

Using Portfolios for Tracking Student Writing

Allison Bill
(Jeonju University)

ABSTRACT

How do you keep track of your students' writing assignments? How do your students know how well they are improving? This presentation will demonstrate a simple portfolio system for submission, organization, and return of students' written work in an English composition class. It is also a way for students to be able to see their own progress, as well as check what their common errors are, and what to work on in their next assignment. Samples of current portfolios will be shared. Participants will take home samples of tracking and feedback sheets.

Keywords: Portfolios, writing, feedback

I. Introduction to Portfolios

Using portfolios for assessment is not new or innovative, but they are not commonly used in the Korean context. In an educational context more focused on test results, portfolios may seem too subjective. However, there are ways to use them objectively. I would like to suggest that portfolios have several advantages. They can be motivating for students. They are helpful for tracking student participation and completion of assignments. They are an effective way to provide feedback to students. And finally, portfolios are an alternative way of evaluating students, particularly in a subject which does not lend itself easily to tests, in this case writing.

1. Motivation

Portfolios can be quite motivating to students as they develop as writers. In a traditional classroom setting, students would usually get a grade for each written assignment. In a course which uses a portfolio-based approach, feedback can be focused more on the writers as individuals, rather than "how students' writing compares to an externally imposed standard" (Peterson and McClay, p.89). Students can see their writing improve in several ways over the course of the semester. Their assignments should become longer as they gain confidence in their writing ability. As well, the instructor's comments should become less and less necessary as students use the feedback from previous papers when writing new ones, and students should see fewer corrections on their assignments. This improvement can be satisfying, and should improve students' self-confidence.

2. Tracking student participation and completion

As with any course, there are always students who easily and successfully complete assignments, and students who don't. When managed properly, portfolios help both students and teachers to keep track of

whether assignments are being completed on time, or at all. In order to track this, the portfolios should be kept by the instructor, though regularly accessible by students. One part of tracking is to see which students are following the steps in the writing process (brainstorming, outline, draft, final paper). Those who are not can be reminded of the benefits of using the process-based approach to writing.

3. Feedback

One major goal of using portfolios is to help students improve as writers. Feedback is crucial in achieving that goal. It not only provides students with ideas on what to change, “the extensive amount of time that teachers devote[] to writing comments provide[s] evidence of how much they care[] about their students as writers” (Peterson and McClay, p.92). Types of feedback can range from how a paper is organized on the page, to whether there is a topic or concluding sentence, to how clearly the ideas are presented to the reader. The feedback is not only for the students, however. Instructors also get feedback on what students are and aren’t learning, and what needs to be reviewed in class (Martinez-Lirola and Rubio, p.94).

4. Evaluation

Writing assessment has gone through a series of changes in ELT. According to Kathleen Yancey (Graziano-King, p.75) there have been several waves: “objective tests (1950-1970), holistically scored essays (1970-1986), and portfolio and programmatic assessments (1986-present).” Graziano-King recommends a self-revised essay as a way of assessing students’ progress in writing. Another important point raised by Graziano-King is that whereas a timed, scored essay only looks at students’ abilities at that one point in time, “portfolios present multiple samples of a student’s work in a variety of rhetorical styles that reflect course curriculum” (p.77). Finally, one benefit of portfolio-based assessment is that students’ grades are decided based on a number of short assignments, instead of a mid-term and final paper. This “seems less arbitrary” (Song and August, p.50) and “fairer than a single test” (p.53). This gives students more of a chance to succeed in the course, as long as they continue to participate. These advantages in using portfolios can be seen by looking at how portfolios are used in one Korean university composition class.

II. A University Composition Class

My English Composition class is focused on process-based writing. Students learn to start the writing process by brainstorming ideas about their writing topic. They learn a few different types of brainstorming – listing, clustering, free writing. The next step is to make an outline, with a clear topic sentence and concluding sentence, and supporting sentences that will prove their controlling idea. Then the students handwrite a draft of their paper, and edit this draft in a different colour. They edit for format, grammar, and content, among other things. Finally, they type up the final version of the paper and print it out. When they submit the assignment, it includes four pages – brainstorming, outline, draft, and final paper. When I read the papers produced from this process-based approach, I focus on two areas – content and accuracy (of format and of grammar/vocabulary/spelling/clarity). I give feedback using a code (i.e. “sp” = spelling, “pu” = punctuation, “art” = article, etc.), as well as using a checklist for required format. Twice in the semester, the students choose one of their papers, and improve it by looking at the feedback I’ve given them.

<u>Revised paper</u>	
Name:	_____
Completed all steps:	brainstorming <input type="checkbox"/>
	outline <input type="checkbox"/> 1st draft <input type="checkbox"/> final copy <input type="checkbox"/>
3 parts:	topic sentence <input type="checkbox"/> supporting sentences <input type="checkbox"/> concluding sentence <input type="checkbox"/>
Used examples to illustrate:	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
Used instructor's feedback:	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
Comments:	

The other main type of assignment in the class is journal writing. Different from diaries, this is not a description of daily events. Instead, the students choose a topic from a list provided, or a topic of their own choice, and write a full page in a notebook. They should write two journal entries a week. The focus of this assignment is fluency, so the journals are not marked for accuracy. I provide (mostly positive) feedback on the ideas, and ask questions about the content. Thus, there is a balance in focus between accuracy and fluency, and between corrective and encouraging feedback.

III. How to Use Portfolios

In the first week of the semester, students write a self-introduction. This is about a page in length, hand-written in class time. When the portfolios are introduced to the students, this is the first entry on their tracking sheets.

<u>Tracking Sheet</u>				
	Date due	Date submitted	Title	Read by
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				

From then on, every time the students submit an assignment, they add an entry on their tracking sheet. This helps both them and me to know what has been submitted, whether it was submitted on time, and whether I have finished marking/giving feedback on each assignment.

At midterm exam time, the students write a self-reflection about their work in the class, and make goals for the second half of the semester.

English Writing – Mid-term Self-Evaluation – October 23, 2012.

Name: ↓

Please tell me how you are feeling about your writing. What skills have you learned this semester? What do you feel proud of? What are you discouraged or frustrated by? What do you still want to learn? ↓

During the final exam week, the students are given their portfolios, and reflect on their assignments, their progress, their effort in the class, etc. They have to give themselves a grade based on effort and achievement.

Composition Class Final Evaluation ↓

Congratulations on surviving this class! 😊 You should be proud of yourselves! ↓

Instructions: ↓

Through the writing process, I hope you have learned that we have never finished learning. We need to keep reflecting on our ideas and improving them. If you are willing to look honestly at yourself, you can keep improving. If you are willing to keep revisiting your papers, you can continue to improve them. Evaluating yourself actually helps you write better. So... ↓

↓
Grade yourself. Be honest. Don't tell me what grade you want, but instead tell me the grade you feel you earned. Make an argument. Back it up with proof (or evidence). ↓

↓
For this paper, I will consider how honest you are. Think back over the semester. How many times were you late? absent? Did you participate in class? How pleased are you with your papers? What progress do you see in your papers over the semester? What lessons did you learn? Any other reason? ↓

Finally, the students' portfolios are graded based on effort, completion, and quality of work. The portfolio constitutes the majority of students' grades on the composition course.

REFERENCES

- Graziano-King, Janine (2007). Assessing Student Writing: The Self-Revised Essay. *Journal of Basic Writing*. 26(2). 75-94.
- Martinez-Lirola, Maria and Fernando Rubio. (2009). Students' Beliefs about Portfolio Evaluation and its Influence on Their Learning Outcomes to Develop EFL in a Spanish Context. *International Journal of English Studies*. 9(1). 91-111.
- Peterson, Shelley Stagg and Jill McClay.(2010). Assessing and providing feedback for student writing in Canadian classrooms. *Assessing Writing*. 15,86-99.
- Song, Bailin and Bonne August. (2002). Using portfolios to assess the writing of ESL students: a powerful alternative? *Journal of Second Language Writing*. 11, 49-72.