How can teachers make a portfolio more than a static collection of papers?

The passive portfolio has earned recognition as a method of assessment; however, an active portfolio which can generate ideas and teach new ways of thinking offers unlimited possibilities for teachers and learners. While the passive portfolio sits on its laurels, the active portfolio is a place to record, collect, and fine-tune thinking as perceptions and ideas are formulated and re-formulated. A passive portfolio is a "show-case" portfolio out of the writer's hands, while an active portfolio is a "working" portfolio which changes and grows with new input as it creates and generates new output. The learning is in the process itself, and teachers need to show students how to think about that process more carefully.

THE PASSIVE PORTFOLIO

Although passive portfolios may be vivid and colorful, they lack the creative spirit of the active, working portfolio. For example, think about the collections parents put together, saving all the important papers their children carry home from school. I, for one, took the best pieces of writing from each year, added those precious notes preschoolers write to Mom, and put them together in a folder. In addition to this writing folder, I had some other documents in a scrapbook, newspaper clippings, certificates of achievement, birthday cards, photos, etc. I combined the artifacts in a three-ring binder. This was the first portfolio I ever put together. It tells a good story, but it is a passive portfolio. For posterity's sake, it is great; but it cannot change or grow or help its creator to learn new information or to become more literate.

Many teachers-in-training use a show-case portfolio to organize and highlight their successful experiences when they are ready to interview for a teaching position. The contents typically include reference letters, a teaching certificate, a transcript, the student's philosophy of teaching, an A paper, a supervisor's evaluation, a scholarship award, etc. Administrators seem to appreciate this extra effort because, aside from the information that the portfolio contains, they feel that the portfolio reflects organizational skills, decision-making skills, and literacy skills as well as an indication of classroom experience. Although this requires creativity and is a reflection on past achievements, this portfolio is also passive. It is not a learning tool.

Another kind of portfolio used by junior faculty during the early years at the university requires that novice professors gather evidence of their accomplishments for promotion and tenure. Portfolio assessment is used at the university level as assistant professors approach third-year review and tenure (Edgerton, Hitchings, Quinlan 1991; Seldin, 1993). Documents and materials related to teaching, scholarship, and service
are displayed and explained for others to evaluate. Somewhat like an artist’s portfolio, the professor’s best works can be examined through student evaluations, tests, course syllabi, speaking opportunities, and especially publications. The content and organization of this portfolio can determine the professor’s future. Its importance as an evaluative tool is obvious, but it too is passive. Its purpose is for making personnel decisions, not for improving performance.

When the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards began looking at “what classroom teachers should know and be able to do,” portfolio assessment was the choice for making some of those decisions (Petrosky 1994). School Site Portfolios were used to help in the assessment of teacher knowledge in order to determine whether teachers meet the requirements for certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. However, a recent article in *English Journal* clearly demonstrated the need for teachers to oppose efforts toward the “standardization” of teacher assessment (Petrosky 1994). A passive, “rank and sort” portfolio would not be helpful to teachers attempting to learn from their own experiences in order to improve their teaching practices.

**MOVING TO THE ACTIVE PORTFOLIO**

Historically, we have come a long way in a very short period of time. In reviewing the last ten years when little had been published on portfolios, researchers in writing assessment at the university level were investigating better ways to assess (Camp 1985; Burnham 1986; Elbow 1987).

Roberta Camp was exploring the writing portfolio for placement in the transition from high school to college. Peter Elbow was concerned with writing proficiency and portfolios with college writers. Donald Graves described the reading/writing folder, conferencing, and keeping track of younger students in *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*. Nancie Atwell described a reading/writing workshop (process) approach for middle school students. In secondary classrooms, we wondered how a collection folder could be more helpful to writers in high school.

Teachers began to question the folder’s contents. When carefully chosen, the contents could illustrate a developmental story of a student’s writing over time. But upon close examination, it also told a story about writing instruction. It was useless to argue that a 45-minute writing sample could be as informative as a collection of long-term artifacts. Teachers soon discovered that by imitating the process used by “published” writers, students became more engaged in their writing. When students made decisions and judgments about particular pieces of writing, they gained a sense of ownership in their writing. When students were asked to share their writing, they became more responsible writers.

Whether the teacher was looking for evidence of growth and development or indicators of skill level and writing competency in a variety of genres, the process portfolio was obviously more informative for the teacher and more helpful to the writer. The most significant change, however, came from the initiation of prewriting strategies and thought-provoking journal prompts.

You may wonder how a journal can magically transform a passive writing folder into an active portfolio. Consider the following scenarios. Miss Passiviti is a traditional teacher. She knows about journals. Her students take notes in their journals. They outline chapters and write summaries. When she gives an overview and tells the students about the important aspects of texts, they record everything. The students use this information to write papers, and the best ones are placed on the bulletin board.

**ARTIFACTS IN AN ACTIVE PORTFOLIO**

**Reading Artifacts**
- Making connections through reading.
- Diagrams
- Booklists
- Booknotes
- Summaries
- Outlines
- Sketches/drawings

**Thinking Artifacts**
- Constructing our own knowledge base.
- Dialogue
- Responses to prompts
- Process memos
- Tracing thinking charts
- Steps to problem solving
- Mind maps

**Writing Artifacts**
- Making meaning through writing.
- Self-evaluations
- Formal papers
- Poems/letters
- Publication piece
- Reflections on learning
- Written plans

**Interacting Artifacts**
- Sharing and scaffolding ideas.
- Peer assessments
- Group consensus
- Brainstorming charts
- Arguments
- Defending/justifying
- Problems and solutions

**Demonstrating Artifacts**
- Application and transfer of learning.
- Video
- Speech
- Oral interpretation
- Creative drama
- Project
- Exhibition
Mrs. Activiti, on the other hand, takes a different approach. She has the students doing double-entry journals: they record text notes in one column and their questions or comments in the other. She tells the students that this is the next best thing to having a conversation with the author. Instead of lectures and quizzes, she uses journal prompts and questions to encourage reflective thinking. Students discuss, debate, and share their ideas before Mrs. Activiti assigns group projects where problems are solved and projects presented. Students make handouts to illustrate their ideas and explain their thinking. Their formal papers are sent to real publishers after self-assessment, peer assessment, and teacher assessment. Students can look at their thinking and learning patterns and connections in a final reflective journal write.

With a thinking journal at the heart of the portfolio, it can be magically transformed into a thoughtful, active portfolio. The developmental process can be seen as the journal changes and grows with each experience, interaction, and reflection. Consider the outcomes outlined at the bottom of the page.

**ACTIVE PORTFOLIOS**

The active portfolio has a diversity of artifacts which are assessed in a variety of ways. Although tests are not mentioned as an outcome of the active portfolio, traditional tests can be added to any portfolio. The point is that when different artifacts are evaluated in different ways by different evaluators, the chances increase for a more authentic assessment of the final portfolio. Furthermore, classroom assessment strategies become models for students to follow as they learn to manage and monitor their own learning. Students who actually use a variety of peer and self-assessment tools begin to understand how assessment and learning connect.

Active portfolio strategies increase student learning. The reflective, meaning-making process is evident in the artifacts (see sidebar). The learning process itself is the most valuable feature; the active working portfolio enables students to see their learning progress, while at the same time it allows them to understand that the assessment process is in itself a learning experience.

From a teacher's perspective, the active port-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PASSIVE TO ACTIVE OUTCOMES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PASSIVE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Students have read a text and taken notes or written a summary.</td>
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<td>2. Teacher gives quiz on the reading, consisting of five recall questions.</td>
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<td>3. Teacher goes over quiz and begins a discussion emphasizing the important aspects.</td>
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<td>4. Students write a paper from one of the important aspects of class discussion.</td>
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<td>5. The teacher hangs the best papers on the bulletin board for parents' night.</td>
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<td>6. Final assessment is done by the teacher, or raters will holistically rank and sort the unknown students' papers.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ACTIVE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Students have written a double-entry journal response of dialogue with text, using questions and comments to clarify and extend their thinking.</td>
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<td>2. Students are asked to draw their responses to the text. Papers are evaluated in groups of four students.</td>
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<td>3. Students still in groups are asked to explain their thinking as they evaluate peers. Students articulate what they know while making sense of the drawings.</td>
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<td>4. Students prepare a presentation for the class using their own drawing, incorporating the new ideas and thoughts recently gathered from others.</td>
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<td>5. Students work in pairs to put a publishable piece together. Peers assess the work, suggesting ways to improve it. The best pieces are sent to a publisher, and the rest are bound for use in the classroom.</td>
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<td>6. Students assess their own work with checklists. They review the work of their peers. They defend and justify their assessment strategies. Thus, they learn to monitor and manage their own learning.</td>
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folio becomes a more accurate tool for assessment, but primarily it focuses on an individual’s learning process.

An active portfolio which can generate ideas and initiate new ways of thinking offers unlimited possibilities for enhancing teaching and learning. Creating an active portfolio enables students to know what they know and how they came to know it. The processes of recording, collecting, and selecting are not enough; constant and continual assessing, interacting, reflecting, and sharing are processes which engage students and lead to personal growth and change.

The active portfolio is a powerful process resulting in meaningful connections which enable students to take the responsibility for their own learning. The active portfolio lets students see that learning is what portfolio assessment is really about.

**Works Cited**


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