Put Portfolios to the Test

*Linda Vavrus*

What would you give for a student assessment tool that yields more than a single score? One that reveals a range of skills and understandings, supports instructional goals, values student and teacher reflection, shows changes and growth over a period of time, and provides for continuity in education from one year to the next? Well, there’s good news: That kind of assessment tool has been around for quite some time. Called portfolio based assessment, it is a collection of selected student work that serves as the basis for ongoing evaluation.

Artists and writers have always used portfolios to showcase their work, but these days, more and more teachers are turning to portfolios in an effort to better assess what their students are learning and how well they are learning it. In fact, portfolios have been identified as one of the top three curriculum trends by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development—a trend indicating that teachers, administrators, and policy makers are taking a new look at standards for student performance.

But when it comes to actually using portfolios to create meaningful assessment records, many teachers find themselves in unfamiliar territory, confronted with a whole new series of tough questions. This article will help answer those questions and tell how you can put portfolios to work in your classroom this year.

**PICTURE OF A PORTFOLIO**

A portfolio is more than just a container full of stuff. It’s a systematic and organized collection of evidence used by the teacher and student to monitor growth of the student’s knowledge, skills, and attitudes in a specific subject area. And so it is what’s in the container, rather than the container itself, that becomes a student’s portfolio.

A student’s portfolio might have several distinct sections representing, for example, literacy, mathematics, science, or social studies. But whether the portfolio represents a single content area or is divided into several different areas of the curriculum, you need to make certain decisions: What kind of structure will the portfolio have? What will go into it? How and when will you select items to be included? How will the portfolio be evaluated or scored? And finally, what will you do with it at the end of the year?

**DECISION #1: What Will It Look Like?**

Every good portfolio should have both a physical structure and a less obvious, conceptual structure. The physical structure refers to the actual arrangement of documents used to demonstrate student progress.

*Linda Vavrus*  
*Put Portfolios to the Test*
The conceptual structure refers to your underlying goals for student learning. After you identify those learning goals, you’ll decide how best to document them with selected student work. For example, if a goal for pre-readers is to recognize that pictures carry meaning, you might audiotape a student talking about the pictures in a book. This tape is included in the portfolio to document performance in that area.

DECISION #2: What Goes In?
Before you can decide what goes into a portfolio, you should ask yourself the following questions:
- Who is the intended audience for the portfolios? Parents? Administrators? Other teachers?
- What will this audience want to know about student learning?
- Will the selected documents show aspects of student growth that test scores don’t capture? Or, will they corroborate evidence that test scores already suggest about student performance?
- What kinds of evidence will best show student progress toward your identified learning goals?
- Will the portfolio contain best work only, a progressive record of student growth, or both?
- Will the portfolio include more than finished pieces: for example, ideas, sketches, and revisions?
As you’ve no doubt seen, most of the answers come back to what you identify as important instructional goals.

Portfolios are authentic forms of assessment because they represent real learning activities going on in the classroom. It follows, then, that you select portfolio samples from the variety of daily and weekly assignments that students engage in. For example, in documenting literacy progress, you might select samples from students’ writing folders, excerpts from student-kept journals and literature logs, audiotapes of oral reading, workbook assignments, and projects completed for various content areas that required reading and writing.

A science portfolio, on the other hand, might include lab reports documenting a student’s ability to conduct, analyze, and interpret findings. It may hold project work, photos of experiments being conducted, or questions posed by students for further study. And in math, a student portfolio might document improvement in increasingly complex story problems, samples of computation, explanations of why a mathematical process works, or solutions to open-ended questions.

REFLECTIVE RECORDS
Work samples only tell part of the story. Documentation of students’ reflections and self-evaluations is equally important. At various points in the year, ask students to study their portfolios. You may focus their attention, for example, on a single piece, a series of revisions, two samples that show growth in a particular area, or the entire collection.

Linda Vavrus
Putting Portfolios to the Test
In considering a writing piece, students might ask themselves: What do I like most about this work? What was important to me when I wrote it? If I revised this, what would I change? How has my writing changed since I wrote this? How is it like other pieces of my work? Is it my best sample? The student’s comments then become part of the portfolio.

Anecdotal, written records of your own observations of student activities or information from conferences with students, parents, or other teachers can complement students’ reflective records. These records are particularly appropriate when creating portfolios for young children.

**DECISION #3: How and When to Select**

If you’re going to use student portfolios, you’ll need a clear and efficient system for deciding how and when documents go in and come out during the school year. The end of a unit, semester, or year are all good times to select work samples that best demonstrate student growth or achievement and remove other pieces as appropriate.

You might want to try creating a time line, identifying regular times during the year for selecting student work. This ongoing process of developing the portfolio is an ideal opportunity to involve students in making decisions about their work. In order to participate in the construction of portfolios, they must reflect on their work. In the process, they develop the ability to monitor their own progress.

With practice like this, students will learn to recognize a broader range of qualities in their work. For example, students may go from first rating their work based on neatness or spelling accuracy to noticing word choice, clarity of expression, use of imagination, or possibilities for revision. When student insights are valued as portfolios are assembled, student responsibility for learning grows.

**TEACHER REFLECTIONS**

You’ll also need a system for dating, describing, and explaining your reasons for selecting the samples you choose. Developing such a system presents one of the biggest challenges in portfolio assessment and requires finding time to reflect on student performances. A caption system can make it easier.

Try documenting your reflections by attaching written statements to each work sample. Each statement should identify the sample, tell what prompted the activity, explain why the document was selected, and interpret what the document shows about a student in terms of the instructional goals. In this way, captions become a useful device in monitoring ongoing growth.

**DECISION #4: Evaluating Portfolios**

The key to scoring a portfolio is in setting standards relative to your goals for student learning ahead of time.
Portfolios can be evaluated in terms of standards of excellence or on growth demonstrated within an individual portfolio, rather than on comparisons made among different students’ work. For example, if one criterion of “excellent” reading ability is to read orally with appropriate expression, a child’s taped oral reading sample should demonstrate changes in inflection that indicate different characters or moods. Or, a taped reading at the beginning of the year and the end of the year can be used to determine individual growth.

Setting standards for evaluation means consulting with other teachers in your building or district to find out what they consider high-level work. You might establish an evaluation scale listing a progression of performance standards to be met and examples of the kind of work that is representative of each of these levels of achievement. Or, identify, for example, what students should demonstrate at each level then describe what constitutes inadequate, satisfactory, and exemplary work. Whatever the system, include enough characteristics at each level to be able to locate where a student’s work toward a particular goal falls in terms of the standards set.

**DECISION #5: Passing Portfolios On**

The advantage to keeping student portfolios doesn’t end when the school year is over. Portfolios give you opportunities to promote continuity in your students’ education and to collaborate with other teachers and your students in the process. By passing a portfolio on, you can share important information with the student’s next teacher. Get together with other teachers to discuss what is expected at different grade levels and to find out what they want to know about your students’ accomplishments this year. This kind of information helps pare down portfolios before turning them over to the child’s next teacher.

Review conferences between student and teacher are a good place to begin making decisions about what to keep and what to remove. Which pieces best demonstrate the child’s growth in that year? Which does the student feel is the “best piece?” Is there a favorite? Which pieces will best help next year’s teacher understand where the student is in terms of that year’s goals? Is one piece particularly unusual or revealing?

**IS IT WORTH IT?**

Portfolios have the potential to create more authentic portraits of what our students learn. While they do require more time and organization on your part, the benefits outweigh the cost. Mary Jo Kever, a fourth-grade teacher at Holy Trinity School in Des Moines, Iowa, who has been using portfolio-based assessment since last year, sums it up: “I’m breathing a sigh of relief that we are finally coming around to documenting and evaluating the growth that I just know is happening in my classroom.”