External Review of Portfolios in Preservice Teacher Education: Studying Our Own Practice

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In this article we present the results of a study in which we examine our use of literacy portfolios in our elementary education methods courses through the inclusion of an external reviewer in the portfolio evaluation process. Preservice teachers at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse are concurrently enrolled in a field-based block of three professional elementary education courses. They are required to create a literacy portfolio as a combined requirement in our two methods courses (Elementary Level Reading and Curriculum and Methods in Language Arts) in which they demonstrate and reflect upon the development of their knowledge and skills as literacy educators. Our one-semester study provided an external professional audience for the review of these literacy portfolios, and provided us new insights to improve the ways in which we evaluated these assessments.

The use of portfolios is currently being explored in a variety of contexts in teacher education (Ohlhausen and Ford, 1990; Ohlhausen, Perkins, and Jones, 1995; Ryan and Kuhs, 1993; Wolf, 1991) as teacher educators seek to align their

practices with their beliefs about teacher development (Stahle and Mitchell, 1993). Increasingly, portfolios are being viewed as an alternative approach to assessment in preservice teacher education which is more valid than traditional, quantitative measurements (Gellman, 1992/1993; Ryan and Kuhs, 1993). The value of portfolios as a vehicle for reflection and self-assessment has also been established in the professional literature (Rousculp and Maring, 1992; Wolf, 1991). In their review of current research on portfolios, Herman and Winters (1994) point out that "well-designed portfolios represent important, contextualized learning that requires complex thinking and expressive skills" (p. 48).

Investigations in the use of portfolios include examination of both their product and process functions (Cole, Lasley, Ryan, Swonigan, Tillman, and Uphoff, 1991) and the tensions that result from the relations between these functions (Mosenthal, Daniels, and Mekkelsen, 1993; Wixson, Valencia, and Lipson, 1994). The formative function of portfolio assessment is most often advocated (Gellman, 1992/1993). Portfolios have also been used in teacher education programs to evaluate preservice teachers (Barton and Collins, 1993; Cole, Messner, Swonigan, and Tillman, 1991). The portfolio system at the State University at New York at Stony Brook is an official procedure wherein student portfolios are evaluated — and graded — by instructors (Elbow and Belanoff, 1991).

The question of who does the evaluating of portfolios poses a critical issue. Certainly, portfolios are a vehicle to support self-assessment of students' own learning. When portfolios are part of course or program requirements in teacher education, they may also be subject to review and evaluation by instructors. Reports of portfolios in preservice teacher education describe evaluation of the portfolios by course instructors themselves (Stahle and Mitchell, 1993;

Valeri-Gold, Olson, and Deming, 1991/1992) or by teams of reviewers drawn from the faculty involved in professional education course work (Cole, Messner, Swonigan, and Tillman, 1991; Mathies and Uphoff, 1992).

All of the aforementioned studies employed internal reviewers who were well-acquainted with course content, portfolio assessment, and preservice teacher education. Except for the inclusion of inter-departmental reviewers in a study by Ohlhausen, Perkins, and Jones (1995), little has been written about the use of external reviewers of preservice teachers' portfolios.

The problem

The portfolio assignment. Elementary education majors at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse enroll concurrently in our two required methods courses. As a combined requirement for both methods courses, students are required to construct a literacy portfolio as a culminating project which reflects the learning they acquire in both their on-campus course work and their field-site experiences. The description of the portfolio assignment found in each of our syllabi includes the following: "This portfolio is a systematic collection of your work as a developing teacher; it is also a vehicle for you to reflect on and self-evaluate your development as a teacher and a learner." We also established the guideline that the portfolios should document growth and development in three areas: 1) professional knowledge about the teaching of reading/language arts, 2) professional skills and abilities related to the teaching of reading/language arts, and 3) personal reading and writing habits.

For the three semesters prior to this study, our assessment of the portfolios was based on a broad set of criteria — organization and professional appearance, reflections, and

quality of writing. These criteria were included in the portfolio assignment in our course syllabi. We wanted the portfolios to be organized in such a way that they would be easily accessible to a professional audience; we wanted the students' reflection in their portfolios to clearly and articulately explain why they had chosen to include particular pieces of evidence which reflected their learning and growth; and, last, we expected that students' reflections would be well-organized, coherent, clearly elaborated, use appropriate conventions and portray a sense of honesty and personal investment. We developed an evaluation matrix of these criteria to guide our review of the portfolios; these criteria were also shared with the students during the portfolio development process (see Appendix A). While these criteria were fairly broad, we wanted to ensure a flexibility in our reviews that would acknowledge individual differences as well as recognize the quality of the students' final product.

Our questions about portfolios evaluation

At the end of each semester, we both read all portfolios and discussed the quality of the work; each of us met in final conferences with half the students. Input from students helped to determine the final portfolio grades.

Because of our experience with portfolios, we believed that their use was more aligned with the goals of our courses and with our views on teacher development than were the more traditional assessment measures. Although we generally saw students' portfolios as providing strong evidence of their learning and growth, we questioned how others might view them. Would another educational professional outside of the university also see the strengths in these portfolios?

For several semesters, we had struggled with the task of assigning grades to these unique and individual

representations of students' learning and growth.   Like Mosenthal, Daniels, and Mekkelsen (1993), we felt a tension between the use of portfolios to facilitate the development of preservice teachers as reflective practitioners and our practice of grading them.   How often, if ever, did students use the portfolio as a way of telling us what they thought we wanted to hear?   How could we better explain to students whose portfolios we viewed as less successful the reasons for our evaluation of their work?   How could we better articulate the criteria used to evaluate the portfolios?   We believed that expanding the professional audience who read and reviewed our students' portfolios might help us to address these questions.   We also believed the inclusion of an outside reviewer would inform and enhance the portfolio review process.

Method

In order to ensure that the involvement of an external reviewer did not decontextualize the assessment process, we sought to involve a reviewer who was knowledgeable about both teacher education and about the work of elementary classroom teachers.   Kate Pilmonas, whose expertise we enlisted, is a professional who understands the changing face of assessment, has a practical understanding of learning to teach as a life-long developmental process, and is well-versed in current theory and practice about literacy education in elementary schools.   As a reading specialist, Kate had also served as a cooperating teacher for two of our students the previous semester and was involved in the study of portfolio development in her own school district.

Of the forty-nine students enrolled in our two courses, forty-one gave their permission to be involved in the study. While we instructors read and evaluated all students' portfolios at the end of the semester, for the purposes of this inquiry

Kate reviewed fifteen randomly selected portfolios. She also participated in these fifteen students' final portfolio conferences. The three of us met three times before and after these reviews to discuss our observations about the preservice teachers' portfolio development. Our meetings were audiotaped; twelve of the fifteen students' final conferences were also audiotaped. All audiotapes were transcribed for later review and analysis.

During the summer after this project, we instructors reviewed these transcripts both independently and together, and identified several patterns which emerged in our discussions about the literacy portfolios. Our criteria for evaluation of the portfolios expanded and became clearer as we analyzed the transcripts. We constructed an evaluation rubric which went through several revisions as we discussed the criteria, practiced applying it to the portfolios used in the study, and formulated language that would be understandable to our students. These multiple reviews and rereadings led to the development of an evaluation rubric which reflected a substantial revision and refinement of our criteria for portfolio evaluation. They also led to a number of descriptive findings about portfolio evaluation.

Findings

With the help of Kate Pilmonas, this study has provided us with a closer look at both the strengths and problems of portfolio assessment in our courses. Through an "outsider's" eyes, we have come to value portfolios more; we have also once again had to face some continuing dilemmas related to their use. Through our analysis and synthesis of the study data, several patterns of findings emerged. These findings are outlined in four sections: confirmations, continued struggles, new insights, and rubric development.

Confirmations — the joy of discovery

Since we began using portfolios several years ago, we have believed them to be valuable as vehicles for student reflection on learning and as assessment tools. From this study, however, we became more aware that one of the values of the portfolios lies in what Kate called the "joy of discovery":

> One of the neatest parts, I think was overall from your point of view, and mine, and theirs [the students'], was this joy of discovery that came out in so many ways. They discovered things about themselves. They discovered knowledge, they discovered methodology ... they discovered what it takes to organize. We discovered who they were as we listened to them and read [the portfolios] ... the fact that assessment gave us something we didn't know makes me think it's pretty darn good assessment. We didn't know the answers before we went in (transcript of reviewers' discussion, May 17, 1994).

We discovered much about what our students had learned and about how well they could articulate that learning. For example, we were surprised and pleased to discover that Monica had developed an understanding of so many important course concepts; this had not been evident from the results of her course examinations. We also discovered that our emphasis on the need for teachers to be readers and writers themselves had an impact on our students. We learned that Jolene, a busy mother of two and a highly committed full-time student, had been successful in making time to read *The Client*. At age thirty-six, Jolene had finally discovered what it means to describe a book as one she "just can't put down." And we learned from his portfolio that Ben had begun to collect poetry, to read *Educational Horizons*, and to

write regular letters to a good friend who was having a difficult semester at a nearby university.

In both their portfolios and in their portfolio conferences, students also repeatedly described their discoveries. As they explained the process of developing their portfolios, they often expressed their surprise over how much they had learned during the semester. They simply hadn't realized what they knew until they had to pull it together in their portfolios.

Similarity in evaluations. Before meeting with each students in the final portfolio conference, we conferred about the grades we might assign each portfolio; we regularly suggested similar grades. Generally we have found students' portfolios to be of high quality. Before this project began, however, we did not know how another reviewer might see our students' portfolios. Were these literacy portfolios really as strong as we often saw them? This study clearly confirmed that our assessment of the students' portfolios was similar to that of at least one knowledgeable external reviewer. For 13 of the 15 portfolios reviewed, the grades Kate assigned were identical or a half-grade apart from the ones we assigned. Interestingly, the differences in grades for the other two portfolios were extreme, Kate's assigned grades being lower. Through the conference, however, important new insights were acquired about both these students. As instructors, we learned we had misjudged Alyssa's interest in working with children. Relatedly, Kate learned about Dennis' passion for teaching which had not been evident to her in his written work.

Importance of alternative assessment. Kate's strongest affirmation was of the importance in looking for alternatives to old systems that do not work. Even after being involved in

the time-consuming process of reading and reviewing portfolios and participating in portfolio conferences, Kate's enthusiasm for our use of portfolios never waned.   She reflected on the value of portfolios as a messier, but better form of assessment:

> [I]t's messy, but that almost implies that it never was before.   Before, the messiness looked like — a kid who wasn't a good teacher, who didn't have the heart or didn't have the soul to be a good teacher, could come off and get an 'A' on all of the multiple choice tests — and that's messy too.   I don't think messy is anything new... The grading stuff has always been messy.   What's different now is I think this is a more honest messy... the grade that goes down is much more honest than grades have ever been in terms of does it reflect authentic teaching ability... I mean, in that sense it's cleaner.   The struggle is there, but you know these kids like you never knew them before (transcript of reviewers' discussion, May 17, 1994).

Continued struggles

Grading portfolios.   Kate's confirmations about the value of using portfolios to assess student learning were important for us to hear, especially since the grading of portfolios was an ongoing dilemma and struggle for us as course instructors.   The portfolio grade was 40% of the students' final grade in each of our courses; it was determined by both of us with input from the students during the final conference. Assigning a grade to the portfolio, and thereby making it a high stakes assignment for our students, clearly has both advantages and disadvantages.

The major advantage of grading the students' portfolios is that it motivates them to take the assignment seriously; this is an assignment we really want the students to take seriously.

We recognize that many students would do their best work on their portfolios whether it was graded or not; we also know that as juniors in college, our students are exceptionally busy human beings and many of them use instructor expectations/standards as the way to determine where they put their time and effort. Our students are well-socialized into a culture where grades count, and where grades are worth working for. If the stakes in this assessment process were lower, many students might choose to give less time, thought, and reflection to this assignment. They also might miss the opportunity to synthesize and evaluate their learning, and to articulate that learning for themselves and others.

On the other hand, grading portfolios is never easy. After several semesters of reading and reviewing students' literacy portfolios, we found that we had an internalized sense of what an "A," "B," or "C" level portfolio might look like as a performance assessment. Assigning grades was more difficult, however, when we considered individual differences and growth of students throughout the semester. We relied on each other to confirm or to challenge our evaluations of the portfolios, and we always considered carefully how the students saw their work. What was most difficult, however, was how to provide feedback to people whose portfolios were not as strong as they believed them to be.

Every semester, about 10% of our students found our assessments of their portfolios to be significantly lower than they expected. For both of us, sitting face-to-face across from these people and trying to help them understand what we saw as problems in their portfolios in a 20-minute conference was hard; it seemed that a small minority of the students had minimal understanding of the criteria for this assignment.

The issue of grading was no less complicated when we invited students' input into the grading process. What was disconcerting about the practice of student self-grading was the reasons students provided for the grades they suggested. Often students said they deserved an "A" because they had put so much work into their portfolios; rather simplistically they equated time and effort with performance. Another common rationale was that the portfolio represented "B" work, because "I'm pretty much a 'B' student." Although we valued what the students thought about the quality of their portfolios, it was evident to us that often they did not understand the criteria on the evaluation matrix which we were using to evaluate their work. Clearly, Kate's observation that this kind of evaluation is a more "honest messy" is one we struggle to live with.

Quality of reflections. A second struggle, which is related to the issue of grading, is whether or not the portfolio sometimes becomes a place for students to tell us what they think we want to hear. At times it seemed that students' attempts to please took the shape of superficiality; students' reflections were bland, depersonalized, and "right out of the book." Too often we felt that students' portfolios lacked both honesty and voice. Kate helped us to think about the superficiality of their portfolios in another way:

> There was no passion. It was spitting back stuff, even the reflections sounded like book reports more than feelings ... and growth and what I've learned ... They really were academia-ese kind of stuff. It wasn't personal ... Maybe they [the students] don't feel that [their personal world] is important. That what you're giving them is the most important thing and "that's what I'll put back in here. If we got it from our teachers that must be the really important stuff" (transcript of reviewers discussion, April 26, 1994).

Students as writers.   The last struggle which emerged
more clearly during this project was how the students'
abilities as writers affected the quality of their portfolios. Kate
was surprised to learn how much this mattered to her as a
reader:

> *I'm so process-oriented I was surprised at how im-*
> *portant the product was to me. The handwritten ones*
> *[pieces of evidence] that were difficult to read, I could*
> *barely tolerate ... And while I was not tolerating them I*
> *was being real angry at myself because I was thinking*
> *there might be a really wonderful thing here, but the*
> *product itself is pushing it away from me. And that*
> *was a real eye-opener for me (transcript of reviewers'*
> *discussion, April 26, 1994).*

As we reviewed the 15 portfolios in this study, it became
clear that in order for a portfolio to be viewed as strong by all
three reviewers, the students had to successfully communi-
cate with us about the learning they had done. Students who
struggled to make written words communicate their ideas and
experiences often produced portfolios that all of us evaluated
less favorably. The dilemma for us here, however, was a new
question for us about how important it is for a good teacher to
be a good writer. What are the limitations of portfolios given
the fact that teachers may be able to reflect on their practices in
an oral mode but struggle to put these reflections in writing
for others to read? On the other hand, if teachers are to be
taken seriously as professionals, shouldn't they be able to ex-
press themselves in writing?

New insights

As we discussed our review of the students' portfolios
and debated our struggles with the evaluation process, new
insights emerged about how we might improve our approach

to portfolio assessment.   The criteria we used for evaluating portfolios had to be better articulated; it needed to do a better job of reflecting what we believe is important for developing teachers to know and be able to do.   We also felt students needed to better understand this criteria so they could more willingly trust themselves and us in the evaluation process. Finally, we realized a clear need to construct criteria that were both specific and flexible; our criteria needed to reflect the growth of students at various developmental levels.

Students' gifts and struggles.   Kate taught us about how important it is to help preservice teachers talk about both their gifts/strengths and their struggles.   As a cooperating teacher in our program for two consecutive semesters, she had always asked her university students two questions in a short conference at the end of their time in her classroom: "What is your gift?" and "What are you still working on?" It seemed that if students were to be encouraged to take risks and to learn from things that did not go well, they also needed to be able to be positive with themselves and to identify their strengths as teachers.

Students' goals.   Related to students' abilities to discuss their gifts and their struggles, we realized that setting and self-assessing goals both during the semester and beyond also needed to be valued in the portfolio.   While we had always had students set goals at the start of each semester, we found that their goals were often global in nature.   We knew that we would have to make "ability to set and assess goals" more explicit if we expected this to count in the portfolios our students would develop.   We also knew that goal setting would have to become a more regular part of what we did in both of our courses.

Selection and unity. Our last insight was related to selection and a sense of focus in the portfolio as a whole. As students approached the process of deciding what they had learned throughout the semester, we realized they needed encouragement to make intentional selections about what to include in their portfolios. Making decisions about what learning has been the most critical and important can be difficult, especially since the only decisions most students are usually expected to make include which bits and pieces of information to study for a test. We knew, however, that the strongest portfolios we had read had a clear sense of intentionality. Students knew exactly why they had included the things they had. Also, our strongest portfolios were ones in which the student had been able to develop a sense of unity or focus. Sometimes this occurred when a student used writer's voice to develop a sense of personalism throughout the portfolio; other times students had chosen a theme, like journey or time, and used that theme as a way to focus and explain their work. In the best portfolios we read during the study, the whole became more than a sum of its parts; the portfolio as a whole was a well-developed reflection on who an individual student was as a developing teacher. We knew we would have to make these criteria explicit in any assessment tool we might develop.

Development of portfolio rubric

Reading and rereading the transcripts enabled us to identify and group the criteria which had emerged in our conversations. The insights and struggles described above helped us to expand and articulate our criteria in ways we had not done previously. We made our first draft of a continua of descriptors and then used this rubric to reread portfolios from the study. As a result of multiple readings and revisions, we constructed a rubric including a continua of descriptors which we hoped would make our evaluation criteria clearer both for

ourselves and for our students (see Appendix B). Because we recognize the ongoing nature of learning about evaluation, we expect that further revisions of this rubric will be needed.

Conclusions

At the start of this study we wondered how the involvement of an external reviewer would inform and enhance our use of portfolios as an assessment tool. Including an "outside reader" confirmed the value of what we were doing; it also provided us with new insights about portfolio criteria and how those criteria might influence our classroom practice.

This study has resulted in a number of changes in our approach to using literacy portfolios. First, perhaps the major outcome of this project was the development of the rubric in which we more clearly articulated the criteria for evaluation of the literacy portfolios. We believe this rubric makes our evaluation criteria more explicit for students as they develop their portfolios; it remains to be seen how this new rubric will influence the development of students' portfolios and/or the grading process. Second, we have revised the description of the portfolio assignment in the course syllabi to be more nearly aligned with the new evaluation rubric. Third, we have begun to share this evaluation criteria with students much earlier than we have in previous semesters. Also, some class time is being spent giving students the opportunity to write reflections about what they've learned, using the guidelines under the quality of reflections section in the rubric. Finally, more opportunities are also being provided for students to revisit goals they set at the start of the semester, and to consider their progress toward those goals.

While we are encouraged by the discoveries we have made and the changes we are beginning to implement related

to literacy portfolios, there are still a number of dilemmas with which we continue to struggle. Notwithstanding the development of a new evaluation rubric, grading portfolios is a difficult task. It is indeed messy. We continue to wonder about the wisdom of this practice; we also wonder about the consequences of not grading portfolios.

A second dilemma we continue to face is related to the issue of quality of writing. We wonder to what extent the student's abilities as a writer should count in the evaluation of a portfolio. Experience suggests that some students are able to speak articulately about their professional growth and learning, but are unable to explain their development through writing. How can we recognize the reflection, the learning, and the personal investment of a student in the absence of effective writing?

Final reflections

The involvement of an external reviewer helped us to expand our portfolio criteria and to make them more explicit. Kate's positive, thoughtful presence challenged our thinking, confirmed the value of what we were already doing, and facilitated our efforts to improve. Although there are parts of this rubric that could have been developed without the help of an external reviewer, Kate's views about what counts for developing teachers are clearly evident in the rubric we have developed.

We employ portfolios in our courses as a vehicle to encourage reflection and self-evaluation on the part of the student. But reflection is vitally important to our own practice, as well. Perhaps Kate's greatest contribution was her ability to support our reflective thought and study of our work with preservice teachers. Because of our conversations with Kate, we learned the importance of expecting our students to be able

to articulate their gifts and to describe their struggles in their portfolios. As she supported us in our own learning and development as teachers, Kate mirrored for us our own gifts; she also encouraged us to continue to appreciate the beauty of our struggles.

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Appendix A
Literacy Portfolio Evaluation Matrix
Spring 1994

Student _____

Evaluator _____

CRITERIA	Development of Professional Knowledge About the Teaching of Reading/ Language Arts	Development of Professional Skills and Abilities Related to the Teaching of Reading/ Language Arts	Development of Personal Reading and Writing Habits
Organization & Professional Appearance			
Reflections			
Quality of Writing			

Comments/Questions

Suggested Grade: _____

Appendix B
Continua of Descriptors for Literacy Portfolio: Rubric

Sense of Personal Uniqueness
_____ Represents uniqueness of individual student
_____ Reveals gifts/strengths
_____ Reveals areas of struggle and risks taken
_____ Represents sense of growth/change

____ Makes personal connections with course/field experiences
____ Conveys sense of active involvement in learning process
____ Demonstrates sense of self as developing reader/writer
Consistently   Frequently   Sometimes   Not Found

Knowledge Base for Literacy Education
____ Demonstrates accuracy of understandings related to literacy and literacy learning
____ Reveals understandings about the role of teacher and emerging identification with that role
____ Displays emerging knowledge of children and their development
____ Demonstrates emerging skills/abilities in teaching reading and language arts
____ Demonstrates sense of self as developing reader/writer
Consistently   Frequently   Sometimes   Not Found

Quality of Reflections
____ Includes sense of elaboration, specificity, clarity, and ability to make connections
____ Demonstrates ability to articulate student's own learning process
Consistently   Frequently   Sometimes   Not Found

Sense of Unity and Selection
____ Made intentional choices about what evidence to include
____ Reflections connect with evidence selected
____ Displays sense of purposefulness and/or unity
Consistently   Frequently   Sometimes   Not Found

Presentation/Organization
____ Writing is coherent, well-edited, and easy for an outside reader to follow
____ Portfolio is neatly constructed and organized in a reader-friendly and accessible manner
Consistently   Frequently   Sometimes   Not Found

Goal Setting
____ Makes projections for ongoing learning/change
____ Self-assesses for continued growth
____ Sets specific goals for persona/professional growth throughout the semester and beyond
Consistently   Frequently   Sometimes   Not Found