

## Student Portfolios: Classroom Uses

Adapted from *Consumer Guide*, November 1993, Number 8 produced by the Office of Research, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) of the U.S. Department of Education.

### What is a Student Portfolio?

Portfolios are collections of student work representing a selection of performance. Portfolios in classrooms today are derived from the visual and performing arts tradition in which portfolios serve to showcase artists' accomplishments and personally favored works. A portfolio may be a folder containing a student's best pieces and the student's evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the pieces. It may also contain one or more works-in-progress, sometimes with written commentary explaining and illustrating the creation of a product evolving through various stages of conception, development, and revision.

More teachers have recently begun using portfolios in all curricular areas. Portfolios are useful as a support to the new instructional approaches that emphasize the student's role in constructing understanding and the teacher's role in promoting understanding. For example, portfolios can illustrate the range of assignments, goals, and audiences for which a student produced a work of art. In addition, portfolios can be a record of the activities undertaken over time in the development of a student art work. They can also be used to support cooperative teaming by offering an opportunity for students to share and comment on each other's work.

Recent changes in education policy, which emphasize greater teacher involvement in designing curriculum and assessing students, have also been an impetus to increased portfolio use. Portfolios are valued as an assessment tool because, as representations of classroom-based performance, they can be fully integrated into the curriculum. And unlike separate tests, they supplement rather than take time away from instruction. Moreover, many teachers, educators, and researchers believe that portfolio assessments are more effective than "old-style" tests for measuring skills and knowledge, or letter-grades on individual pieces of art work.

### Why Try Portfolios?

Students have been stuffing assignments in notebooks and folders for years, so what's new and exciting about portfolios? Portfolios capitalize on students' natural tendency to save work, and they become an effective way to get students to take a second look and think about how they could improve future work. As any teacher or student can confirm, this method is a clear departure from the old create, hand-in, and forget mentality, where first drafts were considered final products.

### How Do Portfolios Work?

Although there is no single correct way to develop portfolio programs, in all of them students are expected to collect, select, and reflect. Early in the school year, students should be asked to consider: What would I like to share with my parents or a friend? What makes a particular piece of art work a good product? What are the stages in the development of a particular art expression? In building a portfolio of selected pieces and explaining the basis for their choices, students generate criteria for good art work, with teacher and peer input. Discussion can help students develop clear guidelines and select examples to get started on their portfolio project. These discussions need to be well guided and structured. The earlier in the term the discussions begin, the better.

Portfolios in classrooms today are a highly flexible instructional and assessment tool, adaptable to diverse curricula, student age/grade levels, and administrative context.

The content in portfolios is built from class assignments and as such corresponds to the local classroom curriculum. Often portfolio programs are initiated by teachers, as they know their classroom curriculum best.

The *age/grade level of students* may determine how portfolios are developed and used. For example, older students are more likely to be able to help determine the criteria by which work is selected, perhaps through brainstorming sessions with the teacher and other students. Younger students may need more directed help to decide on what work to include. Older students are generally better at keeping logs to report their progress. Also, older students often expand their portfolios beyond their art work to include written commentary and documentation of the development of the art work, reports of peer review sessions, and possibly related art history learning's or reports of outside experiences such as museum visits which may have relevance for their art work.

*Administrative contexts* also influence the structure and use of portfolios. While the primary purpose of portfolios for most teachers is to engage the students, support good curriculum and instruction, and improve students' self-evaluation, some portfolio programs are designed to serve other purposes as well. For example, portfolios can be used to involve parents in their children's education programs and to report individual student progress. Teachers and administrators need to educate parents about how portfolios work and what advantages they offer over traditional tests and grading methods. Parents are generally more receptive if the traditional assessment methods to which they are accustomed are not being eliminated. Once portfolios are explained and observed in practice, parents are often enthusiastic supporters.

Portfolios may also be used to compare achievement across classrooms or schools. When they are used for this purpose, fairness requires that standards be developed to specify the types of work that can be included and the criteria used to evaluate the work. Guidelines may also address issues of teacher or peer involvement in revising draft work or in deciding on what to identify as a best piece.

In all administrative contexts, teachers need administrative support to initiate a portfolio program. They need material such as folders, file drawers, and access to a photocopy machine, and time to plan, share ideas, and develop strategies.

All portfolios involve students in their own education so that they take charge of their personal collection of work, reflect on what makes some work better, and use this information to make improvement in future work.

### **What Does Research Say?**

Research shows that students at all levels see assessment as something that is done to them on their class work by someone else. Beyond assigned letter grades and teacher comments, many students have little knowledge of what is involved in evaluating their class work. Portfolios can provide structure for involving students in developing and understanding criteria for good efforts, in coming to see the criteria as their own, and in applying the criteria to their own and other students' work.

Research also shows that students benefit from an awareness of the processes and strategies involved in creating, developing, and critiquing an art work, researching a topic, analyzing information, or describing their observations. Without instruction focused on the processes and strategies that underlie effective performance of these types of work, most students will not learn them or will learn them only minimally. And without curriculum-specific experience in using these processes and strategies, even fewer students will carry them forward into new and appropriate contexts. Portfolios can serve as a vehicle for enhancing student awareness of these strategies for thinking about and producing work — both inside and beyond the classroom.

### **What Are the Drawbacks?**

Good portfolio projects do not happen without considerable effort on the part of teachers, administrators, and policy-makers. Research shows that portfolios place additional demands on teachers and students as well as on school resources. Teachers need not only a thorough understanding of their subject area and instructional skills, but also additional time for planning, conferring with other teachers, developing strategies and materials, meeting with individual students and small groups, and reviewing and commenting on student work. Despite drawbacks, portfolios have been characterized by some teachers as a worthwhile burden with tangible results in instruction and student motivation.

### **Who Is Working In This Area?**

Winfield Cooper is editor of the quarterly *Portfolio News*, a publication of the Portfolio Assessment Clearinghouse. *Portfolio News* provides 20 to 30 pages of articles, project briefs, and other materials by teachers, project directors, and researchers about local and state portfolio projects. It also serves as an information exchange for people interested in portfolios.

PROPEL is a continuation of ARTS PROPEL, a cooperative research project involving the Pittsburgh Public Schools, Harvard Project Zero, and Educational Testing Service (ETS). Throughout both stages of the project, portfolios have been used along with classroom observations and external assessments to assess teaming in three content areas — visual arts, music, and imaginative writing. Information on the PROPEL/ARTS PROPEL approach is now available from ETS in four handbooks — a general overview handbook and one for each of the three content areas. The handbooks describe program and teacher strategies and illustrate student production, perception, and reflection in projects that extend over time.

### **Where To Get More Information**

PROPEL/ARTS PROPEL  
Pittsburgh Public Schools  
341 South Bellefield Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

ARTS PROPEL  
Educational Testing Service  
18-R  
Princeton, NJ 08541

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*Portfolio News*  
Portfolio Assessment Clearinghouse  
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