

# **PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT AS FACULTY DEVELOPMENT: THE SMALL- SCHOOL CONTEXT**

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The benefits of portfolio use extend well beyond improving the writing of students whose work is being assessed. Pat Belanoff and Peter Elbow discuss how portfolios can help increase collaboration and build community in writing programs—among students, among teachers, between students and teachers, and between administrators and teachers (Belanoff & Dickson 17-36). In small colleges and universities in particular, where faculty innovation is verbally encouraged but practically retarded by lack of available time and funding, over-reliance on short-answer student evaluations, and limited faculty motivation, communal portfolio assessment can be especially valuable in promoting faculty development.

While writing portfolio systems are being developed in small schools nation-wide, research on and case studies of writing portfolio systems at the post-secondary school level have centered primarily on larger universities (see Yancy; Belanoff & Dickson). The writing portfolio system developed at SUNY Stony Brook in the early 1980's has become a prototype for writing

programs and English departments in a variety of contexts, both large and small. Stony Brook is a university center with over 20,000 students, a large English graduate program that staffs most of the University's writing courses, and curricular support for the assessment system. The program stands out in several ways, such as in the attention and value given to input from instructors, but in some respects it is also representative of many larger institutions: the Stony Brook model was mandated by a program director and attached to courses assigned to and taught almost exclusively by graduate assistants, supported departmentally by mandatory courses and workshops on Composition theory and practice. Program administrators must balance the need of graduate students to develop independent teaching styles and the departmental requirement that final curricular decisions remain in administrative hands.

Belanoff and Elbow explain the delicate nature of this balance when discussing how portfolios can encourage collaboration between writing program administrators and teachers. They ask, "Is it our program or the teachers'?" and confront the conflicts between wanting to control the direction of a program while realizing that "If teachers don't experience their courses as wholly theirs—they will not invest themselves or do their best teaching." While wanting to encourage teacher quality and investment, they also admit that ". . . it's ours and we want it that way. We want to maintain control and impose coherence and uniformity. We can't give the reins entirely to teachers because we have a commitment to students and to the teaching of writing—and a hankering for our own agenda too" (26-7).

In many respects, the dynamic is much different in small institutions where instructor independence is guarded fiercely and curricular decisions are made primarily by faculty. In 1982, I was one of the instructors at SUNY Stony Brook piloting the new portfolio system. Eight years later, I accepted a position as Director of Writing at a small private school in eastern Iowa: less than one-tenth the size of Stony Brook, without a graduate English or writing program, and tuition-driven. Like many of the new breed of small universities today, the school is "teaching-intensive": full-time professors teach at least four courses per semester, are often asked to carry overloads, and are expected to engage in a full schedule of conferencing, advising, independent studies, committee work, and community service. Pro-

fessional development and research are often pushed to the background, even in tenure decisions, where student evaluations weigh most heavily. There is a dependence on part-timers by as much as a 2:1 ratio, especially in university-wide courses like Freshman Composition, and faculty background and interest in or commitment to Composition is limited across the board.

When I arrived, I proposed that we replace the writing proficiency exit exam required for graduation with a program of writing courses both within the English department and across the curriculum. The freshman writing sections could be coordinated with group portfolio assessment. After exploring several possibilities, the English department decided to adapt the Stony Brook model for Freshman Composition. We would require three papers with cover sheets, one in-class essay, and a reflective cover sheet for the entire portfolio. The papers would include one research paper, one paper that responded to another piece of writing, and one open genre. We agreed not to give C's or better in our courses to students whose portfolios did not pass. The proposal was discussed and voted in by the department, the faculty-at-large, and finally the University curriculum committee.

Seven of us were teaching freshman writing that semester: three full-time and four part-timers. The other two full-timers besides myself were both literature specialists. They taught freshman writing classes at least partly because with the small number of available faculty and the large number of sections, they had no choice. One of them, nearing retirement, had gone to the dean requesting that she be relieved of this duty. Request denied. The other, though she didn't mind teaching advanced writing courses, said that she just didn't "have the patience for freshmen" and would rather limit her teaching to more advanced students.

One of the part-timers was hired in the weeks before classes began. The new instructor had just received a Masters degree in American Literature; he had never taught, but seemed basically able and willing. He was the only available candidate remaining from those whose applications we'd considered over the summer, and he was willing to give up some house-painting jobs to gain teaching experience.

The second part-timer taught six classes at three different local schools in order to make ends meet. He had ten years

experience, but without a post-graduate degree, he could teach a maximum of only two classes at any one school because of his part-time status. The third part-timer was ABD, teaching to fund her dissertation on Romantic poetry. The last instructor, who taught just one class, was a local writer and editor who had been teaching part-time for several years, frustrated by the low wages and the fact that she could not be considered for a tenure-track position without an advanced degree. She had no formal training or special interest in Rhetoric or Composition.

This might seem like a motley crew of characters to make up the Composition faction of an English department, but, of course, this group is not atypical. The faculty turnover that has been promised or threatened across the country has begun only recently, slowed considerably by cutbacks and a sluggish national economy that has delayed both expected retirements and hoped-for replacements. Many tenured full professors are needed to teach freshman writing courses, but are reluctant to acknowledge, let alone embrace, advancements in the field of Composition over the last fifteen or twenty years. It's difficult for a small department to justify hiring a Composition specialist who would require a new line or re-division of teaching responsibilities. When retirements do occur, empty lines are often filled with available part-timers, at least temporarily, and eastern Iowa has dozens of small colleges and universities competing for "local talent," not to mention the major universities in Ames and Iowa City. Funding usually doesn't come through until late spring, and as a result, schools often have to fill slots with whoever is locally available. This is not to say that there aren't lots of skilled, committed teachers who teach part-time without degrees, or tenured "old-timers" who keep learning and changing as they go, but they are often the exceptions rather than the rule.

Our group agreed to meet at the beginning of the semester to discuss goals and logistics. But when the meeting came around, only five of us showed up. One of the missing two, both of whom were part-timers, sent word that he had to be at another local school where he taught; the other just couldn't make it. The meeting went well for the rest of us, but we were concerned about the two members absent. How could we work together if we couldn't even *get* together? I summarized in writing as much as possible of our discussion to fill them in, and we hoped for the best.

At the mid-semester meeting, six of us showed; it turned out that the missing instructor resented having to do this extra work, spending additional hours at school during what she saw as her private time, not to mention the extra work required by the portfolio system. She was angry about still being a part-timer, earning a piddling wage, and wasn't willing to make a unilateral commitment.

Those of us who were there got down to reading a few papers that I'd copied for all of us to look at together. Our readings were as variant as our personal agendas. The question was not so much whether to pass the paper—although we did split right down the middle about that—as *how* we read. We had decided early in the semester that rather than setting criteria in advance, we'd let them emerge in the process. We had agreed to consider the student writing in its entirety, looking for dominant characteristics in a modified holistic reading. When we discussed our findings, however, one reader failed the piece because it had too many misplaced modifiers, another failed it because there was no thesis statement, and another passed it because he saw potential in what the student was trying to do. One thought that sentence-level issues were most important, one that usage was paramount, one that mechanics of any kind were unimportant as long as the argument held together. After discussing the first paper for an hour, we agreed to disagree and moved on to the next.

The rest of that afternoon, I'd rather forget. Our disagreements ranged from what we should be teaching, to how to read a paper, to what a paper should contain, to what made a paper a "research" paper, to what made a paper a paper at all. I longed for an authority. I wanted to *be* that authority and just tell everyone that *this* was the way to read and *these* were the proper conclusions. Needless to say, that didn't happen; when I spoke, my voice just added to the noisy chaos. In the end, I said something about how the day could at least give us a sense of where we stood in relation to the community standards, and we all went home to drink.

Somehow, we got through the mid-semester dry run and even the final portfolio. Predictably, instructors who missed a meeting came to the next with a different sense than the rest of us of what we were doing. Late portfolios were an issue, as were those that didn't seem to meet the criteria, and those

without complete cover sheets. But as Belanoff and Elbow point out, portfolio systems don't *create* difficulties; they just bring them out into the open (23).

The problems of the first meeting didn't go away, but somehow we worked through them. From the beginning, we *had* agreed that the portfolio should emerge from our classroom practices, that the system should include rather than dictate the ways we taught.

Sometimes the compromises that we had to make to include all of our rather diverse approaches seemed to "take the guts" out of the portfolio system. We found, for instance, that we did not all teach library research in our classes. The original requirement that one of the portfolio pieces be based on research from multiple sources was modified to require only that one paper respond in some way to another person's ideas or writing. The paper that had responded to the work of another writer was opened up to require simply that the paper be organized conceptually around a point; the third was left open. We continued to require cover sheets, but accepted anything that was written by the student on a separate piece of paper. We continued to require in-class essays, but decided not to include them in the assessment process, except with borderline non-passes.

I'm not sure how much coherence or uniformity we have achieved in the department. We haven't been able to agree about what constitutes a "research" paper, whether writing courses should be unified by themes, whether they should center on social issues, whether research or responding to text should take precedence, what role freewriting should play, how or whether journals should be assigned, or whether there is a place for grammar exercises on one hand or "expressive" writing on the other. Our grading standards may be a bit closer, but they are still clearly divergent.

But I do know that the communal portfolio system has at least sometimes gotten us out of the isolation of our offices and homes, and into a room together. We've been forced, in most cases for the first time, into an awareness and articulation of our underlying assumptions about teaching and writing; we've had to express and negotiate our differences and find ways to reach at least a limited consensus on theoretical and practical approaches to writing instruction and assessment. Without any "top-down" direction from vice-presidents, deans or department

chairs, we work (and fight) our way through issues of training, commitment, funding, classroom independence, and conflicting pedagogies. We are developing a community consciousness.

The bottom line here is that as a result of the portfolio system and our discussions, instructors *are* changing the way they teach, and by extension, the way their students are learning. After thirty-five years of teaching, one tenured full professor is coming to value reflective writing in his classes (and not just in Freshman Composition). Students in all of our classes are taking a look at themselves as writers, in many cases for the first time. Some instructors are expanding their use of portfolios for final grades, instead of averaging paper grades and a final exam. Their students are revising. Instructors are trying out new things, despite a strong university reliance on student evaluations for re-hiring, promotion, and tenure—which in the past has often served to discourage experimentation or added classroom requirements. And all this is happening without funding and, as importantly, without administrative edict.

In short, communal writing portfolio assessment has had profound effects upon the quality of learning and instruction here at one small university in eastern Iowa. Its effectiveness in improving student writing is well-known; it can be useful as well in encouraging faculty development. Further research and case studies across the curriculum will give us a better sense of the impact of portfolios upon students and faculty in the small-school context.

### WORKS CITED

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