

The Effect of Using Portfolios on Student-Parent and Parent-Teacher Communication

Joel Davis

Florida International University, USA

Abstract: This action research project studied how portfolios enhance the communication between students, parents, and the teacher. While using portfolios in my class, students experienced more dialogue with their parents regarding their effort, the topics being taught, and explanations requiring communication with mathematical reasoning.

A good educator clearly communicates with his or her students. As a teacher, I feel I have made great strides in teaching my students a subject I love. However, I not only desire to communicate effectively with my students, but their parents as well. I believe that students who have consistent accountability from their teachers and parents have a significant advantage. I find it extremely helpful if teachers, students, and parents are open and honest with each other. Ideally, students would go home and tell their parents how they are doing in class, what they are struggling with, and so forth. There are numerous instances where sufficient communication has not happened—perhaps the parents were too busy, or the student was not truthful with his or her parents, or I failed to notify the parents that a problem needed to be addressed.

Providing vast amounts of information to parents does not necessarily qualify as effective communication. In the past 2 years, my school has used Edline, a resource for teachers to post the assignments and grades for their students. As long as the site is frequently updated by the teacher, students *and* parents can access the child's current grades and assignments. However, a typical report card (or assignments with grades) is often an incomplete picture of the child's progress (Cruz & Peterson, 2002). While there are benefits of using a program like Edline, I feel that I have received too many e-mails and phone messages from parents throughout the semester requesting explanations for the grades their children have earned. Did they not turn in the assignment? Are they not working hard? What content are you teaching right now? With what are they struggling?

Due to these frequent questions, I decided that many of the questions could be answered if my students brought home a portfolio to their parents at regular intervals. A portfolio can be defined as a purposeful collection of student work that demonstrates the student's efforts, progress, and achievement in one or more areas (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991). For a portfolio to help communication be more effective, it needs to be shared frequently and lead to a discussion of the work included. So, not only is the *quantity* of communications between students and parents important, but the *quality* of the resulting conversations. A portfolio gives parents an opportunity to look over their child's homework assignments, quizzes, projects, group class work, and tests. My hope was that a portfolio would give parents more specifics to the student's strengths and weaknesses, interests, and the applications of the content being studied.

I am a high school math teacher at a private school in Miami, Florida. I teach Advanced Placement (AP) Statistics and three sections of Analysis of Functions (a fourth-year math course). I decided to target one of my Analysis of Functions classes for my action research because I assumed that my non-AP students, on average, were in need of more accountability

than my AP Statistics students. I chose my third-period Analysis of Functions class, which consisted of 11 students—6 girls and 5 boys. This class of juniors and seniors had a lower class average (C) and a higher proportion of students with documented learning disabilities than my other classes.

I would have liked to utilize a portfolio in my class for the duration of the whole semester. However, due to time constraints, I was limited to a mere 6 weeks. Another possible drawback I perceived was that, for some students and parents, a portfolio may not reveal anything new if they already had a very healthy, open dialogue with each other; perhaps parents were already looking at their child's work as a regular practice before my action research started.

Despite these possible issues, I was excited to implement the portfolio. I felt there was a good chance that many parent misconceptions about their child's performance would be corrected. Although I was not opposed to answering parents' questions about their child, I hoped that the parents would get more answers directly from their child rather than me. More of the responsibility was now given to the students and parents to discuss what problems existed. I wanted to initiate clearer communication between the students and parents that desperately needed it. I also hypothesized that some of my students would not approve of the portfolio. With Edline already enabling parents to access to their child's current grades, giving parents access to their child's work added another layer of accountability.

Literature Review

Data gathered from interviews, surveys, and observations indicate that a large majority of teachers, parents, and students report that the use of portfolios for multiple purposes is effective (Johnson, 1996; Juniewicz, 2003). Because my action research consisted of a communication portfolio, my goal was to enhance communication in what I would call the "student-parent-teacher" triangle.

As a mathematics teacher that embraces the Principles and Standards suggested by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM, 2000), it is a focus of my pedagogy that my students are able to communicate their ideas both verbally and in written form. A past study suggests that portfolios with communication as its purpose do lead to more academic discussion between students and parents and, as a result, give children more opportunities to explain their work (Johnson, 1996). I wanted to give my students an opportunity to communicate what were learning in the classroom *and* at home.

Teachers want to have the support of their administration, colleagues, and especially, parents. Portfolios give an opportunity for regular communication between teachers and parents. In the current state of my class, the main measure of their child's progress was the grade. However, parents want evidence that their children are achieving and a portfolio shows parents that tests are not the only way to measure the progress of a child (Hoerr, 1997).

Parental involvement in school is associated with more positive academic performance (Keith et al., 1998). Of course, a portfolio is merely one way to encourage involvement by a parent with their child's progress, but that is an educator's goal—to provide opportunities for their students to grow and achieve. Students using portfolios have been shown to be more accountable and more likely to take ownership of their learning (Conderman, Hatcher, & Ikan, 1998). There is the potential of a communication device (like a portfolio) to lead to mediating variables (like accountability and better communication with parents), which in turn could lead to higher student achievement. However, while I hoped that my students experienced increased achievement due to the portfolio, my focus of my study was simply, "How effective are portfolios in enhancing student-parent and parent-teacher communication?"

In order to achieve this, I followed the principles outlined in the study reported by Seitz and Bartholomew (2008), who suggested that the portfolios process contain three ideas: collect, select, and reflect. Students were required to keep track of their assignments (collect), select and organize the appropriate documents, and then, through sharing their portfolio with their parents, reflect on their work via discussions and later, in a survey.

Plan of Action

Parents and students of my third-period class were informed of my intent to implement a portfolio so that students could bring home their organized portfolios so that their parents could look it over. Before starting the portfolio, both students and parents completed a survey. The purpose of the qualitative survey was to help me gauge the state of communication between the student and parent prior to the usage of the portfolio. How often did they talk about academics? Did the parents and students find the talks helpful? What specific topics came up in their conversations? The similarity of questions to both groups ensured data triangulation. To ensure more cooperation among the parents, they were e-mailed the survey in addition to their child bringing home a copy of the survey.

Following the return of the surveys, the students were told to start compiling their portfolios. The process consisted of organizing notes they took in class and any graded work they performed in or out of class: homework, group class work, quizzes, and tests. After roughly seven or eight class periods of meeting together, a significant amount of work had been collected and organized by the students. They were then instructed to take it home, get each assignment within the portfolio initialed by a parent, and bring it back in a timely fashion. Throughout the duration of the action research, parents had three opportunities to look over their child's portfolio of work.

After the parents had their third opportunity to look over their child's portfolio, the students and parents filled out one more survey. The intent of the open-ended questions on this survey was to gauge the effect that the portfolios had on the student-parent communication. Students and parents also answered this question: "I found the portfolio helpful (circle one)." They were then given five choices: "Strongly agree", "Agree", "Neutral", "Disagree", or "Strongly disagree."

The parents cooperated, giving consent for their child to participate in my action research, and were eager to help. They were given multiple chances to see their child's work, potentially leading to academic conversations with them. The triangulation of data through the student and parent surveys was necessary to confirm the state of communication prior to and at the end of the implementation of the portfolio. In addition to the surveys, I also received qualitative data from unsolicited e-mails from some parents about their child's progress throughout the use of the portfolio.

Data Analysis

Results from the first survey to the students and parents were informative to the state of communication at home. Most striking were the responses regarding how involved the parents were. According to the students and parents alike, prior to the portfolio there were many discussions regarding academics at home. Nine of the eleven students responded that discussions with parents were "very frequent" or "frequent", while all of the parents said that their talks were "very frequent" or "frequent." The survey also showed from the responses of both students and parents that the majority of parents often checked Edline to see their child's grades. However, two parents made it a point *not* to check their child's grades due to their desire for their child to be more independent.

The first survey also revealed that there were divergent views as to how the parent-student discussions were perceived. A slight majority of the parents (6 out of 11) stated that their talks were helpful, while only two of the students remarked that they were beneficial. The students' perceptions of their dialogue with their parents regarding academics were not encouraging. It appeared that most of them regarded communicating with their parents as a detriment and a nuisance.

Finally, the first survey also revealed what topics came up frequently in conversations between the two parties. The two topics recorded by students that often were discussed with their parents were (a) grades and (b) upcoming assignments. The parents' top two were (a) grades and (b) how they could help their child. The students' study habits were also mentioned multiple times by both groups.

The results of the second survey revealed that, as a result of the portfolio, parents and students spent more time discussing *why* the child received a particular grade. Four of the parents and five of the students confirmed through the survey that discussions and explanations regarding the students' work resulted from the portfolio check. While four of the students reported no significant change in the way they communicated with their parents, several others reported that their effort was a topic of discussion because their parents were able to see their class work. Three parents mentioned that effort was discussed with their child. One of the parents remarked that he was able to praise his daughter for the evidence of her hard work and perseverance.

All but one of the parents found the portfolio helpful, according to the final survey. In addition, I also received e-mails from three different parents regarding the portfolio. Two of the e-mails were received just after the consent form was sent home and showed appreciation for the chance to look over their child's work. One e-mail at the end of the study mentioned that the parent was having more fruitful dialogue with the child due to the specifics of the portfolio. While the response of the parents was largely positive, the response of the students was less positive, but still positive. Seven of the eleven students said they found the portfolio helpful. As to why they found it helpful, some mentioned that it forced them to work harder, knowing they would have to explain their work later to their mother or father. One student mentioned that he did *not* like the portfolio for that same reason. Some mentioned that the portfolio helped them be more organized and two mentioned that they felt the portfolio helped increase their grade.

Due to the triangulation of the surveys I was confident that the data collected was mostly credible. The differences in opinion had to do with the students' and parents' perception of their communication and whether the portfolio was helpful. I was encouraged to hear of progress in some of the discussions between the students and parents. Parents not only knew their children's grades, but were able to initiate dialogue with their children regarding the specifics of their effort, the topic being taught, and explanations of specific problems, requiring the children to communicate their reasoning.

Summary and Discussion

I sympathize with the high school seniors who do not want their work scrutinized by their parents. A senior moving on to an institute of higher learning should be independent and responsible. Nonetheless, parents have the right to know how their children are doing and their strengths and weaknesses. One of the conclusions I came to following the action research is that students who use a portfolio can really take pride in their work. An artist can create a portfolio of their best work, and that is what I want my students to do. While not all my students viewed the

portfolio that way, I feel that several started to realize the importance of doing quality work and being held to a higher standard.

My action research was not without its problems. As mentioned I believe a detriment to the study is the length. While the action research was at least a moderate success in the time we had, I wonder what would have happened if I had more time. Over a longer period of time, perhaps my students would become more at ease with making mathematical explanations by being given opportunities to explain their work to their parents. Or, perhaps given more time, I would see an eventual decrease in effective communication. It is possible that this study is an example of the Hawthorne effect (Yates, Moore, & Starnes, 2008)—many changes in an environment have a short-term increase in effectiveness. It is possible that if a portfolio designed for communication had a lengthier trial period, the participants (students and parents) would tire of it.

Also, I questioned the validity of a couple of my questions created for the surveys. I believe a question on the final survey should have read, “I found the portfolio _____” and the participants should have been given the choices “Extremely helpful”, “Helpful”, “Neutral”, “Not helpful” or “Extremely not helpful”, rather than the original leading question, “I found the portfolio helpful (circle one).” In addition, due to the parents’ and students’ willingness to help me in my action research, I felt they may have been more likely to give an affirmative response, thus introducing bias into the study. A question at the beginning of the survey should also have been reworded to read, “I find my conversations with my child regarding academics _____” rather than the leading statement, “I find my conversations with my child helpful (circle one).”

While the majority of the participants were very supportive and candid in their responses, there was a minority that was not as revealing or specific. I am sure there were times when parents did not have time to look over the portfolio methodically and ask questions. When I do this again, I would like to, if possible, add a short parent-student-teacher conference. This would give an opportunity for the child to present their portfolio and for face-to-face feedback. I would also like to introduce more non-traditional assignments like projects and short papers that would give the portfolio more variety and encourage more writing skills.

Due to the specific context of my class, transferability of the results of this action research is limited. Realizing that this group of students as a whole already experienced consistent communication, the subsequent results would not be generalized to a group of students with much less parental involvement. Also, a group of juniors and seniors may have different perceptions of parental communication than would a group of freshmen or middle school students, so results would not necessarily mirror what would happen in a different age group. More studies involving portfolios as a communication device should be done across many age brackets, socio-economic levels, and other subjects as well.

Other teachers already use portfolios for many reasons (such as a form of assessment) and they should continue to do so. While my class was blessed in that many of the parents were active in their education, not all classes are this way. Teachers need to continue to look for opportunities to get parents excited about their child’s learning. This action research has shown me the worth of even flawed ideas. As it always is in the profession of teaching, educators are trying new things and some work, some do not. I am inspired to keep trying, revising, and revisiting the idea of communication between students, parents, and teachers.

References

- Conderman, G., Hatcher, R., & Ikan, P. (1998). Why student-led conferences work. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 34(4), 132-134.
- Cruz, L., & Petersen, S. (2002). Reporting assessment results to parents. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, & Dance*, 73(8), 20-24, 31.
- Hoerr, T. (1997). Frog ballets and musical fractions. *Educational Leadership*, 55, 43-46.
- Johnson, P. (1996). Sharing portfolios with parents. *Principal*, 76, 44-45.
- Juniewicz, K. (2003). Student portfolios with a purpose. *The Clearing House*, 77(2), 73-77.
- Keith, T., Keith, P., Quirk, K., Sperduto, J., Santillo, S., & Killings, S. (1998). Longitudinal effects of parental involvement in high school grades: Similarities and differences across gender and ethnic groups. *Journal of School Psychology*, 36(3), 335-363.
- National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. (2000). *Principles and standards for school mathematics*. Reston, VA: Author.
- Paulson, F., Paulson, P., & Meyer C. (1991). What makes a portfolio a portfolio? *Educational Leadership*, 48, 60-63.
- Seitz, H., & Bartholomew, C. (2008). Powerful portfolios for young children. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 36(1), 63-68.
- Yates, D., Moore, D., & Starnes, D. (2008). *The Practice of Statistics*. New York: Freeman.