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Portfolios as a Substitute for Proficiency Examinations

Peter Elbow
Pat Belanoff

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Staffroom Interchange

Portfolios as a Substitute for Proficiency Examinations, Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff, State University of New York at Stony Brook

We were troubled by the proficiency examination we found at Stony Brook. We believe proficiency examinations undermine good teaching by sending the wrong message about the writing process: that proficient writing means having a serious topic sprung on you (with no chance for reading, reflection, or discussion) and writing one draft (with no chance for sharing or feedback or revising). Besides, an exam can't give a valid picture of a student's proficiency in writing: we need at least two or three samples of her writing—in two or three genres at two or three sittings.¹

After four semesters of small scale experimentation, and in coordination with a new University writing requirement, we gave up the proficiency exam and made portfolios official in the 40-plus sections of our required Writing 101 course. The new requirement says that every student must get a C or higher in 101 or else take it again. The portfolio system says that no student can *get* that C unless her portfolio has been judged worth a C not only by her teacher but also by at least one other teacher who does not know her.

A portfolio system might take different forms. Here is how our version works at the moment. Every 101 student must now develop—out of all the writing done during the semester—a portfolio of three revised papers: (a) a narrative, descriptive, or expressive piece; (b) an essay of any sort (so long as it is in the discourse of the academic community—i.e., not a personal, digressive, *essai* as by Montaigne); (c) an analysis of a prose text. With each of these papers students must submit a brief informal cover sheet which explores their writing process in that paper and acknowledges any help they have received. The portfolio must also contain a fourth piece: an in-class essay done without benefit of feedback.

Every 101 teacher is a member of a portfolio group. Experienced teachers create their own small groups. New teachers are in a large group—constituted by the Teaching Practicum that all new teachers take.

At mid-semester *all* teachers meet to discuss sample papers and agree on some verdicts: a "calibration" session. Then teachers meet in their smaller groups and distribute their students' mid-semester "dry run" papers to each other for readings. (We've learned that students need an outside reading of one or two of their portfolio essays at mid-semester—in order to get used to the system and be warned of the standards.) The judgment is a simple binary Yes or No—worth a C or not. Readers make no comments on the papers (except for light checkmarks at unambiguous mistakes in mechanics—especially if a paper fails for that reason). A brief comment by the reader who is not the student's teacher is paper-clipped only to failing papers—usually only a few sentences. It is not the reader's job to diagnose or teach—only to judge. It is the teacher's job to interpret these comments to the student when that is necessary. (We're trying to keep the portfolio system from being much of an extra burden on teachers. Strong portfolios can be read quickly—sometimes just skimmed.)

If the teacher agrees with the verdict, the process is finished—and this is what happens with most papers. But if the teacher disagrees, she can ask for a second reading from another reader. If that second reading is the same, the teacher may feel that she should change her view and go along with those two outside readers; but she is free to seek a third reading to validate her original perception. However, the stakes are not high at midsemester; a failure doesn't count. Teachers tend to prefer stern verdicts at midsemester to keep students from being lulled into false security.

This collaborative evaluating process is repeated at the end of the semester—but with full portfolios: a calibration meeting for all teachers on sample portfolios; small groups for first, second, and occasionally third readings; yes/no judgments on whole portfolios (not separate verdicts on each paper): no comments except on failed portfolios. This time, of course, the gun is loaded: it's the end of the semester and a student who fails her portfolio must repeat the course. However, if the two readers agree that the failure stems from *only one* paper, the student may revise that paper and re-submit the portfolio.

By giving students more time and more chance for help, and by letting them choose their best writing, the system is a way to ask for *better* writing and push *more* students to provide it. Sometimes 50% of the mid-semester “dry run” papers fail, but at semester's end fewer than 10% of the portfolios fail—and that goes down to less than 5% after some are rewritten.

This may sound like trying to raise standards and passing rates at the same time, but evaluation by portfolio gets away from the traditional norm-referenced model of evaluation which has given us most of our gut-level assumptions about testing. The goal in traditional evaluation is to rank or differentiate students into as many different “grades” as possible; it is a tradition of “measuring” minds; the ideal end product is population distributed along a bell-shaped curve (as in IQ or SAT scores). The portfolio process uses a very different model of evaluation—criterion-referenced or mastery-based or competence-based—which assumes that the ideal end product is a population of students who have *all* finally passed because they have all been given enough time and help to do what we ask of them.²

The portfolio system makes some teachers feel a bit uncomfortable—especially the first time they use it. But it helps teachers too, and has a number of other benefits. Most important, it encourages good teaching and a sound writing process. A proficiency exam rewards playing it safe and plastic, five-paragraph essays; portfolio papers won't pass with a required C unless they show some genuine thought and investment. The portfolio encourages revising, peer feedback, and collaboration among students. (As for cheating: teachers do not submit a portfolio unless they are confident it is the student's own work; students may not change topics at the last minute in revising papers.)

The portfolio system throws the teacher somewhat into the role of *coach* or *editor* because the crucial decision as to whether the student is eligible to get a C (or must repeat the course) depends on someone other than the teacher. The teacher becomes someone who can *help* the student overcome an obstacle posed by a third party and is thus less likely to be seen by students as merely “the enemy.” Thus the portfolio system leads teachers to make comments like this:

I like this piece. It works for me. But I think some of my pleasure comes from knowing how hard you've worked and how much progress you've made. It helps me to have read some of your earlier drafts and gotten to know you and your concerns. I fear your piece won't work so well for a reader who is a stranger to you.

In effect this sets up the “good-cop/bad-cop” game (“I'd like to give you a break but my buddy is a mean son of a bitch”). But the portfolio also sets up the “cop-

handcuffed-to-the-prisoner" game: an insecure teacher is liable to feel her student's failure as a reflection on her—and may even be tempted to give *too* much help. Most teachers have gotten burnt once: "I'm sorry, but I seem to have misled you. Your portfolio didn't pass." (Even after going back for third and fourth readings.) Thus teachers learn to say, "I think this is good work, I like it, I would give it at least a C. But we'll have to see what portfolio readers think."

We like what this does to the use of grades in a writing course. Teachers retain *almost* complete power over grades. (They can give any grade to an individual paper; they can give any course grade to students who pass the portfolio; they can give any grade below a C to students who do not pass it.) But the portfolio system anchors that crucial "C" line to negotiation by the community. And the system makes teachers less likely to put grades on weekly papers, more likely to concentrate all their energies on useful comments. Students often ignore comments when there is a grade; teachers often write better comments when not having to justify a grade.

The portfolio system encourages collaboration among teachers. When teachers work in isolation they often drift into believing that they use standards made in heaven—that they *know* what A and F mean. (It's painful to give grades when you experience the full sense of indeterminacy involved.) Yet of course there is enormous inconsistency among the grades of isolated teachers, so *students* often drift in the opposite direction—into complete skepticism or even cynicism about the possibility of evaluation or even judgment at all. They often feel that *all* evaluations or judgments are nothing but accidents of teachers' personalities. Such students think that getting good grades is nothing but psyching out idiosyncracies—figuring out what particular teachers "like" or "want."

Our profession lacks any firm, theoretical, discipline-wide, basis for deciding the right interpretation or evaluation of a text. The only way to bring a bit of trustworthiness to grading is to get teachers negotiating together in a community to make some collaborative judgments. That the portfolio promotes collaboration and works against isolation may be, in the end, its main advantage.

These collaborative discussions of sample papers are interesting. One faction may give powerful arguments for failing the sample paper; someone even says, "How can anyone who considers himself a literate professional possibly give this paper a C?" But another group gives strong arguments in its favor, and the blurter discovers that the defenders of the paper are not just the flakey wimps he suspected but also include a colleague he respects as more perceptive and learned than himself.

Hurtful words are sometimes spoken, e.g., "It's not the paper that flunks, it's the assignment!" Yet over the semesters we have come to treasure these difficult moments. As one of us said just the other day when the heat was rising in the room: "We're sorry you are having a hard time, but *we're* having a ball!" It's a relief for us to see all this disparity of judgment out on the floor *as interaction between people*—as heads butting against other heads. Normally, the disparity is locked inside solitary heads, visible only to students who compare notes and to administrators looking at different teachers' grade sheets. When a newcomer complains, "Why do you encourage all this chaos and disagreement?" it's fun to be able to reply, "We're not making it, we're just getting it out from under the rug."

On most samples there is a decisive majority or even consensus. But when teachers remain divided, it's important for us to intervene, get a quick vote to show where the numbers lie (sometimes the discussion can fool you), and say, "Fine. We're split. Here's a picture of where our community disagrees; here is a paper that will pass in some groups and fail in others; nevertheless this picture can give you some guidance when you go off to make your individual verdicts. We're gradually giving each other a sense of our standards as a community." For even though it is the *disagreement* that is most obvious at such moments, *we*, from where we sit, see such discussions producing

much more *agreement* in grading and community standards than we used to have when all teachers graded alone.³

Notes

1. Charles Cooper, *The Nature and Measurement of Competency in English* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1981).

2. See D. C. McClelland, "Testing for Competence Rather than for 'Intelligence,'" *American Psychologist* 28 (January, 1973), 1-14. Also Gerald Grant and Wendy Kohli, "Contributing to Learning by Assessing Student Performance," in *On Competence*, ed. Gerald Grant and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979), pp. 138-59. Also Peter Elbow on the effects of competence-based curricula on teachers: "Trying to Teach While Thinking About the End," in *Embracing Contraries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

3. We have written two essays which describe the system more fully: (1) "Using Portfolios to Judge Writing Proficiency at SUNY Stony Brook," in *New Methods in College Writing Programs*, ed. Paul Connolly and Teresa Vilardi (New York: Modern Language Association, in press); (2) "Using Portfolios to Increase Collaboration and Community in a Writing Program," *WPA: Journal of Writing Program Administration*. 9 (Spring, 1986). For an interesting account of another use of portfolios for grading (but not as a substitute for proficiency examinations), see Christopher Burnham's "Portfolio Evaluation: Room to Breathe and Grow" in the new collection, *Training the Teacher of College Composition*, ed. Charles Bridges (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1986).