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Portfolio assessment in a reading-writing classroom

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present the rationale for portfolios as a part of the qualitative assessment of students' emerging literacy. Ways to develop a portfolio and to use this technique for assessment will be discussed.

Portfolio Assessment
in a Reading-Writing Classroom

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by
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In the 1980s, a renewed focus was placed on process rather than skills in language instructional programs. This instructional trend brought about a need for a change in assessment, from quantitative to qualitative measures, for involvement in process needs to be described. Traditional assessment of reading and writing is confusing to students who are involved in language arts programs that focus on process, for it is concerned with responses to language fragments.

Assessment should empower teachers, students, and parents to center on student growth and needs: Worthwhile classroom practices should be ignited and not extinguished by assessment. Students should view assessment as an opportunity to reflect upon and celebrate the fulfillment of their goal-setting and then to establish goals for future learning.

A technique for promoting the assessment of students' involvement in the language processes is the portfolio. It is a collection of students' language responses that provides students and teachers opportunities to collaboratively assess students' growth in extending their literacy.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to present the rationale for portfolios as a part of the qualitative assessment of students' emerging literacy. Ways to develop a portfolio and to use this technique for assessment will be discussed.

Rationale for Portfolios as a Qualitative Assessment Technique

Traditionally, portfolios have been used by artists, architects, photographers, and models to collect samples and demonstrate skills and achievements to future employers. Portfolios used in the classroom can help students reflect on and understand their own strengths and needs (Valencia, 1990). They can encourage positive feelings among students about their own literacy (Au, Scheu, Kawakami, & Herman, 1990). Portfolios can assist in capitalizing on the best each student has to offer, much like a traditional portfolio. Tierney, Carter, and Desai (1991) state:

Portfolios offer a framework that is dynamic and grounded in what students are actually doing. It is a framework with the potential to empower both teachers and students to reflect upon their reading and writing and to grow in their understanding of their reading and writing, as well as themselves. (p. 42)

According to Valencia (1990), there are four principles that summarize the rationale for the use of portfolios in literacy assessment:

1. Sound assessment is based on authenticity. Students read and write for a variety of purposes, so these purposes should be assessed.

2. Assessment must be a continuous, on-going process that chronicles the development of literacy. The process, rather than just the outcome, is examined.

3. Assessment must be a multifaceted, multidimensional process. It considers interest, motivation, voluntary reading, metacognitive knowledge, and language strategies.

4. Assessment must provide opportunities for collaborative reflection by both teachers and students.

Teachers need to have a clear understanding of the purposes of portfolios. These purposes must be consistent with the goals and objectives of the instructional program. Johns (1990) suggests using two broad goals for portfolios: They should nurture literacy, and they should foster positive attitudes toward engaging in the language processes. Tierney et al. (1991) state, "Portfolios involve a partnership between students, parents, and teachers. It is a partnership centered on empowering students to assess themselves" (p. 105).

Students and teachers can use portfolio information to promote student learning, moving away from a system that evaluates skill by skill and towards one that nurtures self-evaluation of the reading and writing abilities. Tierney et al. (1991) suggest, "A collection of student work reveals quite a lot about the personal characteristics of the student. Not only are a student's confidence, interests, and quality of thinking visible, but so are

a student's power, versatility, effort, knowledge and use of process, self-reflections, and growth" (p. 101). Portfolios focus on decision-making, rather than attaching a grade which is an abstract and relative form of evaluation. This alternative strategy becomes something tangible for parents to see at conference time.

Development of a Reading-Writing Portfolio

This section will include a description of the portfolio contents, housing of the portfolio, and a criteria for selecting exhibits for the portfolio.

Description of Contents

For the assessment of reading and writing, the portfolio can include samples of students' work, their logs describing their goals and reactions to their instructional program, progress notes written by students and teachers collaboratively, test results, anecdotal records kept from teacher observation of students' behavior, student-teacher conference notes, and questionnaires that document students' attitudes towards reading and writing. Au et al. (1990) suggest that students' assessment naturally develops from everyday instructional experiences. Valencia (1990) states:

It is more like a large expandable file folder that holds (a) samples of the student's work selected by the teacher or the student, (b) the teacher's observational notes, (c) the student's own periodic self-evaluations, and (d) progress

notes contributed by the student and teacher collaboratively. (p. 339)

Consistency across the district is an important aspect of developing portfolio assessment. Mathews (1990) points out the necessity for building-level administrators to be involved with the successful change when implementing portfolio assessment. Portfolios, along with standardized tests local assessments, other grades, and teacher observations, can be used as sources of information (Johns, 1990). Students, teachers, parents, and school officials become partners in promoting literacy.

Reading. To assess reading, portfolios can include: a literary response journal, lists of books read, video tapes of various activities throughout the school year, teacher notes, checklists of relevant reading behaviors, and standardized test scores. There might be lists of favorite books, genre, or authors and a reading chart rating individual likes and dislikes of books read. Samples of the students' reading taped at the beginning of the year and again at the end of the year can render evidence of emerging literacy, which are especially helpful at the lower elementary level. Flood and Lapp (1989) suggest including photocopied reading samples to show parents what students were capable of reading at the beginning and at the end of the year.

Writing. To assess writing, portfolios can include samples of all the aspects of the reclusive process--lists of topics for

composition activity, first drafts, redrafts, revisions, and publications in different forms. They can exhibit works representative of different writing genres and works written in other areas of curriculum. Critiques of personal reading or the works of a visiting author or poet can also be part of the collection. Tierney et al. (1991) say that portfolios are not just student work storage areas but a plan for them to become involved in self-assessment as they organize, select, arrange, reflect, plan, share, and critique their own work. This self-assessment process is one of the main reasons for advocating portfolio assessment.

Criteria for Selecting Exhibits for the Portfolio

A portfolio is an organized collection of student response systematically collected by the teacher and student to monitor growth of the student's knowledge, skills, and attitudes in a curriculum area or areas. Portfolios contain what the student judges to be his/her best work from a cumulative folder of the student's involvement in the reading and writing processes (Vavrus, 1990). The selection process for developing the contents of a portfolio is vitally important in nurturing student growth. Students need to maintain a folder that includes a wide range of reading and writing experiences representative of their responses within the language processes. These portfolios can be tied together with a table of contents designed by the student. The

contents may be divided by topic, subject area, chronological order, genre, or pieces the student likes best to least.

One way, suggested by Rief (1990), for students to organize their writing in their portfolios is from most effective to least effective.

A criteria for the selection needs to be established and implemented consistent with the goals of the language arts program. Johns (1990) relates, "One of the real dangers of portfolios is that they become an unfocused collection of many pieces of information. Such an unorganized accumulation of bits and pieces of information will reduce their usefulness" (p. 4). A portfolio evolves slowly with the student and teacher working together to build a common understanding of expectations and criteria. They can develop guidelines at the beginning of the year that gradually turn the responsibility over to the students as they choose what they will read and write.

Johns (1990) states that the students' role in evaluating their own progress and achievement is important to the outcomes of the literacy program. They need to take personal responsibility for their involvement in assessing their reading and writing. They can choose what they read and write, with the teacher acting as a facilitator. Johns (1990) also suggests that the maintenance of the portfolio should be taught to the student "so excessive teacher time is not required" (p. 6).

Reading. The criteria for exhibit selection for the reading part of portfolios differ from the criteria for the writing portfolios because the processes are different. The reading portfolio can include samples of responses from all subject areas. Entries reflecting reading across the curriculum can be included in the portfolio as part of the assessment; for example, a science lab report or complex math story problems and solutions can be important additions to a portfolio (Vavrus, 1990).

Writing. The assessment of the writing process is much more important than the assessment of the final product. A portfolio reflects the "whole picture" and helps students focus their attentions on growth as they engage in the writing process. Through the use of a portfolio, students' abilities are less likely to be underrated.

Rief (1990) suggests that the external and internal criteria for students' portfolios are established by the teacher and students. The teacher can decide on minimum requirements, and the students then make their personal decisions about the selection of their individual work. This criteria should be established early in the school year so students know just what their responsibilities are. Some teachers from Simmons' (1990) pilot project suggest a "Theirs/Mine/Ours" system that allows the student to pick one piece, the teacher to pick one piece, and the student and teacher working together to pick the third piece.

To help students select writing samples for their portfolios, Rief (1990) has offered these questions:

What makes this your best piece?

How did you go about writing it?

What problems did you encounter?

How did you solve them?

What makes your most effective piece different from your least effective?

What goals did you set for yourself?

How well did you accomplish them?

What are your goals for the next time period? (p. 28)

A statement can be attached to each piece of writing to identify the work, to tell what prompted the activity, to explain why the piece was selected for the portfolio, and to describe how the student met instructional goals (Vavrus, 1990). All pieces need to be dated and labeled. The times that the portfolio are assessed also can be initialed and dated.

The organization of the writing section of the portfolio needs to be carefully planned. Teachers can aid students with the critical thinking involved in organization by teaching the task as a part of the regular curriculum. Wolf (1989) suggests dividing the portfolio contents into three categories: biographies of works, a range of works, and reflections. A biography shows different stages of a piece of writing and could include notes,

diagrams, and/or drafts. A range of works portrays the diverse collection of projects and genre and could include letters, poetry, or journals. Reflections are made when the student returns to the portfolio and chooses, evaluates, or critiques the best of the works.

Housing of Contents

The physical appearance of a portfolio will vary according to the goals set by the teacher, school, or district. Expandable file folders or cardboard magazine holders make excellent storage for the collection of artifacts representing pupil performance. They require a storage space that does not take up a great deal of space and is easily accessible. Examples of storage for the collections are book shelves, file cabinets, or plastic file crates.

Process of Assessing Language Growth

Tierney et al. (1991) suggest that portfolios are a basis of information and an alternative process to standardized tests for teachers, students, and parents. For teachers, they develop clear expectations for their students, can decrease paper work, often provide insights into students that enhance teachers' effectiveness, and encourage students to actively participate in their own learning.

Krest (1990) states, "The key to making portfolios work was in learning how to adapt the portfolio to different grade levels,

motivational levels, and ability levels of students while at the same time promoting the new paradigm in the teaching of writing" (p. 29). An emphasis is placed on what the student knows instead of what the student does not know. One teacher who had implemented portfolio assessment reported that the most important change in his students was the value they began to place on their own reading and writing. His students had a sense of ownership in the process as they began selecting topics for writing, helped with assessment criteria, and chose their own reading and writing to be evaluated (Tierney et al., 1991).

The implementation of portfolios gives teachers an opportunity to grow in kid-watching that leads to the development of valuable insights into their students' learning. Then more effective goals can be developed for their instructional programs. Mills (1989) states that

if we did assessment right, people would be talking sensibly about student achievement. They would have clear ideas about what students should know and be able to do. Citizens would have credible answers and a rich array of information in place of simplistic scores. (p. 9)

In the process of assessing pupil growth, the teacher and the students need to collaborate in using the portfolio. They can discuss the students' accomplishments and the goals that need to be established for future study. Rief (1990) suggests that

students conference with their teachers a minimum of four times a year to discuss the contents of their portfolios, how they were organized, and the students' progress. Assessment can be based on organization of the portfolio, favorite reading selections and writing pieces, journal entries, reading projects, the process involved in writing a composition, problems in reading and writing and possible solutions, goals met and developed for future learning experiences, and risk-taking experiences such as extending reading activities to other topics and genres and trying new writing styles and new topics (Rief, 1990).

Ways teachers can support a sense of ownership among students as they develop their portfolios for assessment are suggested by Tierney et al. (1991):

1. Be sure students are a part of the selection and culling process.
2. Make accessibility to portfolios physically easy.
3. Ask student's permission to examine or share their portfolios.
4. Encourage respect among students for each other's portfolios.

Parents need to be included in their children's school life. Inviting parents to participate in celebration of their children's positive efforts as they become better readers and writers promotes children's positive view of their school experience

(Tierney et al., 1991). Fredericks and Rasinski (1990) list six ways parents can become involved in assessment.

1. Parents can be asked about expectations they have for their children. These responses can be referred to throughout the school year.

2. Parents can assist in designing an evaluation instrument that rates home assignments.

3. Parents can be given a weekly or biweekly summary sheet to record observations of their children's reading and writing activity.

4. A simple "question sheet" can be provided to parents on which to ask questions about their children's progress.

5. Parents can compose lists of ways their children have learned in reading and writing.

6. Parents can be encouraged to visit the children's classrooms. The parents' comments based on their observations of their children's performance in the classroom can be recorded.

Reading. The progress students make in reading, as well as their reading preference can be taken into account. Johns (1990) has developed a checklist for surveying students' attitudes toward personal reading. This single sheet for each child provides teachers with quick assessment of each child's responses in a class at various times during the year.

Writing. Tierney et al. (1991) have made these suggestions for students' self-evaluation of their writing portfolios:

1. Compare your writing done at different times during the school year and discuss the changes you notice.
2. Select your best piece of writing and explain your decision.
3. Reflect on your writing difficulties and explain how these influence your writing.
4. Compile a list of goals and expectations for future writing.

Conclusion

Portfolio assessment can be a positive part of children's learning experiences. It can encourage students to become better readers, writers, and independent learners. Because of current curricular changes and trends, traditional means of assessment are no longer appropriate; therefore, portfolios are beginning to play a significant role in the evaluation of students' emerging literacy.

With portfolio assessment, students and teachers work together collaboratively to improve reading and writing. If students are allowed to become involved in their own assessment by trusting them to set goals for their learning and encouraging them to reflect on their involvement in the language processes, they will have a clearer understanding of their growth.

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