From University to Classrooms: A Preservice Teachers' Writing Portfolio Program and its Impact on Instruction in Teaching Strategies for Writing Portfolios in the Classroom

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This article reports findings from an action research project investigating the impact creating writing portfolios has on preservice teachers' understanding of writing portfolio assessment. Participants included 92 preservice teachers enrolled across four different sections of an introductory literacy class. Data sources included: preservice teacher writing portfolios and reflective statements on portfolios; and a Likert style survey designed to collect item response and personal comment data on preservice teacher growth and development with writing portfolio assessment. Data-analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns of student responses in reflective statements on writing portfolios and in-survey questions and comments. Findings indicate that active engagement with writing portfolios significantly and positively influence preservice teachers' competence in and confidence with writing portfolio assessment. Implications are identified and curious issues and lingering questions are discussed.

THIS ARTICLE REPORTS on findings from a *teacher as researcher* (see Short, et.al., 1996; Patterson, Santa, Short, & Smith, 1993; Patterson, Stansell, & Lee, 1990) project that investigated the impact of participating in writing portfolios on preservice teacher understanding of writing portfolio assessment. It asked two questions:

1. What can we learn about the impact creating writing portfolios has on preservice teacher understanding of writing portfolio assessment?
2. How can we use findings to develop more informed instruction in literacy courses in our elementary teacher education program?

This is the first project in a line of planned *action research* (Power & Hubbard, 1999; Hubbard & Power, 1993) focusing on preservice teacher learning. This research recognizes that all teachers (preservice teachers, teacher educators, and elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers) are learners. As Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin (1995, p. 598) state:

Teachers learn by doing, reading, and reflecting; by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see. This kind of learning enables teachers to make the leap from theory to accomplished practice.

First, we provide background for the project. Then, we situate this project within a body of research investigating the relationship between writing portfolios and teacher education. Next, we describe method, identifying participants, data sources, and data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, we discuss findings and describe curious issues and lingering questions.

Background

We are teacher educators who teach different sections of the same undergraduate course: EDC 329 - Teaching Reading and Language Arts

in the Elementary School. This is the first literacy course preservice teachers take in the elementary teacher education program. This course introduces theoretical background, instructional strategies, and assessment procedures surrounding the six areas of the English Language Arts (NCTE, 1996):

- listening
- speaking
- reading
- writing
- viewing
- visually representing

It also provides experiences that address the New Teacher Standards in the Commonwealth of Kentucky (Kentucky Professional Standards Board, 1993):

- designs and plans instruction
- creates and maintains an effective learning environment
- implements and manages instruction
- assesses and communicates learning results
- reflects and evaluates teaching and learning
- collaborates with colleagues, parents, and others
- engages in professional development
- demonstrates knowledge of content
- uses technology

In addition, this course highlights important concepts and issues related to literacy development. Major concepts include social constructivist learning theory, the writing process, and reader response theory. Major issues involve the role of phonics in reading instruction, basal versus literature-based reading programs, and authentic and alternative (to standardized testing) reading comprehension assessment. While these concepts and issues are important, writing portfolio assessment receives considerable attention in large part because it is a major component of CATS (Commonwealth Accountability Test System), the statewide high-stakes assessment system.

Writing Portfolio Assessment

In 1998, House Bill 53 was passed by the Kentucky State Legislature. This bill called for a redesign of KIRIS (Kentucky Information and Retrieval Information System), the testing and accountability system first implemented in 1990. As a result, CATS (Commonwealth Accountability Testing System) was developed (see *Kentucky Teacher*, 2000). CATS is designed to improve teaching and learning in schools (K-12) and includes a variety of assessments:

- national basic skills tests (CTBS) in reading, mathematics, and language arts
- Kentucky Core Content Tests - multiple choice and open response questions in six subjects
- non-academic indicators of dropout, retention, attendance and successful transition to adult life
- writing portfolios and writing tests
- alternate portfolios for students with moderate to severe disabilities
- accountability - how the pieces "count" in a formula to promote school improvement

Writing portfolio assessment is a major component of CATS. Students in grades 4, 7, and 11 are required to create a writing portfolio that includes several samples of writing:

1. a personal narrative
2. a poem
3. a literary piece
4. a transactive piece
5. an on-demand writing sample
6. a letter to a reviewer

All student portfolios are assessed based on a scoring rubric and given a score ranging from 0-4:

0. Non-performance
1. Novice

2. Apprentice
3. Proficient
4. Distinguished

A major goal of the elementary teacher education program is to teach preservice students about writing portfolio assessment, especially how to teach the kinds of writing that are included in student portfolios.

Writing Portfolio Assessment and Teacher Education

We regard the act of teaching as an art of "thoughtfulness" (Barell, 1995). Teaching is being systematically thoughtful about how to support our own learning, as well as the learning of others (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1997; Fisher, 1995). Much research has been conducted on writing portfolios as a tool to support thoughtfulness in learning and in learning to teach (Campbell, Cignetti, Melenyzer, Nettles & Wyman, 2001; Bullock & Hawk, 2001; Zeichner, 1999; Padak & Rasinski, 1992). Writing portfolios, or "smart portfolios" (Wilcox, 1996, p. 173), act as reflective frameworks that help preservice teachers understand their own belief structure about teaching and learning, reflect on their own ways of knowing, and experience a variety of reading, writing, and sharing strategies (Masciale, 1996). This type of learning helps preservice teachers develop a thoughtful attitude before they ever enter the classroom (Wilcox, 1996; Koegler, 2000). It also helps teacher-educators in that writing portfolios represents a window through which to see preservice teachers' growth and development over time (Hoover, 1994). This project investigates the impact that creating writing portfolios has on preservice teacher understanding of writing portfolio assessment.

Method

Participants

A total of 92 undergraduate students participated in this project. All were enrolled in one of four different sections of EDC 329. These sections occurred over a three successive semester period of time. Of these 92, a total of 26 students were enrolled in a section in semester one. All students in this section completed a writing portfolio as part of course

requirements. A total of 15 students were enrolled in a section in semester two. All students in these sections completed a writing portfolio. Therefore, over a three semester period, 77 students in three different sections were assigned writing portfolios and 15 students in another section were not assigned writing portfolios.

Data Sources

We collected data from two major sources:

1. contents in the writing portfolios
2. responses and comments from the student survey

For those completing writing portfolios, students created a portfolio consisting of writing samples based on in-class experiences with the writing process (prewriting, drafting, author's chair, revising, editing, and publishing), and included a narrative, poem, persuasive essay, short story, and letter to the reviewer. The portfolio also included a 2-3 page reflective paper in which students described their personal growth with writing portfolio assessment over time. In addition, a four item survey with comment section was administered at the end of the course. This survey included Likert-style items designed to collect comment data on the impact of writing portfolio assessment on preservice teacher growth and development across four categories:

- awareness of requirements
- understanding of processes
- knowledge of strategies
- need for more information

Data Collection

Those students (n=77) assigned a writing portfolio as part of course requirements submitted their individual portfolio at the end of the semester for instructor review and course credit. In addition, as part of culminating activities at the end of the course, students completed the survey. Students (n=15) who were not assigned a writing portfolio as part

of course requirements completed the same survey, but did so during the semester after they had completed EDC 329.

Data Analysis

We grounded data-analysis in principles of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and driven by methodology of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978). After collecting, coding, categorizing, and reflecting on the data, we met regularly to share, discuss, and reach consensus about our evolving understandings of the data. We focused on identifying recurring patterns of student responses in reflective comments, as well as patterns of student responses across survey questions and survey comments. The purpose of this analysis was to hear a pattern of group voices. These patterns indicated a general feeling by students as to the perceived value of participating in writing portfolio assessment. Similarly, the purpose of survey comments was to hear individual voices. These voices indicated individual student's personal problems and pleasures of creating their own writing portfolio, and the extent to which the whole experience prepared them to help elementary students create a similar kind of portfolio.

Findings

In this section we present findings from responses to survey questions provided by all participants in this study. In addition, we present findings from survey comments provided by participants who were assigned and completed a writing portfolio.

Survey Questions

Responses were designed in Likert style with four choices: (Strongly Agree (SA); Agree (A); Disagree (D); Strongly Disagree (SD)). Table 1 summarizes responses from survey questions across semesters 1 and 3 completed writing portfolios (77 students). We averaged the percentages for section 1, 3, and 4.

Survey Comments

In addition to responding to four survey questions, students who completed a writing portfolio provided survey comments. We included a "survey comment" prompt on the survey question form. Comments took the form of written reflections on the completion of a writing portfolio over the course of a semester. We identified a total of seven categories from survey comments. These categories represent recurring patterns in the survey comment data and include samples of student written reflections.

1. Participating in writing portfolios helps preservice teachers grow as writers themselves:

> From writing a narrative, I felt like I actually grew as a writer. I was able to use more descriptive language and express feelings simply because what I was writing about was so significant to me and affected me so much. If I had chosen a topic that did not affect me as much as this did, then I do not think that I could have written such a meaningful piece.

2. Participating in writing portfolios helps preservice teachers understand what their prospective students will experience when writing portfolios:

> As a prospective teacher, I will use the valuable tools I gained when writing my own portfolio to teach the writing process in my classroom. Because I, too, need a great deal of practicing to write, I feel I can relate to the frustrations a student may encounter when creating his/her piece.

3. Participating in writing portfolios helps preservice teachers look at writing from a different perspective:

> It will be great to share my work with my students, not to mention the help it gave me in understanding the thought processes a person goes through in writing each of these pieces. In previous experiences I have written each of these

types of pieces in the past; however, writing these types of pieces while thinking about teaching them to children sheds a whole new light on the subject.

4. Participating in writing portfolios helps preservice teachers learn strategies that would help their students through the portfolio process:

> Actually having an example of my own writing portfolio pieces will allow me to relate more to students. Whenever they come across a problem that they may be experiencing, I will be able to sympathize with them and understand where they are coming from. I can say, hey, I had the same problems when I was writing and here is what I did to help me get through it.

5. Participating in writing portfolios helps preservice teachers understand writing process issues:

> Creating my own personal portfolio was the best way for me to understand what goes into the process of creating a portfolio. It is important for me to understand the writing process because I will be involved in the process when I become a teacher. Whether I am a fourth grade teacher who actually has to put together portfolios for review or a first grade teacher who has to begin introducing the writing process to students, I will still be a part of the portfolio process.

6. Participating in writing portfolios helps preservice teachers address issues of evaluation and grading portfolio pieces:

> When we graded the portfolio pieces in class that really helped me become familiar with the fourth grade KERA requirements and guidelines. This also prepared me for grading personal narratives in my placement. I had not ever experienced grading these kinds of writings until now. I now know why teachers get so frustrated by grading these.

7. Participating in writing portfolios is not necessarily helpful:

>   We learned what types of writing the children are to do.
> We also learned exactly what these styles of writing looked
> like. However, I don't feel we actually looked at enough
> children's pieces from these writing styles. With a few
> exceptions, we just looked at college-aged students' work. I
> feel that I already can write these styles very well. I just don't
> know if I can teach them.

Table 1

Survey Question Responses in Percentiles for Students Assigned &
Completing Writing Portfolios

Questions	SA	A	D	SD	NR
1. I understand the requirements for 4th grade writing portfolios	47.5	46.5	6	0	0
2. Doing a writing portfolio helped me understand the portfolio process	48.5	28	17.5	4	0
3. I know several instructional strategies to help students generate portfolio pieces	43	26	28	2	4
4. I need follow-up information on writing portfolios as I continue through the program	36	42.5	12.5	7	4

n= 77
Semester 1 & 3
Sections 1, 3 & 4

Table 2

Survey Question Responses in Percentiles for Students Not Assigned
Writing Portfolios

Questions	SA	A	D	SD	NR
1. I understand the requirements for 4th grade writing portfolios	27	33	40	0	0
2. Doing a writing portfolio helped me understand the portfolio process	0	13	0	27	60
3. I know several instructional strategies to help students generate portfolio pieces	27	40	19	7	7
4. I need follow-up information on writing portfolios as I continue through the program	46	26	7	14	7

n= 15
Semester 2
Section 2

Discussion

As noted earlier, the writing portfolio is an integral part of CATS
and teachers are expected to help students create them. The writing
portfolio is an important experience for students in the EDC 329 course
because it is a tool to support theoretically sound reading and writing
instruction. A major requirement of this course is for students to create a
writing portfolio, and through the process, come to understand
requirements for 4th grade writing portfolios, understand the portfolio
process, and know instructional strategies to help students generate
portfolio writing samples.

For the purpose of this analysis we collapsed the four Likert style items with four choices of responses for each item (Strongly Agree; Agree; Disagree; Strongly Disagree) into two major categories: Level of Agreement (Strongly Agree; Agree) and Level of Disagreement (Disagree; Strongly Disagree). We examined each question to determine if a majority of student responses indicated a level of agreement or disagreement on that item (or somewhere in between). A level of agreement indicated that a majority of students responded with a Strongly Agree or Agree on an item. A level of disagreement indicated that a majority of students responded with Disagree or Strongly Disagree.

The following is an analysis and discussion of survey questions across all three semesters.

On question 1 an overwhelming majority of students who completed a writing portfolio indicated a high level of agreement in understanding requirements for 4th grade writing portfolios. A pattern of survey comments supports this agreement: "When we graded the portfolio pieces in class that really helped me become familiar with the fourth grade KERA requirements and guidelines." This understanding represents an "I now know" attitude. That is, students now know and are more comfortable with fundamental requirements of writing portfolios. Similarly, a majority of students who did not complete a writing portfolio indicated a level of agreement in understanding requirements as well. However, more students expressed disagreement than those who completed a writing portfolio.

On question 2 an overwhelming majority of students who completed a writing portfolio indicated a level of agreement that writing a portfolio helped them understand the portfolio process. Three patterns of survey comments support this agreement:

- as teachers of writing ("As a prospective teacher, I will use the valuable tools I gained when writing my own portfolio to teach the writing process in my classroom.")

- as writers themselves of portfolio pieces ("It will be great to share my work with my students, not to mention the help it gave me in understanding the thought processes a person goes through in writing each of these pieces)
- as writing process teachers ("It is important for me to understand the writing process because I will be involved in the process when I become a teacher.")

This understanding represents not only an "I now know" but also an "I now can" attitude. That is, students now know and are more comfortable with writing processes in helping others create portfolio pieces, but also can use these processes to write their own. Conversely, a majority of students who did not complete a writing portfolio indicated a level of disagreement in the same assertion. That is, these students did not feel writing a portfolio helped them understand the portfolio process.

On question 3 students who completed a writing portfolio, in general, indicated a level of agreement that they know instructional strategies to help students generate portfolio pieces. One pattern of survey comments supports this agreement: "Whenever they come across a problem...I can say, hey, I had the same problems when I was writing and here is what I did to help me get through it." This knowledge of strategies represents an "I now can use" attitude. That is, students now know and are more confident with a variety of instructional strategies to help others generate portfolio pieces.

Interestingly, on question 3 we expected that students who were assigned and who completed a writing portfolio as a course requirement would indicate a high level of agreement (strongly agree & agree) about knowing instructional strategies to help students generate portfolio pieces. Conversely, we expected that students *not* assigned a writing portfolio as a course requirement would indicate a high level of disagreement (strongly disagree & disagree) about knowing instructional strategies to help students generate portfolio pieces. Student responses to Question 3 illustrate an anomaly. On the one hand, as Table 1 illustrates, only 47.5 percent of students assigned a writing portfolio indicated knowing instructional strategies to help students generate portfolio

pieces. On the other hand, as Table 2 illustrates, 27 percent of students who were not assigned a writing portfolio indicated knowledge of instructional strategies to help students generate portfolio pieces. In the former case we know students experienced instructional strategies to help themselves complete a writing portfolio, but wonder if they made explicit connections to how they could use these same strategies to help others (elementary school students) complete a writing portfolio. Similarly, we wonder if students who did not complete a writing portfolio (but who are introduced to reading and writing portfolio requirements) made connections between instructional strategies learned in class and ways to help students with different portfolio requirements. This anomaly and explanation requires further inquiry.

On question 4 students who completed a writing portfolio indicated a level of agreement that they need follow-up information on writing portfolios. Students did not identify what specific help they most needed. Similarly, students who did not complete a writing portfolio indicated a level of agreement that they had a need for follow-up information, as well. They, too, did not identify what specific help they most needed.

Curious Issues & Lingering Questions

One curious issue deals with the extent to which students remain positive and knowledgeable about the portfolio experience over time. These data indicate that students are overwhelmingly positive about the writing portfolio experience. Specifically, they identify strategies learned *while enrolled in EDC 329* as highly beneficial, yet they express less positive views on follow-up and even disagree that they know many instructional strategies to support student writing. We find this curious. What happens between the positive attitudes that occur while "doing" portfolios and the negative attitudes that develop one semester removed from the "doing"? How can we prevent this slippage?

Another curious issue is that grade level placement does not appear to impact student knowledge or confidence with writing portfolios. Originally, we suspected that grade placement would be a significant factor. For example, because portfolio evaluation occurs across the Commonwealth of Kentucky in 4th grade (as well as in 8th and 11th), we

suspected that students placed in this grade would see and learn significantly more about the process and product of portfolio development than in other grades. However, based on informal post-placement classroom conversations with students, this hypothesis requires further testing. Specifically, in many cases students report that they do not see teachers in their placement (K-4) implementing the writing process or theoretically sound writing practices. Thus, we question whether preservice teachers are given opportunities to see sound instructional practice, much less given the opportunity to apply what they have learned, about writing portfolios in field experience. Consequently, we are asking: Is there a diminished return on such program requirements?

At this time we plan to continue to collect follow-up data with these groups through student teaching. We continue to ask: What do we do if confidence and attitude about writing portfolios wane over time? Will we see other areas showing a strong need, since so much time in our EDC 329 course is spent on writing? We look forward to these inquiries.

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