a collection of writing assignments in a folder is likely to be of little worth to either faculty or students, so it is important for faculty to think carefully about the reasons for asking students to keep portfolios before making them a course requirement.

In general, the longer the period of time over which written work is collected, the more growth and change will be obvious. Ideally, students would keep portfolios throughout their undergraduate careers (and perhaps beyond), but they can also be a useful tool in a single course. Considerable help is available to those interested in incorporating portfolios into their classes.

Three excellent resources on the use of portfolios for assessment of either programs or individuals are *Assessment in Higher Education: Politics, Pedagogy, and Portfolios* by Patrick L. Courts and Kathleen H. McInerney, *Portfolios: Process and Product*, edited by Pat Belanoff and Marcia Dickson, and *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom*, edited by Kathleen Blake Yancey. [1-3] The sections below provide a starting point for thinking about using portfolios in writing-intensive courses.

Types of Portfolios and Their Purposes

Although faculty who have used portfolios to assess individual student growth have developed a number of variations, there are basically two kinds of portfolios— what Courts and McInerney call "nonselective" and "selective" portfolios [1] and Yancey defines as "working" and "final" portfolios [3]; each has appropriate uses depending on the type of assessment the instructor has in mind.

Nonselective or Working Portfolios

As Courts and McInerney define the nonselective portfolio: [1]

> In this kind of portfolio, all of the student's work in a given course would be collected, chronologically dated, and clearly labeled in terms of its relationship to a given assignment. . . .In short, all of the concrete evidence the students can collect to indicate their involvement in a course would be a part of these portfolios (accompanied, of course, with written explanations of the importance of an item included in the portfolio).

Yancey defines a "working portfolio" as an archive of a student's work which is characterized more by "saturation than selection" [3] Such a portfolio is more informal than the nonselective type described above; it may contain incomplete pieces as well as multiple drafts, false starts, journals, freewriting exercises, and other kinds of informal or "writing to learn" writing as well as polished pieces. Yancey argues that the working portfolio is particularly suited to formative assessment.

Courts and McInerney list several advantages to the nonselective portfolio:

➢ The teacher has access to all of the student's work and therefore has a relatively complete sense of the student's general progress.

➢ Students have an opportunity to look at and reflect on everything that they have been doing.

➢ For programmatic assessment, the nonselective portfolio provides an overview of the types and amount of writing required in a particular course.

➢ Students could use the portfolio to their advantage in "selling" their prospective employer or graduate school on the types and quality of writing they have been doing.

However, there are also disadvantages to using the nonselective portfolio approach:

➢ The sheer bulk of the portfolio may be overwhelming.

➢ The "complete picture" may be no picture at all because everything in the portfolio becomes equal and indeterminate.

➢ This kind of portfolio may place a heavy demand on the teacher's time and energy.

The amount of time required to evaluate a portfolio depends to some extent on the purposes for which it is being evaluated. Therefore, while portfolios can be scored holistically to quickly assess overall performance, they should be reviewed carefully to discover the specific difficulties a student is experiencing.   A nonselective portfolio may not be the best choice for this type of evaluation.

As an example, for many years we have required nonselective portfolios for students in our Engineering Practices Introductory Course Sequence (EPICS) capstone sophomore-level course. Students spend the semester working in groups of five to solve real-world problems for customers outside the school. The portfolio, due at the end of the semester, is a team effort which contains all of their written work for the semester, both formal and informal. The contents include team and individual formal reports to the client, individual meeting minutes, notes from interviews and resource materials, and reflections on the team dynamics. Taken as a whole, the portfolio depicts the group's processes and products over the course of the semester. It is a very valuable holistic assessment tool.

Selective Portfolios

The selective portfolio allows either the student or the professor to choose representative works to include in the portfolio. The main caution with this approach is that both student and faculty must be clear about the purposes of the portfolio in order to make appropriate selections. The following purposes are among those listed by Courts and McInerney for their selective portfolio system. The list gives a sense of the reasons why a faculty member might want to have a portfolio requirement.

➢ To provide students with the opportunity to reflect on their own performance in a given course or on a given assignment in an attempt to increase their metacognitive awareness both in the moment and over time.

➢ To empower individual students by encouraging them to choose for themselves what is or is not important in their performance on given assignments and courses.

➢ To provide a concrete basis for open, learner-centered discussion between advisor and learner.

To Yancey, the completed or final portfolio is usually "more formal, more clearly defined, and more focused. The completed portfolio is no longer an archive, but a presentation, a performance." This type of portfolio often includes aids to the reader-responder such as a table of contents, a grade justification in which the student argues for a particular grades based on the accomplishments reflected in the portfolio, a writer's reflection, or a writer's profile. This type of portfolio might be more attractive as a selling device for a prospective employer because the student and teacher have had the opportunity to "filter" the contents and be selective about what to include.

We are in the planning stages of a longitudinal selective portfolio requirement for students in the McBride Honors Program at CSM. Students in this seven-semester sequence will be required to select representative works from their seminars each semester, reflect on how the selected work represents their efforts and accomplishments in the seminar, and meet with a faculty tutor for a one-on-one discussion of the portfolio. Before graduation each student will be required to meet with a faculty committee to present his/her portfolio and discuss his/her growth as a writer and thinker over the previous three and one-half years. The completed portfolio will also provide an excellent compilation of the student's work to present to prospective employers. These portfolios will be developed and updated electronically so that graduates of the program who wish to can continue to contribute to them after they leave CSM.

Making Portfolios Work: Suggestions and Cautions

Although many faculty have had success for a number of years using portfolios to assess individual student progress in writing classes, others find them a waste of time for both faculty and students. Among the complaints about portfolios that I hear frequently are:

> ➢ "You just end up with a folder full of papers at the end of the term. What's the point?"
> ➢ "It takes far too long to wade through 20 (or 30 or 40) portfolios at the end of the term. I don't have the time."
>
> ➢ "This ends up just being busywork for both the students and the faculty."
>
> ➢ "I've already graded all of these papers once. What's the point in doing it again?"

These responses are legitimate but they reflect a lack of understanding of the portfolio process, something that should be thought about carefully before undertaking a portfolio program. A few suggestions may help to make the use of portfolios more positive for both faculty and students.

First, it is essential that faculty clarify to themselves and to their students the reasons for having students keep portfolios. If faculty don't have clear reasons, then they are indeed just collecting piles of papers and asking students to engage in busywork, a situation which students will quickly sense and treat accordingly. There are many legitimate reasons for asking students to keep portfolios, some of which were listed above; faculty simply need to be clear in articulating their reasons.

In my experience any portfolio program works best when it meets the following goals:

- ➢ A good portfolio program allows students to reflect about themselves as writers and learners.

- ➢ A good portfolio program allows students to learn to evaluate/critique the writing of their peers honestly but compassionately.

- ➢ A good portfolio program allows the individual student and faculty member to discuss the specific strengths and weaknesses of the student as a writer and to trace his/her growth over a period of time.

Although some faculty members prefer to select the material to be included in student portfolios and to have physical possession of the portfolios, in my experience, the more responsibility college students take for their portfolios, the more effective they become as a learning tool. For that reason, I ask students to both select the contents of their portfolio and to reflect critically on them [4]. For example, in my freshman writing-intensive courses I ask my students to keep all of their writing for the semester in a portfolio. At the end of the semester I ask them to select one work and write a short (1 to 2 page) reflection on what they learned from writing it. They often choose the paper they are the proudest of, but they may also select the paper that they had the most difficulty writing or the topic that they least identified with. This opportunity to reflect on the writing process itself is the most important part of the assignment; it gives the students insight into their strengths and weaknesses as writers. Their reflections also give me valuable feedback about the effectiveness of my assignments.

Another effective end-of-the-semester assignment is to ask students to reflect on their growth as writers over the course of the semester using the works in their portfolio (either nonselective or selective) as their raw material. Again, they are being asked to reflect on their own development, something that we unfortunately ask students to spend too little time doing in most courses.

A second purpose in having students maintain portfolios is to give them opportunities to critically evaluate and compare their work with that of others in the class. Although portfolios are not necessary to accomplish this goal (peer review of papers can be done either during the draft stage or with the finished product without keeping a portfolio), they are an excellent way of "spreading the learning" in a writing classroom. Part of the maturation process involves the transition, articulated by Perry and others [5], from a developmental stage in which the teacher is the source of all knowledge, the authority with a capital "A," to a stage in which peers are a legitimate source of knowledge. A writing classroom is an excellent place to emphasize this process, but students who are not used to either receiving advice from or giving advice to peers need help in becoming effective at both. Portfolios provide an excellent, non-threatening means of doing this. For example, although every student in a course may complete the same assignment, each of them approaches it in a different way. Having the opportunity to share portfolios allows students to see the different approaches possible and to gauge their successes and failures. They also quickly learn about each others' areas of expertise (e.g. audience analysis

and awareness, use of irony, ability to argue effectively) and then become consultants to other students in the course who need help in particular areas. I provide templates for peer review with specific questions (e.g. What was the thesis of this paper? What counter-arguments are discussed? What one thing did you like best about this paper?) at least until students become proficient reviewers. I have found that otherwise they tend to focus on surface errors rather than larger issues of content, organization, and style. Peer reviews, along with all drafts of the paper, are included in their nonselective portfolios.

The final goal achieved by a successful portfolio program is the interaction between the individual student and the teacher about the student's progress as a writer [6, 7]. In both my writing and technical classes in which my students keep portfolios, I schedule one-on-one conferences with them several times during the semester to review the contents of their portfolios and to discuss their perceptions of the course and of their growth as writers. These conferences are extremely valuable because they move the discussion away from grades and onto the students' process and progress as writers. As Yancey says, when teachers read "working" portfolios as works in progress, "their initial reason for reading is not to grade an assignment, but to inquire about and to re-create the rhetorical situation." Students' written reflections provide a rich starting point for conversations about their perceptions of themselves as writers and thinkers and we become colleagues in our goal of improving their writing. An unexpected benefit of this process is that, as Courts and McInerney point out, I sometimes discover "that a concept the teacher thought most of the students understood is almost universally confused among the students in a class." Reading and discussing portfolios can be an education for both students and faculty.

A portfolio also can serve as an excellent vehicle for summative assessment or grading. An individual teacher may choose to grade the portfolios produced by students in his or her class, or the teacher may work with others teaching the same class to "blind" rate portfolios either to assign grades or to determine proficiency and nonproficiency.

Conclusions

In addition to helping students develop as writers, portfolios can be a valuable way to improve their critical thinking skills as well as their ability to be self-reflective and self-critical. Portfolios can also provide a rich assessment of growth over time. They allow students to share and learn from peer responses and provide faculty and students with one-on-one opportunities to discuss the specific strengths and weaknesses of student writing.

Bibliography

1. Courts, Patrick L. and Kathleen H. McInerney, *Assessment in Higher Education: Politics, Pedagogy, and Portfolios*, Praeger, Westport, CN, 1993.
2. Belanoff, Pat, and Marcia Dickson, Eds., *Portfolios: Process and Product*, Boynton/Cook, Portsmouth, NH, 1991.
3. Yancey, Kathleen Blake, "Portfolios in the Writing Classroom: A Final Reflection," in *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom*, NCTE, Champaign-Urbana, IL, 1992.
4. Ballard, Leslie. "Portfolios and Self-Assessment." *English Journal* (February 1992): 46-48.

5. Perry, William G., Jr*., Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.
6. Arter, Judith, *Using Portfolios in Instruction and Assessment*, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory Test Center, Portland, OR, 1990.
7. Herter, Roberta J. "Writing Portfolios: Alternatives to Testing." *English Journal* (January 1991): 90-91.

Biographical Information

BARBARA M. OLDS is a professor of liberal arts and international studies and principal tutor of the McBride Honors Program at the Colorado School of Mines. She has used portfolios extensively in both humanities and engineering design courses.