
PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT IN THE CLASSROOM



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A portfolio is a collection of student work with a common theme or purpose. The use of portfolios is not new. Portfolios have been common in the fine and performing arts for years in seeking support for one's work, to document change or improvement in style and performance, or to gain admission to special schools.

Broad expansion into the academic arena took place in the 1990s as part of the movement toward performance assessment. This change was fostered by a climate of criticism of traditional assessment techniques, especially multiple-choice testing.

The focus here is on the use of portfolios for assessment, but portfolios can be utilized to achieve other goals. Portfolios may, for example, document varied experiences of the learner in a course or class, provide points for discussion between learner and teacher or among learners, and represent change in the student's technique or skill over time.

The Portfolio as an Assessment Tool

Portfolios are often described as a more authentic means of assessment than the traditional classroom test. Rather than showing that the learner *knows* what has been taught, the portfolio demonstrates that the student *can do* what has been taught. For example, we may identify the component parts of a short story on an objective test. But the inclusion of a short story in a portfolio documents our ability to write a short story.

However, describing portfolio assessment as authentic suggests that other forms of assessment are less valid, or inappropriate. That is not the case. Different methods of assessment are useful for different purposes. Portfolio assessment is most appropriate when learning can be best demonstrated through a *product*.

The Portfolio Assessment Process

The use of the portfolio as an assessment tool is a process with multiple steps. The process takes time, and all of the component parts must be in place before the assessment can be utilized effectively.

Decide on a purpose or theme. General assessment alone is not a sufficient goal for a portfolio. It must be decided specifically what is to be assessed. Portfolios are most useful for addressing the student's ability to apply what has been learned. Therefore, a useful question to consider is, *What skills or techniques do I want the students to learn to apply?* The answer to this question can often be found in the school curriculum.

Consider what samples. Consider what samples of student work might best illustrate the application of the standard or educational goal in question. Written work samples, of course, come to mind. However, videotapes, pictures of products or activities, and testimonials are only a few of the many different ways to document achievement.

Determine how samples will be selected. A range of procedures can be utilized here. Students, maybe in conjunction with parents and teachers, might select work to be included, or a specific type of sample might be required by the teacher, the school, or the school system.

Decide whether to assess the process and the product or the product only. Assessing the process would require some documentation regarding how the learner developed the product. For example, did the student use the process for planning a short story or utilizing the experimental method that was taught in class? Was it used correctly? Evaluation of the process will require a procedure for accurately documenting the process used. The documentation could include a log or video of the steps or an interview with the student. Usually, if both the process and the product are to be evaluated, a separate scoring system will have to be developed for each.

Develop an appropriate scoring system. Usually this is best done through the use of a rubric, a point scale with descriptors that explain how the work will be evaluated. Points are allotted with the highest quality work getting the most points. If the descriptors are clear and specific, they become goals for which the student can aim. There should be a separate scale for each standard being evaluated. For example, if one standard being assessed is the use of grammatically correct sentence structure, five points might be allotted if all sentences are grammatically correct. Then, a specific number of errors would be identified for all other points with zero points given if there are more than a certain number of errors. It is important that the standards for evaluation be carefully explained. If we evaluate for clarity of writing, then an operational description of what is meant by clarity should be provided. Points available should be small enough to be practical and meaningful; an allotment of 20 points for clarity is not workable because an evaluator cannot really distinguish between a 17- and an 18-point product with regard to clarity.

Share the scoring system with the students. Qualitative descriptors of how the student will be evaluated, known in advance, can guide learning and performance.

Engage the learner in a discussion of the product. Through the process of discussion the teacher and the learner can explore the material in more depth, exchange feelings and attitudes with regard to the product and the learning process, and reap the greatest advantage of effective portfolio implementation.

An Example of Portfolio Assessment

A teacher has taught a language arts unit on descriptive writing, which includes goals related to vocabulary use, sentence structure, and grammar. Attainment will be assessed, in part, by the writing of a descriptive paragraph.

The teacher could give a test requiring the students to provide word definitions or identify sentences that are written correctly or incorrectly. However, paragraph writing is a test of their application of the skills taught, not just their knowledge.

The teacher has decided to evaluate just the product because there are a variety of processes that could lead to production of a well-written paragraph and it is not really important which process the student uses. Points will be awarded for each main component of the product. For example, three points will be awarded for grammar if no grammatical errors are present and one point will be taken off for each error. A student with more than three grammatical errors will not receive any points in this category. However, the teacher must describe what is meant by the term “grammatically correct.” One possible description might be, “no errors in tense, punctuation, or sentence structure.”

Variety in use of vocabulary could be described as the inclusion of at least a certain number of different descriptive words to receive all points. Variety in sentence structure could be assessed by the number of different sentence forms in the paragraph. The teacher might have students self-score and then compare their score with that of the teacher during a discussion of reasons for scoring and ways to improve.

Multiple Uses of the Portfolio

Students with special needs. Many goals on Individual Education Programs (IEP) of students with significant disabilities cannot be assessed by traditional objective or standardized tests. If a student is to learn to tie shoes, remove and hang up a coat, or wash hands independently, the video component of a portfolio could document these accomplishments.

Communication between home and school or school and community. It is very important to establish communication with parents when using portfolios. Portfolios can enhance communication between school and home if they are used appropriately. For example, a collection of student writing from the beginning to the end of first grade can provide powerful documentation of student progress. Work done by an eighth-grade class to address a local environmental problem can do more to show the community what students are learning in science than a set of test results.

Documentation of teacher effectiveness. Portfolios can assist the teacher in demonstrating that students have met standards or IEP goals, that technology and other varied teaching techniques are being used in the classroom, and that students are actively engaged in learning.

Development of students' cognitive skills. When students have specific qualitative goals to meet, they practice skills that enhance learning and effective development of products. Designing a product with specific goals in mind can improve planning skills and contribute to realistic self-appraisal. Specific descriptors mitigate vague self-assessments, unrealistic positive or negative self-evaluation, generalized “all or nothing thinking” (my work is always bad or always good), and perfectionism.

Advantages of Portfolio Assessment

- Assesses what students can do and not just what they know.
- Engages students actively.
- Fosters student-teacher communication and depth of exploration.
- Enhances understanding of the educational process among parents and in the community.

- Provides goals for student learning.
- Offers an alternative to traditional tests for students with special needs.

Challenges

- *Reliability*: It can be quite difficult to establish scoring systems that are reliable over raters or time. Reliability across raters is especially important if major decisions are to be based on the assessment outcome.
- *Time*: The use of portfolios for assessment is time consuming in terms of hours needed to produce the product, time to develop a workable scoring system, and training for the evaluator(s).
- *Depth, not breadth*: Portfolio assessment offers the opportunity for depth but not breadth with regard to academic material covered. A written test can include questions from an entire unit with a sample of items from all areas taught. Because of the time it takes to produce products, it is not possible to have a portfolio that represents every aspect of a unit. However, products in the portfolio, if chosen properly, illustrate depth of mastery in the area assessed.
- *Fairness*: It may be difficult for the evaluator to control outside influences on the product such as parental assistance and access to resources like computers. If the assessment contributes to high stakes decision making, lack of equity in resources can be a significant problem.
- *Interpretation of results*: Since the portfolio system is rarely standardized, stakeholders may wonder what it really says about the student. How does the learner compare to others at his age or grade level? Would the portfolio assessment result be meaningful to those outside the school system such as college admission officers or those selecting scholarship recipients? Those individuals will not know the nature of the assignment, the help that was given, or the quality of the products of other students in the group.
- *Contributions to learning*: The use of the portfolio for assessment purposes could detract from its most important contributions to the learning process, such as honest teacher-student communication, forthright self-assessment, and working toward one's personal best. When the portfolio must be scored, or assigned a grade, students may tend to defend their work rather than engage in true self-assessment. Teachers may focus more on the scoring process and less on effective communication about the work.

Resources

- Andrade, H. G. (2000). Using rubrics to promote thinking and learning. *Educational Leadership*, 57(5), 13–18.
- Montgomery, K. (2001). *Authentic assessment: A guide for elementary teachers*. New York: Longman. ISBN: 0321037820.
- Penta, M. Q. (2002). Student portfolios in a standardized world. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 38(2), 77–81.
- Stiggins, R. J. (2001). *Student-involved classroom assessment*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall. ISBN: 0130225371.

Website

Indiana University, College of Education—
<http://reading.indiana.edu>
 Related websites and materials to enhance understanding of portfolio assessment.

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