

Lessons learned about student portfolios. (benefits of student portfolios)

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The idea of going beyond test scores to collect more substantive evidence of a school's curriculum and teaching initiatives seemed innovative to faculty members at Crow Island School a decade ago, Ms. Hebert notes. What they didn't know then was that the process of selecting samples of work and assembling them into a portfolio is profoundly important to children.

A decade ago we began a project with **student portfolios** at Crow Island School in Winnetka, Illinois. Influenced by Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, our faculty explored the many learning experiences of our students and decided to encourage the children to gather their work over time so that they themselves could see evidence of their learning. During the past 10 years we have learned so much more than we imagined. We now know quite a bit about what a portfolio is and probably more about what a portfolio is not. But what continues to energize our thinking after all this time is what a portfolio can be.

When we started this project, we didn't fully understand the possibilities that portfolios could offer. The notion that there could be some child-centered, qualitative supplement to the single-number characterizations of learning emphasized by our testing culture seemed reason enough to organize our efforts and those of our students. The idea of collecting more substantive evidence of our curriculum and teaching initiatives to counteract narrowly defined test scores seemed innovative at the time. What we didn't know then was that the process of selecting samples of one's own work and assembling them into a portfolio is profoundly important to children. We also learned that all children have a natural ability and desire to tell their story through the contents of the portfolio. Even now, we remain excited about capturing the individual voices of our students through portfolio collections.

Over the past 10 years we've discussed and rethought many aspects of our understanding of portfolios. Here are some of the lessons we've taken to heart:

* Don't get too focused on delineating the contents of the portfolio. In the early years of our work, we were far too concerned about the specific contents of the portfolios. Looking back, I believe that discussing this matter is a natural way to explore the purposes of portfolios; however, it's important not to become rigid about what goes into a portfolio. I'm always reminded of the wonderful definition offered by staff developers Pearl Paulsen and Leon Paulsen: "Portfolios tell a story. . . . Put in anything that helps to tell the story." The real contents of a portfolio are the child's thoughts and his or her reasons for selecting a particular entry. That selection process reflects the interests and metacognitive maturity of the child and the inspiration and influence offered by the teachers.

When teachers first get involved with portfolios, they tend to have different ideas and suggestions about what to put on the portfolio "must list." Fortunately, we never committed ourselves to making such a list, and I suspect that is why, in part, we are still so fascinated with this topic. After 10 years we realize that there is no best notion of what goes into a portfolio; rather, portfolios serve as a metaphor for our continued belief in the idea that children can play a major role in the assessment of their own learning. This perspective, rather than a predetermined list of curriculum samples, should be the guideline for placing particular items into a portfolio.

* The "container" issue. Initially, most teachers gathered children's work in a wide variety of containers. Hanging file folders became a popular organizing tool. The issue of what work was sent home and what work stayed in the classroom was important in the early years. It took time to establish the expectation that most of the children's work would stay at school. Faculty members spent many hours discussing details: the type and color of containers, the location and labeling of the intermediate gathering folders, the importance of dating all student work, and the directions we would give to the students about selections. Some tensions and anxieties surfaced in response to our open conversations, and there were some disagreements about the contents and purposes of portfolios. Thus the security of knowing we would definitely be using red, yellow, blue, and green legal-sized folders in grades 1-4 and black binders in grade 5 was a source of great comfort. Issues of giving tangible form to the often unwieldy openness of student-centered portfolios need to be addressed but must be secondary to the larger and more fundamental discussions about what a portfolio can represent about a child's learning.

* Whose portfolio is it? Because our initial understanding was that portfolios might counterbalance the narrowness of test scores with concrete examples of our students' interests and abilities, we assumed the role of portfolio managers. The notion that children could or should participate in the selection of the contents of the portfolios was intriguing to us, but we didn't have a clear plan to implement that ideal.

How does the child know what to choose? What if a child doesn't select balanced evidence of the teacher's curriculum for his or her portfolio? Is it appropriate for a child to present a portfolio that excludes a major content area? These questions

continue to be a part of our ongoing discussions as we discover the ever-growing metacognitive voices of our children - voices that we train to become competent and thoughtful tellers of the stories of their learning.

We now believe that the selection of the contents of the portfolio is an evolving process shared by child and teacher. When children are just beginning to understand what a portfolio is, they require clear scaffolding. We advise students about including certain pieces of work that we feel will be valued - if not now, at a later time. We have discovered that the conversations that take place as portfolios are being compiled give the children the security to suggest additional entries that are more personal or unique to their own school experience. One message about child ownership is very clear: we do not assign a letter grade or evaluation to the portfolio. We honor the child's world that is represented by the portfolio. We want to learn more about that world so that we can more sensitively help each child grow.

* An archive adds a sense of history to the portfolio. As children's work was gathered, we were uncertain what to do with it at the close of the school year. Our faculty discussions emphasized how important it was for the children to have access to their work over time so that they could develop a better understanding of their histories as students. We decided to use the term portfolio when referring to a single year's selection of works and archive for the total collection, which could span up to six years (K-5). Establishing the physical space to house an archive (in our school, the library/resource center) was an important step: it signaled to all children that each of them was an important part of the history of our school.

* Defining an audience is crucial. The notion of gathering work to "tell your story" is far too abstract for young students unless they know who is listening to that story. The question of the contents of a portfolio becomes much clearer once an audience is defined. For our students, the parents were the most natural audience. Other audiences could be siblings, other students from the same or different grade levels, prior teachers in the school, or senior citizens in the community.

* Attaching meaning to the contents of the portfolio contributes to the child's metacognitive growth. The collecting of student work was initially overwhelming. Some students saved everything, and others were reluctant to make a decision about what to select for their portfolios. We needed a mechanism to assist students - and ourselves - in managing the size of an individual portfolio and, more important, to inject more thoughtfulness into the selection process. The idea of "reflection tags" quickly worked its way around the building. The basic idea is to consider reasons for including a piece of work in the portfolio, to record these statements of value on a tag of paper, and to attach the tag to the sample of student work. This idea is usually presented in a rug-time discussion with students.

In the early grades, conversations with children focus on the purposes of maintaining a portfolio. In first grade, students are reminded of the baby books that their parents have put together. This example introduces the concepts of purposeful selection, life history, and evidence of change over time. "Now that you're in first grade, you will select some of your first-grade work, and we'll keep it in a portfolio." The first-graders love the sound of this grownup word and remember that their kindergarten teachers introduced this idea to them last spring. Often fifth-grade student buddies assist the children in sorting through their work and selecting items for their portfolios.

In second grade, children may be asked, "Why would you put something in your portfolio?" "Because it's my best work" is usually the first response. With patience, the teacher elicits further value statements from the students. "Because I'm proud of it." "Because I didn't think I could do this." "Because I worked very hard on it." The teacher records these thoughts on tags of paper and asks the children to affix them to particular entries in their portfolios. "Do you have any blank tags?" asks another student, demonstrating that further ideas have occurred about why one keeps artifacts in a portfolio and indicating that the transfer of ownership from teacher to child has begun. The use of individual reflection tags (or some other open-ended written reflection) about the contents of a portfolio is an important element in portfolio construction. The physical act of attaching meaning to a specific piece of work contributes significantly to the child's metacognitive growth.

* A celebratory event brings child, portfolio, and audience together. Trying to balance the micro and macro issues surrounding our portfolio project was no small task. Discussions about contents, containers, file folders, and the location of the archive, together with the philosophical issues of portfolio ownership, the role of portfolios in assessment, and educating parents about the use of portfolios, had us going in many directions at once. What we needed was a unifying experience that would consolidate all our discussions and concerns and that would clearly communicate to both students and parents the value we assigned to portfolios.

Learning is worth celebrating, and children can be competent participants in that celebration. Gradually we have developed structures to express that belief as part of our school culture. By far, the most powerful celebration of student competence has been the Portfolio Evening, an opportunity for children to present their portfolios to their own parents. At one of our regularly scheduled conferences with parents, the children are given the responsibility to present their portfolios individually to their parents and to explain to them the process by which the materials were generated, the self-reflections involved in the selection of the materials, the conversations with the teacher that spurred particular choices, and any other aspects of their "learning stories" they want to share.

To prepare for this event, the children spend several weeks talking about their portfolios and archives with their teachers, with peers, and often with older students. Specific lessons are focused on how to organize selections of work; how to place them in chronological order; how to think about work as evidence of competence in more than one subject area; how to

compare earlier work with present work, showing the acquisition of more advanced skills; and, most important, how to reflect on the portfolio as a whole. Students complete portfolio menus called "Ask me about" sheets. On these organizing sheets the students highlight the contents of their portfolios and emphasize learning experiences that are important to their portfolio story.

Another aspect of the Portfolio Evening is the production of a classroom videotape of approximately 15 to 20 minutes in length. This video is intended to portray a day in the life of this particular group of students, including the learning that takes place in special subject areas of art, music, physical education, Spanish, and computers. In addition, many videotapes include recess activities and selected field trips. The project of organizing, scripting, and filming these videotapes is one that the children look forward to with great enthusiasm. Of greater value, however, is the fact that the production of this brief videotape provides an important metacognitive task for each group of children as they reflect on and develop descriptive language for each segment of the school day - as they understand it.

The dates of the Portfolio Evenings appear on the annual school calendar, and parents are also invited by letter. The event takes place over two nights, with half of the class and their parents attending each night for approximately 90 minutes. In the days just prior to the event, the children add final touches to their presentations and select an area of the classroom where they can hold a private conversation with their parents.

* Parent education is required. Another lesson we have learned is that we need to deliberately teach the parents about the value of **student portfolios** - what they mean to us, how we use them as a part of our curriculum, their immeasurable value to the children, and how they fit into an assessment program for our school. It's important to emphasize that portfolios do not replace more standardized measures. Standardized tests address the question "Which child knows more?" whereas portfolios address the question "What does this child know?" One question is not better than the other; posing both questions will provide a more comprehensive perspective of a child's work in school.

For the past three years a panel of eight faculty members representing grades K-5 have presented an informational program for our parents. At this evening meeting, the teachers speak briefly about their understanding of the value and purposes of portfolios for the particular age group they teach. From our years of conversations and direct experience, we are able to provide the scaffolding that enables parents to better understand their children's portfolio presentations and gain a more in-depth view of their children as learners.

These are some of the lessons we've learned about portfolios over the past 10 years. When the adoption of portfolios is first being considered, it's important to begin with a discussion of beliefs about children and learning and the connection between them. And then, of course, there's the question "What is our role in all of this?" More than any book we've read or speaker we've listened to, our own ongoing discussions about portfolios - what they can do and represent - provide direction for our own professional growth. It is important for us to continue to take the time we need to pursue this topic in depth, and we continue to share with one another any new activities and suggestions that might be helpful.

The involvement, the sense of connectedness, and the self-discovery that children demonstrate in compiling their portfolios have taught us that our work over these 10 years has to a large extent fulfilled many of the promises that we thought portfolios held. Of course, we know that there are many more lessons to be learned as we listen intently to the children during this process and learn more about the meaning and value they assign to the development of their portfolios.

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