

Variations in Assessment, Variations in Philosophy: Unintended Consequences of Heterogeneous Portfolios

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Teacher-assessors face particular challenges when working with portfolios containing both revised and timed student writing.

Portfolio assessment has become the predominant best practice in writing assessment at the college level. Despite its clear superiority to previous methods of assessment, portfolio assessment has brought its own collection of challenges. Although the stated goal of much portfolio grading is to create an overall, or holistic, judgment of a student's ability based on a collection of writings, we know from Hamp-Lyons and Condon that creating a truly holistic assessment of a portfolio is "highly unlikely, if not impossible" because instructors "inevitably . . . consider one text in light of another, . . . weigh one against the other, . . . and make decision(s) that, while representing a judgment about the whole portfolio, (are) grounded in a weighing of the parts, rather than in a dominant impression of the whole" (180). This nonholistic variation in approach to portfolio assessment is further complicated when the portfolio contains impromptu (timed, exam-style essays) as well as revised writing. Many departments and institutions choose to have students include a sample of impromptu writing in portfolios along with drafts of revised essays that were written during the semester, creating what can be called "heterogeneous" portfolios. There are numerous motivations behind this decision: to have an example of what students can produce on their own (in contrast to what they can produce with feedback from instructors and peers), to have an example of a different style of writing to compare to the others, to try to eliminate/reveal plagiarism in the revised essays, and to provide practice for upcoming standardized writing tests, among other reasons.

My home English department implements a large, cross-graded programmatic writing assessment system in various levels of developmental courses that uses heterogeneous portfolios for some of the reasons articulated above. My own experience participating in this assessment system and my close observations of others' methods of reading portfolios led me to suspect that, as Hamp-Lyons and Condon have found, teachers treat the impromptu and revised writings very differently. Not only do teachers treat these items differently than one another, but

different teachers also treat these two types of writing quite differently than other teachers do. Hamp-Lyons and Condon hypothesized that this situation would have been ameliorated if the revised essays in the portfolios in their study had included drafts; presumably, the inclusion of drafts of these essays might have persuaded the teachers to pay more attention to the students' writing process rather than focusing on final products.

The current study found that teachers have very different ways of approaching and assessing heterogeneous portfolios. Although the portfolio system studied here does include multiple drafts of all revised essays, all teachers don't necessarily read all of the drafts that are presented. On a logistical and administrative level, these differences are concerning—the differences among teachers could make the whole assessment program quite unreliable. More interesting, however, is an analysis of what these differences in approach reveal about teachers' tacit philosophies of language and learning. These philosophical differences manifest in the different beliefs teachers articulate in their questionnaire responses. Underlying these practical manifestations are deep variations in teachers' very constructs of the elusive thing we're trying to teach—writing ability. Surely, there are always differences among teachers' beliefs regarding and approaches to assessment; however, the particular situation created by heterogeneous portfolios teases out differences and brings them to the surface more than other assessment measures might. This happens because the heterogeneous portfolio is itself a composite of different philosophies of writing ability and assessment. It is not born of a consistent, clear-focused concept of writing ability, and thus it provides an environment in which teachers' various and at times inconsistent philosophies can emerge.

Context and Method

I asked teachers to complete a questionnaire on their practices of assessing portfolios. They completed the questionnaire toward the end of the term—after norming sessions had been held and while they were assessing at least one large stack of portfolios. Out of the 40 teachers teaching one of our portfolio courses during the spring of 2007, 29 agreed to complete my questionnaire. Taken together, these 29 teachers were teaching a total of 39 sections of portfolio courses; thus they were assessing somewhere in the vicinity of 780 student portfolios (assuming an average of 20 portfolios per section). The questionnaire asked them to describe their typical process of handling a portfolio: the order in which they read the contents, the documents that influence their decision most significantly, the time it takes to read a portfolio and how they spend that time, and the suggestions they would make for improving our department's portfolio process.

I found many interesting things through this process, but the most salient finding seemed to be the wide variation in the amount of time different teachers spend on each portfolio. There was an enormous range: from one minute on the low end to five days on the high end.¹ Half of the respondents said that they take less than ten minutes to assess each portfolio, while the other half take forty-five

minutes to five days. Given the enormous time variation, it was clear to me that these teachers were doing different things when they were assessing portfolios. I looked more carefully at these two groups—the fast ones and the slow ones—and discovered, even more interestingly, that the “fast” ones put much more weight on the impromptu essay, called the “in class essay,” and the “slow” ones put much more weight on the revised essays, which are each presented with at least two earlier drafts. I then focused my subsequent analysis on variations in teachers’ handling of the impromptu essay and revised essays in their processes of assessment. Initial analysis of questionnaire responses created twenty emergent themes. The predominant themes were then analyzed for relationships and merged, resulting in the three most influential themes, which are discussed here: assessment, real writing, and pedagogy.

Assessment: Achievement versus Proficiency

Teachers in the study fall along a spectrum between assessing what a student has achieved in the course and assessing a student’s proficiency in writing. Some teachers feel strongly that they are supposed to consider how hard a student has worked on drafts of the revised essays presented in the portfolio, and perhaps even look for evidence of improvement between revised essays that were written earlier and later in the semester. Other teachers feel that they should assess what students are able to do rather than how hard they have worked or how far their writing has come over the course of the semester. Needless to say, these teachers approach heterogeneous portfolios in very different ways. Often even the same teachers feel themselves pulled between these two competing perspectives. If a student has a weak impromptu essay, often a teacher will pass them if their revised essays show that they have tried hard in the class. Conversely, sometimes when a student’s drafts don’t show overwhelming effort, a teacher will pass them based on the strength of ability shown in the impromptu.

Teachers who focus on assessing students’ achievement in the course prioritize the process of writing (receiving feedback from other writers, revising, reflecting on one’s writing) in considering student work. Some comments from the teachers follow:

I used to agonize over the [impromptu], because I took it as the culminating demonstration of skill, but now I consider the final drafts the most (time wise) because I look at the portfolio more holistically. Final drafts—they give a view of a student’s development over time. However, the reflective piece often enlightens me to any special circumstances/obstacles the student faces which impact on school work. If a student has worked hard despite outside obstacles, this initiative will likely continue to carry through [to future courses]. Sometimes motivation is key. (Respondent A)

I’m interested in whether or not the student has made the progress he thinks he’s made and whether or not he’s truly aware of his own strengths and weaknesses. (Respondent E)

Comment regarding revisions: If the student is really revising (as opposed to

copying over) I have a positive view of the student, even if the student may have real writing problems. (Respondent X)

I spend the most time reading the revised essays because they take the most time and because I feel that they most clearly show how the student has progressed and how his/her writing process works. (Respondent Z)

I like to note changes, movement, progress (or lack of). I like to see if students eliminate things in order to avoid revising. (Respondent C)

These teachers are interested in change, movement, progress over time. They are not as interested in the absolute quality of the student's final product as they are in the progress the student has made and in the quality of the student's process. They are interested in the student's own self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses as a writer. They assess these qualities by looking at multiple drafts (often more than three) of each essay. They spend long periods of time reading and comparing these drafts before they make their final assessment decision. Because these instructors are comfortable with a writing process that involves several rounds of feedback from others, they are often more interested in the final drafts of each revised essay than they are in the first drafts because the final drafts represent the culmination of the student's work—their process—for each project. Many of these instructors put little weight on the impromptu essay because they consider it useless in making an assessment of achievement.

While these instructors are engaged in a painstaking review of multiple drafts of multiple essays, others are focused on the impromptu essay and the first drafts of revised essays as they try to assess student writing proficiency:

I believe that the [impromptu] is a true example of the type of writing the student is capable of doing on their own. (Respondent G)

The [impromptu] clearly establishes what the student can or cannot do. It is the most valuable piece within the portfolio. I also spend an equal amount of time comparing first drafts of revised essays to the [impromptu]. (Respondent J)

It gives me a better sense of the student's readiness for [the next writing course]. It's one thing to produce a polished essay after 3 revisions and instructor feedback, quite another to produce a polished piece of critical writing in 2 hours. (Respondent N)

The [impromptu] essay—since that is written at the end of the term (after the student, presumably, had had practice) and it's written by the student alone—no comments/help from the teacher or tutors. (Respondent W)

I will often put a great deal more weight on the [impromptu], particularly if it is strong (this b/c it is the last thing they write in the course, and so can represent all they've learned in the class). (Respondent AA)

The [impromptu] essay together with the first two in-class drafts. For me these take up most of my time and concentration. These pieces give me a realistic sense of what the student is able to do at this time in the semester. (Respondent BB)

The [impromptu] influences my assessment most strongly because the students write it without help from their teachers. It is also valuable because all students take the same test. (Respondent F)

All of the teachers quoted above are assessing students' proficiency, but even among them there are meaningful variations. Some teachers value the impromptu essay because it was written at the end of the term, and thus in their minds it must represent what students are able to do after having worked on their writing all term. In other words, they see it as a "post-test" of writing ability. Some of these instructors spend time comparing the first drafts of earlier essays, which some presume were written in class, with the impromptu essay to see what changes have developed in the student's writing ability during the course of the semester—a classic pre/post-test comparison. Several other teachers, some of whom are quoted above, value the impromptu essay as a measure of achievement because it represents what students are capable of producing *on their own* without "help" from tutors or teachers. This valuing of independence in writing is worth noting here, but I will examine it more closely in the discussion section. For all of these teachers, the important thing to assess when looking at a student's portfolio is how well this student—alone—can write without any "help" from readers. For this reason, these teachers put much more focus on impromptu writing than they put on revised writing. It should be noted that by focusing primarily on the documents in the portfolio that have not been revised, these teachers are in effect ignoring most of the student work presented in the portfolio.

To some degree, the design of the heterogeneous portfolio itself creates this tension between assessing achievement and assessing proficiency. Portfolios are by design achievement tests whereas timed essay tests are proficiency tests. Blending these two tests types into one creates a situation for teachers that is, at best, difficult to navigate in any consistent, coherent way. One is a procedure that documents the process of learning, and the other is a procedure that documents the performance of a writer outside the context of learning. Another way to articulate this conundrum is that these heterogeneous portfolios are straddling Yancey's second and third waves of writing assessment: the impromptu essay can be seen as a vestige of the second wave's belief in using single-sample direct measures of student writing, while the portfolio itself is an assessment technology born from the third wave's belief in multiple direct samples, written in the context of the classroom over a period of time. Perhaps because they represent different paradigms of assessment, teachers in this study have trouble looking at the revised essays and the impromptu essay in the same way. They try to do it, but some end up thinking that the impromptu essay might be the more significant item for evaluation because it should show what the student has learned during the entire semester. Others look at both types of writing and end up thinking that the revised essays are much more important than the impromptu essay because it is only through the lens of the revised essays that we get a glimpse of what the student accomplished over the course of the term.

Real Writing

In one way or another, most teachers in this study expressed the desire to assess student writing based on the most “realistic” and authentic criteria. Teachers’ sense of how realistic a criterion is depends on how well they think it matches up with the ways student writing will be evaluated in the future, after the student leaves the composition class. This theme echoes Bob Broad’s finding that the ways teachers construct the various writing contexts beyond freshman English figure into their assessment judgments (“Pulling” 228). At heart, this is a test validity issue. Several teachers in my study mention that whereas they find revised writing the most reliable item in the portfolio, it doesn’t really represent or mimic the type of writing situation that students will have to face in the future. Although most teachers share the desire for a valid assessment, they vary as to the types of writing and writing situations they think are most authentic. Some feel that they should judge how well students will do on writing assignments in other college courses, and they assume that this writing will involve drafting. Therefore, these teachers tend to ignore the impromptu essay and focus instead on the drafting process students have used to produce their revised essays. They value the final drafts and the students’ self-reflections more heavily than they do early drafts and the impromptu essay:

I like to see the student’s self-assessment before I review the revised essays and the exam. I’m interested in whether or not the student has made the progress he thinks he’s made and whether or not he’s truly aware of his own strengths and weaknesses. I read the [impromptu essay] last to see how the student writes under pressure (and with limited time). This is not, after all, how most academic writing is done. I often use the [impromptu] to help me determine a grade for a borderline portfolio. (Respondent E)

I feel the revised work is most like “real-life” writing, which is rarely done on the spot or in a peer vacuum. (Respondent AA)

I don’t especially value the ability to write on a topic in a couple of hours; I’m more interested in whether a student is willing to spend 10 or 20 hours developing a first draft into a college-level essay. (Respondent P)

These teachers think that real-world writing—in the academy or otherwise—involves extensive time to compose, the opportunity to have others read your writing and provide feedback to it, and the opportunity to revise, several times if necessary.

Other teachers think that they should evaluate students on how well they can write in a real world in which there are not opportunities for extensive time, feedback, and revision before a document must be finished. I surmise that they are thinking of the world outside of the academy, or perhaps just other disciplines, in which one often does not get chances to receive feedback and revise before evaluation. These teachers tend to put much more weight on the impromptu essay:

I do not know if everyone follows the practice of starting essays (first and second draft) in class, therefore I pay a lot of attention on [*sic*] the [impromptu essay] because it reflects a “real life” situation and it is timed. True, students work under

stress, but it indicates ability to focus, organize and respond to the topic and guarantee that the student wrote it. Then, I carefully read and study the first two drafts and then the final draft. (Respondent BB)

This teacher voices a perspective shared by many in this study: that most writing done “out there” in the world does not involve the types of social interaction and discourse with a supportive community of writers that are commonplace in the twenty-first century composition classroom. Whether or not this is the case, this perspective influences their assessment practice.

Pedagogy: How Much Is Too Much Revision?

Among the teachers’ responses there is a tension between the desire to assess based on the product of a controlled situation (the impromptu essay) and the desire to assess based on the products of a more “natural” situation (the revised essays). Some teachers prefer to assess based on the impromptu essay because they feel more confident that it represents what students can actually do on their own. The variability of the situation surrounding the revised essays makes them distrust the validity of these essays as representations of student writing skill; the writing assignments, the number of revisions allowed, the quantity and quality of teacher and peer feedback given to each draft can all vary substantially from class to class. This situation is what Broad referred to as the “revision problem” (“Pulling” 228). The very existence of impromptu writing within the portfolio offers these teachers the option of disregarding the revised writing in favor of the impromptu. Other teachers are more comfortable assessing the results of what they consider to be a more naturalistic and authentic, and thus valid, social environment.

Teachers’ primary complaint about using the revised essays to assess student writing ability is that the other teachers provide too much and too directive feedback. Some respondents even go so far as to say that teachers seemed to want to “take over” students’ essays and change the voice of the essay to their own. Some teachers are concerned that feedback interferes with students’ opportunities to express themselves. Their concern isn’t so much an assessment concern as a learning concern. Some teachers mention how other teachers’ comments seem to “influence” the quality of the students’ essays and “interfere” with the students’ own writing. If teachers specify what should be in each section or paragraph of an essay and correct every grammar error, then how can the portfolio reader use these samples of writing to judge student ability? As one teacher comments, “the ‘final version’ . . . almost always ‘looks good’ after the teacher and student have collaborated” (Respondent C). Hamp-Lyons and Condon found that some teachers in their study put greater weight on the impromptu because of the role feedback might have played in the revised essays:

It seemed from readers’ self-reflections that they were aware of the part they had played as instructors in improving their own students’ texts and that this led them to be suspicious when they saw significantly better revised texts than impromptu writing in portfolios from other classes. Perhaps this means that the readers were

seeing the improvement as the instructor's work rather than the student's. Some readers' self-reports, in fact, indicated this very belief. (185)

It is clear that there are a number of tensions among different teachers' styles of written feedback and among their philosophies of the role that teacher feedback should have in learning and assessment. At best, teachers say that teacher comments "influence" student writing; at worst, that they "interfere" with student writing, learning, and, therefore, assessment:

I'm interested in the timed essay to get a sense of what the writer can do without interference/influence of others. (Respondent D)

After the 2nd draft, the revised essays belong to the instructor. (Respondent Q)

My final decision is based on the [impromptu]. It is the only essay within the portfolio that is solely the student's writing. Anyone can help a student with revised essays. However, the final essay reflects the student's ability to think and write independently. (Respondent J)

I am trying to weed out what part of the final draft is actually the student's work and what part is just his/her responding to teachers' and tutors' comments and suggestions. (Respondent R)

The [impromptu] essay—since that is written at the end of the term (after the student, presumably, had had practice) and it's written by the student alone—no comments/help from the teacher or tutors. (Respondent W)

The [impromptu] influences my assessment most, because it's done under controlled conditions. (Respondent B)

The [impromptu]—This lets me know how the student actually writes and expresses his/her thoughts and ideas. (Respondent G)

There's an interesting divide as well between how teachers read the revised essays. Revised essays are the number one thing teachers skip when they read portfolios, but, interestingly, people skip different things. Some teachers skip final drafts because they feel that final drafts aren't really the student's work and therefore aren't useful for assessment. Others only read final drafts because they see them as the culmination of the student's work for the semester. These teachers are, in my mind, assessing very different things.

For many teachers, extensive teacher comments on revised essays are an assessment challenge but are a normal and anticipated part of reading portfolios. Others were clearly troubled by the way other instructors commented on student writing, revealing deep differences in the philosophies of teaching and learning among these instructors:

I was shocked to discover the level at which other teachers were rewriting their students' essays, crossing out whole sentences, whole paragraphs and rewriting. In the process the students' most original ideas and voices were misinterpreted and/or lost. I was also alarmed to discover that some teachers tell students what the content of each paragraph should be. Surely this is not what Vygotsky meant by

“scaffolding.” Finally, every grammatical, spelling, and punctuation error was corrected. . . . So, in the end, I decided that the revised student writing was, for the most part, meaningless, because it was both designed and written by the teachers. (Respondent Q)

The [impromptu] is definitely a strong factor [in my assessment decision], but an equally important factor for me has become the answer to this question: Can the student sustain his/her own thesis and write in his/her own voice despite the teacher doing everything in his/her power to prevent this? (Respondent C)

These teachers are disturbed by the degree to which their colleagues offer directive commentary and guidance to their students. They feel as if their colleagues have crossed a pedagogical line and have, in effect, taken over the authorship of the essays. Both respondents Q and C are inclined to weigh revised writing more heavily than impromptu writing, but both often end up relying on the impromptu writing because they feel the teachers have influenced student writing too heavily in the revised essays.

Many teachers report that the impromptu is the only piece of writing in the portfolio that they “trust” because they know that the students wrote it themselves. This implies at best heavy-handed guidance from instructors on the revised essays and at worst student plagiarism on the revised essays. Teachers feel that they can rely on the validity of the impromptu to a degree that they cannot rely on the revised essays. Many teachers say that their reaction to the impromptu most strongly determines whether the portfolio will pass or fail. One mentions that there’s more “control” with the impromptu, and several teachers imply that teacher feedback interferes with our ability to see student writing ability via the revised essays.

Discussion: Variations in the Concept of Writing Ability

At heart, this conundrum of how to use the impromptu writing, or whether it’s more trustworthy than the revised essays, is an issue of how “writing ability” is conceptualized and understood by teachers. Among the faculty in my home English department, there appear to be competing notions of what writing ability is, which become manifest during the communal portfolio assessment process. Assuming that we are somewhat representative of other schools like ours with assessment programs like ours, this study brings to light some of the underlying struggles teachers experience when trying to implement portfolio assessment that includes an impromptu piece. I focus my brief analysis on variations in the concept of writing ability because it strikes me as the most salient core belief that influences writing teachers’ understandings of what goes on in their classrooms. As I analyzed the responses to my questionnaire, I kept stumbling upon what seem to be significant variations in this key concept. For clarity, I break these variations down into the two most prominent versions, and I use Donald Davidson’s categories of “internalist” and “externalist” notions of language to elucidate the divisions between the two.

The teachers who distrust the validity of essays that are the product of a process involving extensive teacher and peer feedback, who feel that they should

assess students' proficiency as independent, individual writers—separate from their achievements in the course, and who feel that most writing in the real world is not the result of social interaction—are operating from a particular construct of writing ability. For these teachers, writing ability is a stable proficiency that an individual person possesses, independent of context and unaffected by topic; for example, if a writer can write well about giraffes, he or she will be able to write just as well about politics. It is, as is assumed to be true of physical abilities or mathematical abilities, testable and can be called forth on demand in any situation.

In order to value impromptu writing and first drafts of essays over writing that has emerged from an overt and documented process of social interaction, one has to be what Donald Davidson would describe as an “internalist”: “the internalist says that the contents of our thoughts . . . are determined by what is in the head” (Kent). Writing ability is, in this view, the manifestation of what we know as individuals. Our knowledge of genre conventions, grammar, rhetorical strategies, content, and audience expectations resides in our individual minds and can be called forth, to be judged, in a socially isolated situation. This perspective is Positivistic because it “presumes an independent and stable reality (in this case ‘writing ability’ or ‘writing quality’) that humans try more or less successfully to ‘measure’” (Broad, *What* 7).

This perspective has a long history in composition studies. Regardless of a teacher's favored pedagogical approach (i.e., current-traditional rhetoric, process, etc.), an internalist concept of language is very likely the common taproot of their practice. As several scholars and historians of English have noted, the notion of the individual mind thinking and reflecting on experience and generating ideas on its own is central to composition specifically and the humanities in general (Berlin; Bruffee; Crowley; Faigley, “Competing,” *Fragments*; Harris; Miller). Faigley cites compositionists' belief in a modern conception of the self, and the attendant internalist concept of language, as historically resistant to change:

Where composition studies has proven least receptive to postmodern theory is in surrendering its belief in the writer as an autonomous self, even at a time when extensive group collaboration is practiced in many writing classrooms. Since the beginning of composition teaching in the late nineteenth century, college writing teachers have been heavily invested in the stability of the self and the attendant beliefs that writing can be a means of self-discovery and intellectual self-realization. (*Fragments* 15)

Much teaching and assessing practice in composition is grounded in this very notion of the autonomous self and in an internalist construct of language.

Most famously, current-traditional rhetoric's focus on mastering modes of writing emerges from an internalist philosophy of language, but it does not necessarily stop there. Many “process” approaches to teaching writing also emerge from an internalist perspective. Even if teachers believe that the development of writing ability is a process involving various interventions and revisions, they may very well believe that it is largely an internal and individual process that students go through largely on their own. The teacher's role would be to guide the student through the

process of drafting and revision but not to intervene or participate in the student's writing. This is an unresolved tension in the field, not just in these teachers' assessment practices. We have not worked out a way to assess individual student writing ability using the often collaboratively produced documents that emerge from a social constructivist, "process" classroom. In the face of this conundrum, many teachers in my study (see in particular comments from teachers C, D, J, G, Q, R, and W) became uncomfortable with their colleagues' "interference" in students' essays and relied more heavily on impromptu writing and first drafts of essays.

In contrast, the teachers who don't sweat the extensive feedback that they and other teachers might give, who feel that they should assess students based on their very particular and individual achievement in the course, and who feel that writing is most authentically taught and assessed in a social climate of feedback and revision appear to operate from a different construct of writing ability. For them, writing ability is a proficiency that develops and is visible within a social context. They believe that writing skills are not universal but are embedded in particular communities and contexts, and vary depending on the writer's relationship to and knowledge of the topic under discussion. These teachers are practitioners of what James Berlin referred to as the "New Rhetoric" and others since then as the "post-process" approach to teaching writing.

In these approaches to teaching writing, teachers have taken a decidedly "social turn" in the way they conceptualize language (Matsuda). In contrast to internalist epistemology, post-process teachers are grounded in what Davidson would call an "externalist" epistemology of language:

The externalist . . . maintains that there are factors external to the person which are determinants of the contents of our thoughts, and not just causal determinants . . . externalism has to do with your history and things that exist outside of you that make a difference to what you can think or what you are thinking at a given moment (Kent).

In contrast to an internalist perspective, an externalist perspective conceptualizes our minds as being utterly entwined with the world rather than being separated and sheltered from it. Our thoughts, abilities, and knowledge are all as much external to us as they are internal; in fact, the boundary between what is external and internal becomes quite blurred and, in some articulations of this theory, disappears. As Kenneth Bruffee noted, "knowledge is not something we acquire and wield as individuals relative to each other but, rather, something we generate and maintain in company with and in dependency upon each other" (645). Post-process theory emerged from this legacy of anti-foundationalist and social constructivist philosophies of thought, language, and learning.

Post-process assumes that "meaning making is a product of our communicative interaction with others rather than a product of an individual" (Breuch 133). Writing, from this perspective, is the result of, and evidence of, interaction within social groups of which we are members: "We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate

and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say” (Harris 98). We can see elements of a post-process perspective in the teachers who are comfortable looking over several drafts of student essays, which include written feedback from teachers and other students. They want to see the overt, written social interaction that has taken place and has shaped the essays students have included in their portfolios.

It seems very likely that the teachers in this study who described quite different ways of reading and assessing heterogeneous portfolios were operating from some of the different constructs of language, writing, and writing ability discussed here. These varying constructs are embedded in their comments about writing assessment, realness, and pedagogy. Even more interesting than the fact that teachers have different perspectives is the fact that many teachers seem to mix and match these philosophies in the face of heterogeneous portfolios. It is almost as if they are able to change gears, so to speak, in mid-assessment in order to accommodate the different student texts with which they are faced. Many instructors described feeling pulled between these different philosophical positions. Perhaps they normally tend more toward a social constructivist approach to writing but will pass a relatively weak portfolio on the basis of a strong impromptu essay, or vice versa. Our way(s) of teaching may or may not actually reflect a consistent philosophy of language or learning: “We may teach one thing, assign another, and actually expect yet a third” (Fulkerson 679). This reveals, I believe, the schizophrenia our field has in terms of how we conceptualize the self and language. We frequently discuss the self and language use as socially constructed, and yet we often approach assessment from an internalist perspective. According to Huot, this is not a situation that is unique to my department but is, rather, representative of the current state of writing assessment in general:

We have evolved pedagogies that conceive of teaching as a coaching and enabling process, while holding onto conceptions of evaluation as a means for gatekeeping and upholding standards. Assessment practices that use grades and teachers’ written comments as ways to ‘sort’ students or demand mastery of certain ‘skills’ outside the context of a specific piece of writing remain at odds with a pedagogy that recognizes students’ socially positioned nature as language users. These practices ultimately deny that linguistic, rhetorical, and literate capabilities can only be developed within the context of discovering and making meaning with the written word. We have yet to create in any substantive way a discourse that links the teaching and assessing of writing. (164)

Practical Suggestions and Conclusions

Many of us have an urge to try to have the best of both worlds and to work out a method of continuing to include impromptu writing in final portfolios. Some programs try to stipulate that timed writing count for only a certain percentage of the points possible in a portfolio (and, presumably, a certain number of points must be attained to pass a portfolio); but, if we think through this situation, it could end up creating more problems than it solves or resolves. Say, for instance, that timed

writing were to count for 20 percent of the assessment decision for each portfolio. What would happen if students earned the full 20 percent (or 20 points) for the timed writing, but only earned 40 points for the quality of their revised work? That would put some assessors in an unpleasant and unclear situation regarding how to proceed. It also adds a complexity to portfolio assessment that detracts from the readers' ability to try to look at the contents of the portfolio as a "whole" when making their decision. While percentages and point values provide the illusion of structure and organization in the assessment process, I'm not sure they truly help resolve the ambiguity of the heterogeneous portfolio.

So what is a program to do? I propose several steps writing program directors might take to bring their programs closer to implementing portfolios in a more consistent way than is represented by the empirical evidence in this study. First, one has to work from the assumption that the faculty of any program hold the various beliefs regarding writing ability discussed in the last section. We should never assume that just because "the field" has moved toward a certain way of thinking that this shift represents the perspectives of the majority of faculty in the (actual) field. Thus, the first step in implementing—or renovating—a portfolio program should be to draw out the variations in the construct of writing ability that exist among the local faculty to be involved in the program. One could use a variation on Bob Broad's protocol for "dynamic criteria mapping" designed to elicit instructors' notions of writing ability rather than the criteria they use to judge the quality of student writing (*What*). The goal of this interaction would be to have faculty articulate what they think writing is, how writing ability develops for an individual, and what they think ideal writing pedagogy looks like. The program director could use the themes of my analysis in this essay as a structure for the discussion: achievement versus proficiency, what counts as real writing and the role of revision. This stage in the planning of a portfolio program could take place over an entire semester, through a series of meetings focused on drawing out the faculty's beliefs on these vital issues—issues that will end up influencing the way they read student portfolios.

Once the faculty's often tacit notions of writing ability have been drawn out via a process of open discussion, the faculty must be provided adequate opportunity to read, discuss, and debate influential texts in portfolio theory and practice. It is not enough that program leadership be familiar and comfortable with portfolio theory and rationale. The entire faculty of the program must be included in this socially constructed process of reading, comprehending, and resisting these texts. These discussions could take several forms, depending on available funding and time. A program could run a semester-long reading group or conduct a series of seminars or workshops for portfolio faculty. The precise form this step takes will vary based on the needs and resources of an individual program. Reading lists for these programs should be generated locally based on what the program director discovered about the faculty's notions of writing ability. Readings should also represent critiques of portfolio assessment and the "process" movement in general. I suggest this for two reasons. Firstly, by opening the faculty up to scholarship that is critical of portfolio assessment, administrators send faculty a clear message that

they are not trying to indoctrinate them into one way of viewing portfolios. Instead, they signal to the teachers that we see them as intellectual peers and partners in the project of implementing portfolio assessment in the program. Secondly, at this point in history, portfolio assessment and the process movement have been critiqued every which way possible. Being exposed to the critiques that do exist may make skeptical faculty less likely to generate these lines of criticism themselves and will allow them to see that program administrators are aware of the challenges endemic to portfolio assessment. Clearly, there are several goals in this step. This step is intended to be at once informational, social, dynamic, and empowering for the faculty involved in the program. This step should treat the faculty as professional partners in creating a portfolio program, not as “staff” to be “directed” to use a particular form of assessment.

These first two steps should help program leadership develop a more intimate knowledge of their faculty’s beliefs and philosophies of writing ability and instruction. Based on what they have learned through this process, program administrators need to make a choice regarding final assessment practices in the program they direct. If the leadership selects portfolio assessment, then my advice is to commit completely to that approach and that philosophy and to create a portfolio system for the program that does not involve an impromptu, timed writing “test” or “sample.” As we can see from the experiences of the teachers in this study, heterogeneous portfolios send mixed messages to teachers and open the door for teacher-assessors to employ radically different assessment practices using some combination of the documents presented in these portfolios. A portfolio free of any impromptu writing encourages assessors to rely exclusively on writing that has been the result of class-based work and that has been generated through interactive processes involving peer review and teacher feedback. My point here is that if a program wants to really use portfolios for program assessment, they need to do so without the “net” or “crutch” that impromptu writing provides. In addition, it is important for administrators of a portfolio program to realize that faculty will always hold varying beliefs about writing ability and instruction. Just because everyone is using the same protocol does not mean that they actually employ the protocol in the same way. By eliminating the impromptu writing from the portfolio altogether, one eliminates the possibility for a particular type of variation to occur.

Although the field of composition has clearly embraced portfolios as the current best practice in writing assessment, individual programs may decide that, for various reasons, portfolios are not for them. Perhaps students in a program are subject to external, mandated standardized examinations, the results of which supersede the outcomes of a course. Perhaps a program is under pressure to create a method of standard assessment in a short amount of time. Perhaps the majority of the faculty in a particular program believe strongly in the validity of impromptu assessments. Whatever the case, there are many good reasons why the leadership of a program might decide not to use portfolios for collaborative final assessment. In this case, I recommend that they create some system of assessment that meets their needs but that does not attempt to be a portfolio. Program directors will have to

find supplements for the functions they will lose by not using portfolios for collaborative assessment, such as faculty development, collaboration, and program review.

This small study illuminates a number of directions for future research to help us refine our ways of using portfolios. We need further study investigating the point at which teachers draw the line on teacher commentary and revision. How much is too much commentary? Where is the line between feedback and “taking over” or “rewriting” student work? How do teachers working in a collaborative assessment system navigate each other’s feedback styles? We also need more research exploring the student side of heterogeneous portfolios. How do students understand the role of revised writing versus the role of impromptu writing? Finally, we need to keep working to develop assessment measures that take social constructivism to heart. How can we assess an individual’s performance—or ability—while acknowledging that the performance is socially constructed? To echo Huot’s conclusion, we do not yet have a discourse of assessment that is consistent with our beliefs and practices of teaching writing. ◀

Note

1. This instructor took five days to assess an entire class of portfolios. She looked at each portfolio on each of these five days to assess a different “aspect” of the student work in each portfolio.

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