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## LESSONS LEARNED AS ONE DISTRICT MOVES TOWARD QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT IN WRITING AND READING

Denise K. Schnitzer

Norfolk Public Schools, located on the southeastern coast of Virginia, is an urban district made up of approximately 36,000 students. Thirty-six elementary schools, eight middle schools, and five high schools are located in the district. In the summer of 1989, central office and building level personnel prepared to implement new standards for promotion of students from grade to grade in the elementary and middle schools. In the past, we had placed a heavy emphasis on placement in the adopted basal reader, making student promotion contingent upon passing end-of-book tests of isolated skills. Utilizing the new standards, we now require that students demonstrate proficiency in reading verified by a Student Reading Portfolio and proficiency in writing verified by a Student Writing Portfolio. As we moved from quantifiable measures of reading and writing to more qualitative measures, we were taking a new direction in assessment. No longer are students measured only on how well they perform on pen-and-pencil tests; they now also have the added criterion of how well they utilize the reading and writing processes in daily classroom activities and progress over time.

This new direction in assessment is one recommended in *Becoming a Nation of Readers*: "Schools should introduce more comprehensive assessments of reading and writing. Standardized tests should be supplemented with assessments of reading fluency, ability to summarize and critically evaluate lengthy selections, amount of independent reading, and amount and quality of writing" (120). At a time when many educational policy- and decision-makers are questioning traditional forms of assessment, our district-wide commitment to and implementation of more authentic forms of assessment should prove valuable.

We answer the professional calls for the need to assess the language arts in a variety of ways by using the Student Writing Portfolio and the Student Reading Portfolio. These portfolios not only incorporate various ways of evaluating writing and reading, they also give teachers opportunities to assess progress over time rather than with a one-time test. This article focuses on the steps we took to implement a portfolio approach to reading and writing assessment. Included is an explanation of the contents of the two portfolios and a discussion of the importance of conferences in the assessment process. I also discuss the importance of teacher judgement and observation in such assessment. The article concludes with a discussion of cautions and teacher concerns that surfaced during the implementation.

### Student Writing Portfolio

The portfolio approach to assessing writing has been used longer than portfolios in other areas. We used the Student Writing Portfolio to allow students to showcase their best pieces of writing and maintain a record of student progress in the use of the writing process.

Students and teachers place the writing assessment sheet and actual samples of student writing in the Student Writing Portfolio folder (See Figure 1). Portfolios are used in kindergarten through grade 8.

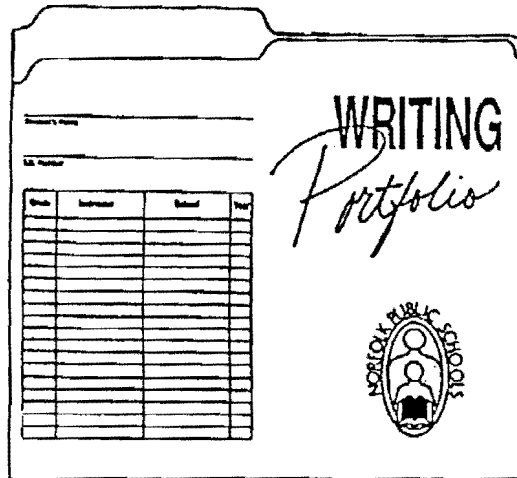


Figure 1. Writing Portfolio

The teacher maintains the Student Writing Portfolio and each student maintains his/her daily writing folder. Works in progress, ideas for writing, and completed pieces are kept in the daily writing folder. The teacher places a writing assessment sheet in each Student Writing Portfolio. Different forms of the writing assessment sheets are available for kindergarten, grades one and two, grade three, grades four and five, and grades six, seven, and eight. The different forms reflect the developmental stages of student writing. The assessment sheet for kindergarten is divided into two categories (Pre-writing and Drafting). The sheets for grades one and two have three categories (Pre-writing, Drafting, and Editing). The categories for grades three through eight include Pre-writing, Drafting, Revising, and Editing. Although the categories in the higher grades are the same, the number of areas to evaluate under each category becomes more extensive and complex as the student progresses through the grades.

The Student Writing Portfolio also includes a series of writing samples. Students and teachers select a sample of student writing taken during the first two weeks of school as the initial entry into the portfolio. This becomes the benchmark against which to assess progress as the year goes on. Once each nine weeks the teacher and student select a sample of writing from the student's daily writing folder to place in the portfolio. This piece of writing should reflect the best that the student has produced during the quarter. By the year's end there are five pieces of writing in the portfolio. The teacher-maintained portfolio moves with the student from grade to grade so that students, teachers, and parents can view progress over the years. At the end of the elementary grades, there is a ceremony to present some of the writings from each grade level to the students. There is a similar ceremony at the end of middle school.

#### **Student Reading Portfolio**

The National Council of Teachers of English delineates a significant difference between the way reading is learned and the way it is taught and assessed in the vast majority of classrooms (NCTE Commission on Reading, 1988). The goal of assessment should be to give the students ample and varied opportunities to apply their reading skills to real-life situations and text. In order to give students these opportunities, we felt the need to move assessment away from end-of-book tests to the use of the Student Reading Portfolio. By using the portfolio, we incorporate multiple indicators of expertise (e.g., comprehension, strategic reading, and fluency), multiple

measures in various contexts through wide reading (e.g., reading for different purposes and reading a variety of genres), and repeated measures over time (quarterly review).

Teachers, with assistance from students, maintain the Student Reading Portfolio which contains the reading assessment sheet and the reading log sheet. The Student Reading Portfolio consists of a Student Reading Portfolio folder (See Figure 2), reading log sheets, and the reading assessment sheet.

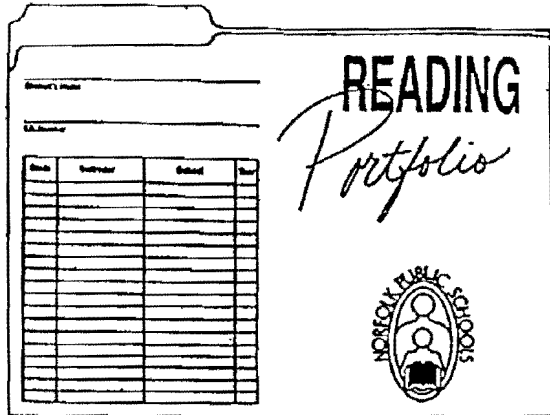


Figure 2. Reading Portfolio

Teachers and students keep ongoing records of reading completed both within and outside the classroom through the reading log sheets (See Figure 3). The student maintains this sheet on a daily basis. The student enters the title, author, and date completed on the sheet. When students read longer selections such as novels or collections of short stories, the amount read is entered each day. The maintenance of this reading log sheet is the student's responsibility. Students in grade one take over this responsibility as soon as their handwriting and development allow. The log sheet is kept in the Student Reading Portfolio folder for reference during reading conferences.



verbalize the main idea. Along with this, students should be able to talk and/or write about details that support the main idea. Teachers assess the student's ability to make inferences and to determine generalizations by asking questions above the literal level.

An assessment of "strategic reading" is also part of the portfolio. Strategic readers take into consideration the complexity of the text, their familiarity with the topic, and their purpose for reading. In addition, they assess their own knowledge in relation to the demands of the text. They monitor their comprehension and implement "fix-up" strategies when comprehension fails.

As the teacher assesses strategic reading, he or she notes whether the student employs strategies to clarify meaning when a word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, or longer segment of the text is not readily understood. The teacher also notes whether the student is able to identify the task and set a purpose for reading. The student's use of appropriate strategies such as skimming, paraphrasing, re-reading, predicting, relating new knowledge to prior knowledge, monitoring comprehension, and questioning is noted by the teacher. The teacher ascertains the use of such strategies by asking students to verbalize what they are doing to solve reading difficulties as they read on a daily basis. The teacher maintains anecdotal notes on each student's strategic reading throughout the quarter in order to determine the quarterly rating.

The Student Reading Portfolio also includes information about a student's reading fluency. The ability to decode words quickly and accurately in coordination with the process of constructing meaning from text denotes a fluent reader. The student should strive to read materials with fluency as opposed to word-by-word reading. Indicators of fluency include ease in decoding new or unknown words, proper rate and phrasing, appropriate pauses, and maintenance of place in text.

In order to assess fluency, teachers observe students during reading sessions throughout the quarter. Students should always have a purpose for reading aloud, such as supporting a point made in a discussion or playing a role as part of a performance. Teachers may ask students to read aloud a prepared selection at the quarterly reading conference to help check for fluency. However, this is not the total basis for checking fluency since fluency

should be assessed on an ongoing basis during observations of students in the classroom.

The reading portfolio is also a means for assessing the breadth of the students' reading experiences. Good readers read a variety of materials. Applebee, Langer, and Mullis state, "Students need to be encouraged not only to read frequently, but also to read a variety of different kinds of materials" (39). Reading a wide variety of materials on an independent basis increases both fluency and vocabulary development. Students who read varied and different kinds of materials are successful readers who score higher on tests of reading achievement. A wide variety of reading materials includes plays, biography, poetry, essays, newspapers, folk tales, drama, magazines, etc. Teachers use the reading log sheet to assess the scope of a student's. At the quarterly conference, the teacher and student discuss the selections on the log sheet as well as the student's likes and dislikes. During this discussion, the teacher may give the student suggestions of titles and genres to read during the next quarter. Every attempt is made at this time to expand the kinds and variety of materials that the student reads.

### **Writing and Reading Conferences**

As part of our new assessment program, teachers hold at least one individual writing conference and one individual reading conference with each of their students during each quarter. During the writing conference, the teachers and students view writing samples and discuss their progress. At this time the student and teacher together select the sample of the student's best writing to file in the portfolio. The teacher speaks to what has been observed in day-to-day writing activities, specific strengths and weaknesses in steps of the writing process as evidenced on the writing assessment sheet, and goal-setting for the next nine weeks. The student is an active participant in this conference and discusses feelings and ideas on writing and helps to set future goals. This conference time allows teachers to know students better and offers a chance to focus on the student's strengths in writing rather than dwelling on the mechanical aspects of writing that were done incorrectly.

During the quarterly reading conference, the teacher also focuses on those areas found on the reading assessment sheet, noting progress in



reading and helping students do some goal-setting. At this time, the teacher may want to ask the student to read a short passage that the student has read and practiced beforehand. They discuss the reading log sheet, and the conference ends with a discussion of plans and goals for the following quarter.

### **Teacher Observation and Judgement**

Assessment occurs not only at testing time but is an ongoing part of the teaching and learning process. As teachers observe their students reading and writing on a daily basis, they make judgements concerning these areas. Therefore, observations of the ongoing learning becomes an important part of assessment. Goodman recommends the use of "kid-watching," which involves observing, interacting, documenting, and interpreting. As teachers observe students in a natural setting, they interact and gain clues to the students' use of the writing and reading processes. Evaluation becomes more accurate when it involves human judgement and dialogue whereby students and teachers can ask questions for clarification and elicit more complete answers (Wiggins).

It is our belief that the classroom teacher is the best evaluator of students' growth in the learning process. In support of these evaluations, teachers make daily observations of the students participating in writing and reading. These notes can be used with students and parents during conferences. Eventually they become an integral part of the portfolio assessment.

### **Teacher Concerns**

The task of moving from quantifiable forms of assessment to more qualitative forms is not easy, especially for a large district. Our teachers are at various stages of acceptance of such a philosophy; therefore, the willingness to implement is varied. We do not expect teachers to do too much too fast. The first step is to prepare teachers for changes in assessment by pointing out the need to change. We accomplished this by reviewing testing data, distributing professional articles, and offering in-service sessions. After such a need is accepted, teachers then need to see the assessment instruments and be given the opportunity to have input concerning those instruments. In order to accomplish this in our district, we sent all assessment

instruments to every school and asked for input from teachers and administrators. We also held mini-sessions on citywide in-service days where teachers voiced concern and asked questions for clarification. As a result of this process, teachers feel ownership of the changes being made.

Teachers who routinely use reading test scores as the only means of assessment often are reluctant to accept teacher judgment as a viable form of assessment. No longer having quantitative data to share with students, parents, and administrators can cause fear and concern. It is important that all teachers realize that they as professionals who see students on a day-to-day basis are the most capable assessors of student progress. Key players in the change process need to convince teachers that daily interactions with students, observations, and notes are valid means of assessment. Teachers and other key personnel should convey this idea to parents and other interested parties.

Teachers also express concern about the amount of time involved in conducting individual reading and writing conferences each quarter and completing the reading and writing assessment sheets. Teachers must realize that conferences do not need to last for long periods of time nor do they need to be formal and structured. Conferences easily can occur as teachers move about the classroom on a daily basis and talk with students about reading and writing experiences. Such conferences not only allow students and teachers to know each other better, but allow teachers to assess student progress over time.

These are the most important concerns that arose in our district as we attempted to implement more authentic forms of writing and reading assessment. While such concerns are likely to surface, they are not insurmountable, nor did they prevent us from implementing portfolio assessment. However, keeping these concerns in mind may aid other districts in designing ways to avoid them or ways to deal with them if they surface.

Rob Tierney writes about the attempt in our district to provide criteria and to set appropriate standards against which to judge portfolios as a "coming to grips with addressing the complex issues of summarizing and comparing performance in ways that have integrity" (30). In seeking these ways we have experienced problems, but feel the outcomes are well worth the effort. As our teachers assess a student's learning process over time, they are better able to see a true picture of what students can write and read. Students

and teachers now have the opportunity to make plans for additional growth and progress. Our students are becoming self-evaluators as they talk to teachers about their reading and writing. Students are reading real texts for this assessment; thus, the assessment is more aligned with what happens during instruction and outside the classroom. It is our hope that this type of assessment will encourage students not only to become better readers and writers, but also students who choose to read and write.

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