
PORTFOLIOS EVOLVING: BACKGROUND
AND VARIATIONS

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In the first part of the presentation, we outlined the changes in research and practice that have led to the current interest in portfolio approaches to writing assessment. We identified four kinds of changes: in the prevailing views of writing and writing instruction, in models and goals for assessment, in teachers' roles in curriculum development and assessment, and in students' roles as learners.

There is great diversity among models for portfolio assessments designed for different purposes and context, but certain features are common to portfolios responsive to the changes identified earlier: multiple samples of writing, variety in the kinds of writing represented, evidence of processes used to create text, and student reflection on writing. We emphasized reflection as the feature that most distinguishes portfolios from other approaches to writing assessment and affords greatest opportunities for impact on instruction and learning.

Next, we illustrated the kinds of information about learning made available through portfolios and the kinds of difficulties that occur in the development of a portfolio design. We emphasized the exploratory nature of the projects described and the need for other portfolio projects to discover the approaches most appropriate to their situations.

We described the process used in the New York City Junior High School Writing and Learning Project to develop an appropriate and informative approach for portfolios of writing drawn from across the curriculum. First the purpose of the portfolio was established: to encourage students to show and become aware of the ways in which they use writing as a tool for learning and of changes in the ways they use writing strategies. Teachers participating in the project then articulated the underlying principles that characterized their classroom instruction in writing, and these principles became the basis for a series of guideline questions for students to use in selecting pieces of writing for their portfolios.

The students in the project selected from their writing the pieces they believed would illustrate how they used writing as a tool for learning, and they wrote letters explaining to the portfolio reader the reasons for the choices they made.

We presented examples from a student's portfolio to show the kinds of learning and reflection evident in his work, and also to illustrate a number of questions it raises about portfolio assessment. Many of these questions arise from differences among students, across classrooms, and across subject areas; others involve problems of creating useful vocabulary for communicating about students' work and the learning demonstrated in portfolios. Portfolios may not easily lend themselves to standardization and their primary value may be in what they reveal about learning to students themselves and to their teachers and parents.