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# **What Teachers Have Been Telling Us About Literacy Portfolios**

**Jerry L. Johns  
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An increasing number of educators have begun to use portfolios to chronicle the literacy development of students within their classrooms. Such alternative assessment may more closely reflect current research in the field of reading because it serves as a tool for both students and teachers to document and monitor learning over time (Bintz and Harste, 1991). Teachers, instead of developing test wiseness for standardized tests, use portfolios to gather data that mirrors the reading/writing curriculum and chronicles individual student development (Johns and VanLeirsburg, 1991b; Willis, 1992). Though unanimous agreement as to what data should comprise a portfolio does not exist, a consistent theme is apparent in the definitions of a literacy portfolio: a portfolio is an alternate approach to assessment using a collection of information about performance to describe growth in literacy learning (van Kraayenoord and Paris, 1992). As a collection of data reflecting literacy growth, portfolios must represent shared communication between teacher and student about individual goals and progress. Documentation of growth in reading and writing ability serve as evidence and information that is both useful and specific when conferencing with parents, reporting student progress, and assessing curriculum effectiveness.

Portfolios as an alternate form of assessment may be applied at the classroom, school or district level with varying degrees of interest and investment. Four years ago, Crow Island School in Winnetka began a project which grew out of dissatisfaction and frustration with traditional, standardized tests. The Winnetka Illinois Public Schools augmented their reporting with student portfolios and found a powerful and positive tool expressing the fundamental values of the school and complex issues of children and their learning (Hiebert, 1992). Further, the Winnetka project reflects a priority on the developmental aspects of learning for the individual child and a high regard for teachers as professionals. Using portfolios as an alternate form of assessment requires the empowerment of classroom teachers to evaluate individual student growth and to communicate this valuable information to parents and school personnel. Under such circumstances, the opinions of teachers as professionals are essential. Do teachers believe literacy portfolios should be used to evaluate individual student progress? How widespread is the actual use of portfolios? What practical problems do teachers report with the use of portfolios? Specifically, which pieces of documentation do many teachers choose to include in literacy portfolios? The above questions guided the following investigation.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, the information gained served to extend two previous studies by Johns and VanLeirsburg (1991a; 1991c) surveying educators about their use of and reaction to classroom literacy portfolios. Second, additional information was collected from educators regarding their perceptions about the use of portfolios to assess literacy development. The importance of portfolios in literacy assessment has grown in recent years. Little research, however, has been accomplished

relative to the reactions professionals may have toward using literacy portfolios as assessment devices.

## Method

**Subjects.** A total of 140 subjects enrolled in a week-long literacy workshop sponsored by a midwestern reading council participated in this study: 68 subjects (49 percent of the total group) reported experience with the actual use of literacy portfolios and 72 subjects (52 percent of the total group) had no previous experience with portfolios. Nearly half of the subjects reported the decision to use portfolios was theirs alone and the remaining half were required by their school and district to use literacy portfolios. Information about portfolios was not shared with this group of educators prior to the administration of the questionnaire.

The workshop participants came from various school districts in northern Illinois. Nearly 60 percent of the group were elementary school teachers. Of these elementary teachers, 48 (or 59 percent of this group) had previous portfolio experience and 34 (or 42 percent of this group) reported no experience with portfolios. Almost 14 percent of the workshop participants taught in grades 7 through 12. Only four secondary teachers, or 21 percent of this group reported experience with portfolios. About 11 percent of the workshop participants were reading teachers; half of the reading teachers had experience with portfolios and half had no previous portfolio experience. The remainder of the total group of subjects, about 16 percent, was composed of administrators and ESL teachers. Approximately one-third of this group reported experience with portfolios.

The total group of subjects were fairly evenly divided within their range of teaching experience: one quarter of the subjects had less than 5 years, one quarter had 6 to 10

years, one quarter had 11 to 15 years, and one quarter had 16 or more years of experience. Over half of the subjects reported completion of a master's degree or above. About 5 percent had achieved a K-12 reading specialist certificate. The remainder of the subjects, about 40 percent, had completed a bachelor's degree. Evidence of coursework in reading was reported by respondents participating in the literacy workshop. About one-third had completed 4 to 12 hours in reading and one-third had 13 to 22 hours. Nearly 15 percent had completed 22 to 30 hours in reading courses and nearly 11 percent reported more than 30 hours. Only about 6 percent of the respondents had completed 3 hours or less in reading coursework.

**Questionnaire.** The 1992 questionnaire administered to workshop participants was modified from both the 1990 and 1991 studies (Johns and VanLeirsburg, 1991a; 1991c). Questions dealing with the rationale and conceptual base for portfolios were deleted. Over 90 percent of both the 1990 and 1991 respondents indicated agreement with four basic premises of portfolio use in the classroom: that they are based on authenticity, are an on-going process, evidence multidimensional collection of artifacts, and provide collaboration between teachers and students (Valencia, 1990). Questions regarding artifacts that should be included in a literacy portfolio were also excluded. Instead, an open-ended question was directed to the subjects who reported experience with literacy portfolios. The experienced subjects were requested to list the sources they actually included in their portfolios.

The revised questionnaire included a new section of questions relating specifically to portfolio use in the assessment of literacy. The total number of items on the revised survey was 40, including the open-ended question

requesting subjects with experience to list specific sources of inclusion for literacy portfolios.

## Findings

**Assessment.** The 140 subjects were asked to rate their reactions toward the use of portfolios to assess the literacy development of students within a classroom on a five-point scale ranging from *always*, *sometimes*, *seldom*, *never*, to *uncertain*. Over 90 percent of the respondents believed that portfolios should be used to assess literacy for students in primary grades, for students in intermediate grades, and for students in middle school. Nearly equal percentages of subjects with experience and subjects without experience answered *always*, or *sometimes* to these questions. Over 80 percent of the respondents believed that portfolios should be used to assess literacy for high school students; 6 percent answered *seldom* or *never* and 10 percent were *uncertain*.

About 96 percent of the respondents thought that portfolios should *always* or *sometimes* be used to assess students' writing. Nearly 75 percent agreed that portfolios should be used to assess students' spelling with slightly greater percentages reported from the group which had experience with portfolios. Just over 87 percent of the subjects thought that students' reading should be assessed with literacy portfolios. Again, slightly higher percentages were reported by those subjects who had portfolio experience. Over 90 percent of the respondents believed that portfolios should be used to assess students for language arts in general with slightly higher percentages from the group experienced in portfolio use.

Similar data were obtained for both the subjects with and without portfolio experience relating to the use of

portfolios in assigning grades. Slightly over 15 percent of the respondents believed that portfolios should always be used as a basis for grades, but about 60 percent reported that portfolios should sometimes be used as a basis for grades. Over 17 percent thought they should seldom or never be used as a basis for grades and about 6 percent were uncertain. Both the experienced and non-experienced groups reported similar opinions about the use of portfolios along with tests. About 67 percent of the group thought portfolios should be used in conjunction with standardized tests and 80 percent felt that they should be used in conjunction with classroom tests. Over 90 percent of respondents felt that literacy portfolios should be used to help with parent conferences, to collect work samples to pass on to next year's teacher, and to aid in instructional decision making. Surprisingly, over 85 percent of those answering the questionnaire believed that literacy portfolios should be used both to aid in placement for special services such as Chapter 1, and to aid in placement for alternative educational services such as special education services. Only 8 percent of the group responded uncertain to these two issues. Table 1 summarizes the data relative to portfolio use for assessment.

**Practical problems.** The second major area surveyed related to practical problems with the use of portfolios. Professionals were asked to rank a list of potential problems on a five-point scale ranging from *a very serious concern* to *no concern*. The greatest concern, reported by over 70 percent of the total group, was using portfolios as the sole means for student evaluation. Additionally, about half of the total group expressed very serious or serious concern with planning portfolios, developing and completing checklists used in portfolios and replacing standardized reading or achievement tests with portfolios.

**Table 1**  
***Opinions of Professionals: Portfolios for Assessment***

Portfolios for Assessment	Percent of Responses					OM
	AL	SO	SE	NE	UN	
for students in K-3						
portfolio (N=68)	54	41	0	2	3	
non-portfolio (N=72)	43	46	3	0	8	
for students in 4-6						
portfolio	43	56	0	0	2	
non-portfolio	38	56	0	0	7	
for students in middle school						
portfolio	38	59	0	0	3	
non-portfolio	28	60	4	0	7	1
for students in high school						
portfolio	32	57	2	2	6	2
non-portfolio	31	44	8	1	14	1
for students' writing						
portfolio	63	32	3	0	0	2
non-portfolio	60	38	0	0	3	
for students' spelling						
portfolio	27	50	13	4	6	
non-portfolio	18	49	15	4	13	1
for students' reading						
portfolio	31	63	4	0	2	
non-portfolio	26	54	7	0	11	1
for language arts						
portfolio	43	54	0	0	3	
non-portfolio	35	51	4	1	7	1
as a basis for grades						
portfolio	18	69	4	7	2	
non-portfolio	13	54	10	13	11	
with standardized tests						
portfolio	35	37	7	12	9	
non-portfolio	26	38	11	10	14	1
with classroom tests						
portfolio	49	37	6	6	3	
non-portfolio	40	36	8	3	11	1
with parent conferences						
portfolio	78	21	0	0	2	
non-portfolio	76	21	0	0	3	
to collect work samples						
portfolio	66	28	2	2	3	
non-portfolio	67	29	1	1	1	
in instructional decision making						
portfolio	60	37	3	0	0	
non-portfolio	56	36	3	0	6	
in placement for special services						
portfolio	53	38	3	2	4	
non-portfolio	43	39	6	0	11	1
in placement for alternative education						
portfolio	52	37	3	3	6	
non-portfolio	42	40	7	1	10	

Percentages may total 99 to 101 due to rounding.

AL=Always NE=Never SE=Seldom SO=Sometimes UN=Uncertain OM=Omitted response



Little or no concern was recorded by 40 to 50 percent of the group for these possible practical problems: where to keep portfolios, talking with students about portfolio contents, using portfolios in parent-teacher conferences, using portfolios as one means to evaluate student progress, and costs associated with portfolios. It is important to note that lack of concern about these potential problems was reported by both experienced and non-experienced groups.

Table 2 organizes the responses of both groups, those with portfolio experience and those who responded that they had no experience using portfolios.

**Items included in portfolios.** Those respondents actually using portfolios, about 49 percent of the total group, were asked to write down items specifically included in their classroom portfolios. Only two-thirds of those involved with portfolios made a list of items for inclusion. A wide variety of artifacts were listed. Table 3 lists the most frequent choices for inclusion in literacy portfolios by workshop respondents who actually use portfolios.

In addition to listing writing samples, those who had experience with portfolios listed other types of writing: process writing, literacy critiques, structured essays, original poetry, and narrative/expository pieces. Along with informal evaluations and observations, information for next year's teacher, goals, running records and reading checklists were listed as included in portfolios. Other tests that were included in portfolios besides the informal reading inventory and standardized tests were classroom tests, skills tests and strategy assessments. Specific student assignments, as well as the broader term *work samples* were also listed. Some of the more narrowly defined work included retellings, book reports and semantic maps.

**Table 2**  
**Possible Practical Problems With Portfolios**

Possible Practical Problems	VS	SC	Percent of Responses		NC	O
			S	VL		
planning portfolios						
portfolio (N=68)	18	37	35	6	4	
non-portfolio (N=72)	21	33	38	7	1	
organizing portfolios						
portfolio	16	27	44	10	3	
non-portfolio	18	26	43	11	1	
managing the contents						
portfolio	16	32	38	9	4	
non-portfolio	24	32	32	11	1	
developing checklists						
portfolio	12	38	32	16	2	
non-portfolio	8	42	40	6	4	
where to keep portfolios						
portfolio	10	3	38	38	10	
non-portfolio	13	15	29	28	15	
providing access to students						
portfolio	10	15	38	27	10	
non-portfolio	10	24	36	25	6	
discussing contents with students						
portfolio	24	18	19	25	15	
non-portfolio	13	13	31	29	15	
preparing notes/checklists						
portfolio	18	34	29	13	6	
non-portfolio	8	32	46	10	4	
school-wide						
portfolio	10	29	31	15	15	
non-portfolio	17	22	29	21	10	1
entire school system use						
portfolio	18	21	29	19	13	
non-portfolio	14	26	28	21	10	1
in parent-teacher conferences						
portfolio	15	13	13	35	22	2
non-portfolio	10	10	26	35	20	
as sole means for evaluation						
portfolio	41	25	28	3	3	
non-portfolio	42	36	17	4	1	
as one means of evaluation						
portfolio	16	9	12	35	28	
non-portfolio	6	13	29	29	24	
portfolios replace standardized tests						
portfolio	21	32	31	7	9	
non-portfolio	24	25	29	18	4	
costs associated with portfolios						
portfolio	9	7	31	32	21	
non-portfolio	8	18	38	18	18	

Percentages may total 99 to 101 due to rounding.

VS=Very serious concern, S=Some concern, NC=Not certain, SC=Serious concern, VL=Very little concern, O=Omitted response

## Discussion and conclusions

Our current (1992) survey shows a growing use of portfolios to assess literacy development. Nearly half of the professionals surveyed at the workshop reported that they actually use portfolios in their classrooms. In our 1991 study, only a quarter of the group could make that same claim. This information was not available for the 1990 study.

Specific questions relating to the use of portfolios in assessment were incorporated into the current study. Results show that professionals, both with or without portfolio experience, agree overwhelmingly that portfolios should be used for instructional decision making across grade levels for language arts. However, around 20 percent of the respondents would seldom or never use portfolios in conjunction with standardized tests or as a basis for grades.

Practical problems related to the use of portfolios appear to be diminishing as more professionals put them into actual classroom use. Planning and managing the contents of portfolios are still major problems with nearly half of the respondents in each of the three studies. Our 1992 survey resulted in a very major concern: using portfolios as a sole means for evaluation. Over 70 percent of the current group identified that assessment issue as a serious or very serious concern. Less than half of the respondents in our previous survey shared that reaction. Of diminishing concern over the past three years are cost, talking with students about contents, and using portfolios in parent-teacher conferences. Artifacts for inclusion in portfolios show a common trend across all three studies from 1990 to 1992. By far the most common choice was student writing samples. Informal observations and evaluations done by the teacher, a list of books read by the student, work samples, and informal

reading inventories also continued across the three studies to rank as main choices for inclusion.

**Table 3**  
*Items Included In Literacy Portfolios*

<u>Item</u>	<u>Times Listed</u> (N=46)
writing samples	30
informal observations/evaluations	13
list of books read	8
invented spelling checklist	8
audio tapes	7
interest/attitude survey	7
journal writing	7
work samples	6
end of unit reading tests	6
informal reading inventory	5
standardized tests	5

However, in our most recent survey, professionals do not rank student input to the portfolio as an important item. Less than 5 percent of those who were experienced with portfolios listed student self evaluations for inclusion. In both previous studies, student self-evaluations were chosen for inclusion by over 70 percent of professionals surveyed. The difference in the data could, in part, be explained by our format. In the previous studies, respondents reacted to a formulated list of possible items to include in portfolios. In the 1992 survey, respondents were asked instead to list items they actually included in literacy portfolios. The survey question was an open-ended one. That particular question type may have been more difficult and time-consuming for the respondents.

In summary, a growing number of professionals are actually using portfolios. The educators we surveyed agreed that portfolios should be used for assessment purposes in the language arts, including reading and writing,

from elementary through high school. They also believed that the portfolios should be used to provide information to help place individual students in special programs. The professionals surveyed responded that managing and planning may be potential practical problems, a trend which has increased over three years of our survey. The most frequently chosen item for inclusion in literacy portfolios has been writing samples of students, followed by informal observations and a list of books read.

Professionals are becoming more aware of and express positive opinions toward the use of portfolios. Perhaps continuous evaluation that is linked to instruction presents an appealing choice, one that is logical and effective for the improvement of instruction. Wolf, LeMahiue, and Eresh (1992) explain the national push to improve schools and instruction, *America 2000*, as setting high standards and using new and more probing assessments to hold districts, teachers, and students accountable. The many projects involved in making educational change have two things in common: to articulate clear, high standards for what students should know and a delivery system common to all states allowing all students to have a fair chance of achieving these standards. The suggestion that assessment be increasingly performance-based in order to affect student or system performance has accompanied the plan, urging that standards and assessment come together in a voluntary national system.

The challenges of such sweeping reform are enormous and may not be ideal or logical. Yet, the mention of performance-based assessment, like the literacy portfolio, is encouraging. Many educators and scholars (e.g., Wolf et al., 1992) encourage new assessments that will allow us to ensure that a wide range of students use their minds well,

explaining that “the design and implementation of alternative modes of assessment will entail nothing less than a wholesale transition from what we call a testing culture to an assessment culture” (Hiebert, 1992).

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