Writing Assessment: Grading to Writing Environments with Portfolio Assessment
By Scott D. Stratton

Now what starts with the letter A?
My Grade starts with “A”
Let’s think of other things
That start with “A”
Oh, who cares about the other things?

“A” is my grade, that's good enough for me
“A” is my grade, that's good enough for me
“A” is my grade, that's good enough for me
Oh, my grade, my grade, my grade starts with “A”
(Adapted from Joe Raposo’s “‘C’ is for Cookie”)

Cookie Monster is obsessed with cookies. Whether they are chocolate chip, Oreo, peanut butter or oatmeal matters not. Although he is toothless, the wild-eyed, fuzzy, blue creature from Sesame Street can’t get enough of the little, round desert crackers. With them he’s the happiest monster on the block. Without cookies, however, he becomes rather frightening and behaves in a manner similar to that of drug addicts. He becomes fidgety, paranoid and depressed and we oftentimes find him breaking down at the end of a scene, tearing into the nearest plate of cookies as if it was the last dish of cookies in that quaint, oddly secluded neighborhood.

Students, in the same respect, are obsessed with grades. And we often find them displaying the same withdrawal symptoms as Cookie Monster when they don’t know where they stand (fortunately, I have yet to witness a student tear into a stack of papers the way Cookie Monster tears into plates of cookies). Still, in all fairness to students, it should be stated for the record that their obsession with grades is probably more valid than Cookie’s cookie mania. It’s understandable that they want to know how they’re doing in class, or how they did on a presentation or a piece of writing. They’ve become so accustomed to being ranked on their performances, and relying on these ranks to assess themselves, that it’s impossible to blame them when they bombard us with questions like “What’s my grade?” and “How am I doing?” At the same time we are also pleased that they ask us these questions. After all, these questions are signs of interest in the class, interest in taking on responsibility. So, to settle fears for a little while we give them their grades. Begrudgingly. I say Begrudgingly because grading is tough business. Donald Graves, who
dedicated three whole paragraphs to assessment in his indispensable teaching guide, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, might have summed up teachers’ sentiments on grading best. He writes:

> Grading is a fact of life in all school systems. If you don’t give grades now, in a few years someone else will. I will never get used to giving grades to anyone. How can a letter or number sum up the full work that a person has done for term or a year? I want grades to help, not hinder. Once again, my inward reaction says they hinder. If I must grade I make the best of a difficult situation. (93)

Some writing teachers looking to make the best of their difficult grading situation have turned to portfolio assessment, which, in the last 10 years, has become one of the most popular methods to assess student writing. In fact, portfolio assessment has become so popular that the trend has been catchy on a much larger scale. Pittsburgh implemented a citywide writing portfolio plan in the early 90s, and even states such as Vermont, Oregon and Kentucky have been assessing student writing through portfolio collections for as many as a dozen years now. As far as Oregon and Kentucky are concerned, although the portfolios are significantly weighed, those states require portfolios in addition to in-place final exams (Hillocks 155).

So, what’s the big stink about portfolio assessment? It would take a book to answer that question. I can and will, however, give you glimpses into that gigantic answer in exploring how teachers are using portfolio assessment to change their classroom atmosphere from one of grading to one of writing. This chapter also addresses issues of validity and reliability, and how these core assessment issues have either been resolved or recontextualized to allow teachers to move past grading issues and on to a more dire matter: writing. The issues in writing assessment are the focus of the first part of this chapter, because understanding where assessment has been before portfolios washed ashore is integral to understanding how portfolio assessment has revolutionized the composition classroom atmosphere.

**Writing Assessment to the Present**

Changes in writing assessment over the past 50 years, according to Kathleen Blake Yancey, are best historicized by thinking of those changes as three overlapping waves, all of which feed into the others but none of which completely displaces the ones that came before (483). During the
first wave of writing assessment, which rolled in between 1950 and 1970, objective tests that sought to indirectly measure writing skills were the norm. This wave carried with it objective, multiple choice tests of usage, vocabulary and grammar. This sort of writing assessment dominated practice for nearly 20 years because test makers and many educators alike believed that such objective tests informed classroom practice: how and what to teach students throughout the school year. Moreover, these tests of writing skills were easily measured. In other words, it was easy to determine what a student knew about writing. After all, there was only one possible answer for each question posed.

The second wave, which Yancey approximates was the next 16 years after 1970, the objective, indirect method of measuring writing ability remained, but a more direct method of measuring writing ability also developed: the holistically-scored essay (484). Although the holistically-scored essay allowed raters to score an actual piece of student writing, thus directly assessing what the student could demonstrate about his knowledge of writing, this form of assessment has more recently been found to misconstrue what writing is and how it is composed. That is, students and teachers alike were given the impression that one writing sample from one particular mode of discourse created in a single sitting in a short period of time aptly defines writing.

The third and final wave, which is still washing ashore and thus developing, has carried with it a new and more direct and authentic measurement of student writing. Yancey notes that

> The one model [holistically-scored] essay is replaced by a set of texts, so that: a single draft becomes two drafts; two drafts becomes two drafts accompanied by some authorial commentary; two drafts plus commentary become an undetermined number of multiple final drafts accompanied by a “reflection,” and this set of texts becomes the new: portfolio assessment. (Yancey 486)

Although Yancey notes that several, complicated factors led to the overlapping of these assessment waves, issues surrounding reliability and validity in assessment were major factors in each new incoming wave. These two, little words also play a key role in answering how portfolio assessment has grown so popular in the eyes of writing teachers and their students. Although validity and reliability are fairly easy concepts to understand — validity implies that you measure what you intend to measure, and reliability means you have the ability to
measure it consistently (Yancey 487) — the role each word has played during the history of writing assessment is a bit more complicated.

When writing assessment took the form of objective, multiple choice tests for the two decades after 1950, the reliability of these tests dominated the fact that what was being measured was not valid student writing. Yancey points to a 1952 survey that found that of 100 responding educational institutions, 90 percent administered placement tests for incoming freshman; 84 percent of which were standardized and most of which were created by text experts (E. Sasser qtd. in Yancey 487-88).

During the second wave, that of holistically-scored essays, the tables turn on reliability in favor of a more valid way to assess student writing. Much of this concern, Yancey notes, is that by the middle 1970s teachers saw a large discrepancy in the way they were teaching students and the way students were being assessed. If you’ll recall, during this time period a focus on teaching writing as a process rather than a product began to develop (Murray’s 1972 article “Teach Writing as a Process Not Product” was one of the first to discuss this new writing focus) and teachers were beginning to evolve from literature teachers to writing teachers. In other words, they knew more about writing, what it looked like, and how it was composed. They also knew that objective, standardized tests were making less and less sense when the primary virtues of those tests centered on reliability. While educators knew that assessing actual student writing would be more valid than objective test questions about writing mechanics, style and usage, it was believed that to assess student writing one had to make sure that piece of writing could receive the same grade by more than one grader. In other words, the assessment tool had to be reliable. Thus, holistic scoring rubrics were eventually developed to assure that student writing could be consistently scored.

Unlike the objective tests of the first wave, holistic scoring did not produce the same level of reliability. That is, raters of objective tests find that they can agree on a student’s grade nearly all of the time (remember that they have all the test answers in front of them), thus usually producing an interrater reliability coefficient of 1. The difficulty in getting raters of student essays to agree, however, has forced acceptable interrater reliability standards to plummet; .7 is usually the minimum acceptable interrater reliability coefficient for holistically-scored essays. Still, although the coefficient is acceptable, the issue of reliability in holistic scoring remains an issue.
Peter Elbow, however, points out that to get agreement among essay raters is to train those raters before and during scoring sessions. “What training means,” Elbow elaborates, “is getting those scorers to stop reading the way they normally read.” In short, the reliability of holistic scoring is not measuring students’ texts by real readers in natural environments, but scoring “in artificial settings with imposed agreements” (“Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking:” 189).

Brian Huot also points out that because so much emphasis has gone into ways to bring reliability up to par, there has been an overall lack of literature produced to validate holistic scoring. Huot argues this notion using David Charney’s words:

[T]he validity of holistic scoring remains and open question despite such widespread use[,] the question of whether holistic ratings produce accurate assessments of true writing ability has very often been begged; their validity is asserted, but has never been convincingly demonstrated. (qtd. in Huot 206)

Throughout this third wave, validity has continued to be the testing feature of choice, although reliability has once again been the primary focus of concern. In terms of measuring what the given assessment intends to measure, student writing, proponents of portfolio assessment have argued that if one text increases validity, how much more valid is assessing two, three or four texts? The College Composition and Communication Conference Committee on Assessment highlighted this point in their 1995 position statement on writing assessment. The position, which was developed over the course of two years, stresses as its foundational claim that “in all situations calling for writing assessment...the primary purpose of the specific assessment should govern its design...” (431). Additionally, the Committee’s fourth statement notes that one piece of writing, even if it is produced under the most ideal circumstances, does not indicate literacy. The statement goes on to stress the importance of “more than one piece of writing, in more than one genre, written on different occasions, for different audiences, and evaluated by multiple readers.” Finally, in a bold, yet telling statement, statement four finalizes with: “this realization has led many institutions and programs across the country to use portfolio assessment” (432). Throughout the entire position statement, portfolio assessment is the only assessment “wave,” as Yancey would call it, specifically mentioned.

In terms of reliability, however, “Writing Assessment: A Position
Statement” is much less bold. The third statement associates evaluation with reading in the sense that evaluating writing is to read. What a reader draws from a given text and uses as the basis of evaluation depends on two factors: (1) how that reader’s language use has been shaped; and (2) what the specific purpose for reading is. The Committee concludes its statement on reliability by suggesting that evaluators be recognized as a “community of interpreters who can function fairly — that is, assess fairly — with knowledge of that community” (434).

Elbow, who was used earlier to gently attack the training of raters for holistic assessment, thus attacking the reliability of holistic assessment, now takes the side of reliability in portfolio assessment. Additionally, Elbow also clears up what it seems the CCCC Committee failed to verbalize clearly: that neither literary theory nor philosophy can help us decide on right or wrong interpretations of texts; the fact that holistic scoring sessions achieve impressive interrater reliability coefficients should be an indication that something is “fishy,” smelling of the implication that those who scored were simply not reading the way they normally read (Foreword xiii).

Elbow, in his foreword to Pat Belanoff and Maria Dickson’s book, Portfolios: Process and Product, suggests a new piece of testing jargon that I believe works well when discussing reliability standards in portfolio assessment. Elbow notes that while good validity suggests that the assessment provides a good portrait of what is being measured, good “mirror validity” suggests that the assessment “gives a good picture of how we actually look at pictures.” Essentially, what Elbow points out is that allowing raters to evaluate writing the way they normally read not only validates reliability in a somewhat recontextualized meaning, but also increases the validity of validity (xiii).

Additionally, reflective pieces also objectify some of the subjectivity in Elbow’s “mirror validity.” When students explain in reflections why they developed a certain character, moved a particular plot along at a certain speed, changed this word, moved that paragraph, deleted this scene, capitalized that phrase, they help readers understand their writing decisions. So, in addition to reading the way readers naturally read, which actually translates to guessing what writers were thinking during their writing processes, raters of portfolios have the ability to actually see learning. The have this ability because students have made their learning visible in reflection.

Still, if this new, “authentic” context of reliability isn’t enough to convince,
Joan Herman and Lynn Winters point out that portfolio raters CAN get the reliability numbers as well. A 1993 study found that raters in Pittsburgh’s portfolio system were able to get interrater agreement between .6 and .8. Additionally, Herman’s 1994 study of an elementary-school based portfolio system found agreement to be much higher: between .82 and .98 (50).

Finally, with reliability presented in Elbow’s “authentic” context, it should be pointed out that although Herman and Winters see the many-sided benefits of portfolio assessment, they do wonder if validity is compromised by classroom teachers who use portfolio assessment. They point out that if a process approach to writing is studied, as is the case with most portfolio-centered classrooms, nearly all stages of the writing process allow students to get assistance from others, primarily teachers, parents and peers. In short, Herman and Winters wonder “Whose work is it?” (52).

While this is a valid argument, it is not one that would last long in the hands of champions of authentic assessment. Houghton Mifflin Company define authentic assessment as “assessment tasks that resemble reading and writing in the real world and in school.” Moreover, the company points out that “working on authentic tasks is a useful, engaging activity in itself; it becomes an ‘episode of learning’ for the student. From the teacher’s perspective, teaching to such tasks guarantees that we are concentrating on worthwhile skills and strategies” (Houghton Mifflin Company).

The words “real world” stick out in the Houghton Mifflin definition because students who get feedback or learn something new from another writer during their writing process emulate what writers do in the real world. Real writers in the real world ask peers for advice; they ask for help. Can you imagine newspaper reporters not sharing information when their beats collide? an editor telling the author he can’t give her feedback on chapter three because it wouldn’t be her book anymore? the publisher hiding all the dictionaries in his magazine’s news room because “the writers should simply know how to spell stuff if they want to earn that much money?” These scenarios would give a new definition to media competition wouldn’t they?

Additionally, Houghton Mifflin’s words, “episode of learning,” stand out because collaborating with peers, whether they are fellow students, colleagues, editors or publishers, is in itself an engaging activity that promotes learning. The reporter who learns about a mayor on another
reporter’s beat finds that he just learned something new, and can then implement that learning to finish his story and meet his deadline. The author who gets substantial feedback from her editor finds that she’s now got something to consider in her revision process. What she does with that advice is another matter, but she at least has it to mull over. And the publisher who discloses the location of all the dictionaries finds that his writers are able to gain much more control over the language, which obviously entails learning more about the language.

Just as portfolios have grown on instructors and state and city school systems over the last decade, authentic assessment has been carried ashore by the same wave. And many instructors are now beginning to implement much more authentic writing into their instruction. Students, in turn, are also placing more authentically written pieces in their portfolios for evaluation. Kentucky’s portfolio writing system, for instance, requires that students put together a six-piece portfolio at the end of the year. One goal, according to Writing Program Director Starr Lewis, is to get students writing for a variety of authentic purposes and audiences (193). In other words, the how-to-make-a-peanut-butter-and-jelly-sandwich descriptive essay is tossed out the window. Letters to the editor are now common pieces in portfolios, as are memoirs, personal essays, short stories and poetry. And, as they should, students are talking their ideas over with other students. Moreover, students seek outlets for publication for their work. Publication, after all, informs students that they must be aware of the audience for which they write. Writing teachers have achieved this authenticity aim by producing online and print magazines for student work. Other teachers have helped students, usually the most capable, get published in local newspapers, magazines, and journals, among other outlets.

The evolution of writing assessment to the current popular and preferred form, portfolio assessment, provides us with the best choice for measuring student writing. In addition, placing reliability in this new, “authentic” context allows portfolio grading to have this gentle yet natural evaluation flaw that also assists in validating reliability. So, with these two issues seemingly out in the open, yet out of the way, it appears portfolio assessment gives teachers a good reason to stand behind their grades. At the same time, portfolio assessment allows teachers to hide students’ grades behind the writing done in their classrooms.

“Writing Environments” Rather Than “Grading Environments”
Christopher Burnham believes that the combination of students and
grades has its share of harmful side effects in the classroom. He argues that students’ overwhelming concern about grades serves as a “major stumbling block” in the process of writing, which, by writing’s very nature, translates to an obstacle to effective learning (125). Elbow expands Burnham’s notion by pointing out that students oftentimes instead of working toward learning, work toward grades; something they translate as doing what the teacher wants to see. Thus, their attempt to please the teacher and obtain good grades becomes something much less than learning. What it becomes, for example, is students making revisions based on teacher comments because, and only because, they believe that making these revisions will insure a good grade. The revision becomes blind revision rather than a rethinking of their writing (Elbow 197). Hence, line five of my epigraph rings true to students’ perceptions of learning. If they make these blind revisions and get that “A” then “who cares about the other things?”

What do we do about grading then? Well, some writing teachers over the last 20 years have begun to rely on portfolio assessment to change their classrooms, as Burnham explains, from a “grading environment” to a “writing environment” (137). He asserts that portfolio grading systems allow students to obtain ownership of their writing and at the same time assume responsibility for it. In short, portfolios, he argues, “create independent writers and learners” who no longer find themselves wrapped up in writing for the sake of a grade, but wrapped up in writing for the sake of writing, learning and a multitude of other personal reasons (“the other things”). The fact is, when writing becomes personal grades border on becoming irrelevant.

For instance, a student who writes a birthday poem for her mother is probably more concerned about the look on her mother’s face when the piece is read than the grade the teacher hands out for the writing. A boy who writes a music review on his favorite band and then posts it on the Internet for all the world to see feels a tremendous sense of pride when Amazon.com notes that 35 out of 41 people found his review helpful. Whether the teacher finds the review helpful matters not. And the young woman who writes a passionate letter to the editor about the 9/11 attacks, and then finds her letter in the paper three days later, is little concerned about what the teacher thinks of the letter. Besides, she’s far to busy glowing in that just-got-published sort of way. And this glowing does occur. I know because I’ve witnessed a 55-year-old man, my uncle, relishing in the glory of a published letter to the editor...for an entire week! The point is that these fictional students, and my factual uncle, if you want to throw him into the mix, wrote not just because they had to,
but because they wanted to. The words, line by line, paragraph by paragraph, verse by verse, and draft by draft mattered to them, because the topics mattered to them. Authors don’t write for the sake of a grade. Although they write for an audience and with a specific purpose in mind, the sense of pride they feel when a work stirs emotion in their readers is motivation enough to make writing satisfying. In that respect, writing induces selfishness on the part of the author as much as it induces emotion on the part of readers.

This is the core of authentic writing. And although authentic writing is not directly related to portfolios in the writing classroom it is certainly at the heart. And we must treat our student writers as real writers in the real world. According to Shelly D. Smede, this means establishing an authentic tone right from the start. In addition to her teacher role, Smede puts on the mask of editor and publisher in her classroom. Before students begin work on a piece of writing, they must first submit a query letter to her explaining exactly what they intend to do. They must explain the premise of their piece, the target audience, outlets for publication, and other specifics (92). Not only does this query letter allow the teacher to conference with students prior to first drafting, but it sets an authentic stage and subtly explains to the student that there exists a higher order beyond the teacher’s eyes. Moreover, editors oftentimes help shape a piece of writing in its early stages. They give directions, reminders and suggestions. This is their job.

It is also their job to respond to writing. Elbow points out that responding to rather than grading drafts maintains a classroom atmosphere that is centered on teaching and learning (188). He believes that grading or ranking leads students to get so hung up on “oversimple quantitative verdicts” that learning takes its place in line behind the grade received. Students become much more concerned about the grade than the comments the teacher took time to write on their papers. “Have you noticed,” he writes

    how grading often forces us to write comments to justify our grades? — and how these are often not the comments we would make if we were just trying to help the student write better? (190)

Essentially, what Elbow argues for is evaluation, which he explains as “looking hard and thoughtfully at a piece of writing in order to make distinctions as to the quality of different features or dimensions” (191). Although Elbow argues for evaluation as a replacement of grades, I argue
for evaluation in terms of leading up to a grade. After all, we have to face the fact that eventually, school districts are going to want us to assign grades. Evaluating drafts and holding our grading tongue, so to write, during this response time allow students, based on our comments, to rethink their thoughts without a numerical obstacle getting in the way. Karen Mills-Courts and Minda Rae Amiran note that in portfolio-based classrooms even the weakest writers can succeed when the focus is kept on improvement rather than on grading (106). And Elbow points out that even the “A” students who have been rewarded in the past for handing the teacher what the teacher wants to see, are able to rethink their judgments and sell themselves in a manner that is no longer equated with selling out on their values, thoughts and beliefs. (190).

Moreover, students have the opportunity to evaluate their peers. Given the proper training, students can learn to respond to the early drafts of their peers effectively and efficiently. Not only does this remove some of the teacher’s paper load, but it allows students to become spectators in another writer’s world. In this role, according to James Britton, students “generate and refine” their writing system. In easier terms, what Britton means is that students are free to explore what other writers do. They are able to think critically about other writers’ techniques, and in responding to their peers they are able to apply their value systems (Britton 15).

Allowing students to respond also builds a warmer community of writers, and these writers, once they get over the initial hesitation about leaving themselves open for criticism, learn to appreciate suggestions, comments and questions about their writing choices. In turn, this community as a whole becomes less concerned with grades and more concerned with writing, learning and, probably most important, having fun in the process. Mills-Courts and Amiran have witnessed this writing enjoyment first-hand and point out that students

feel empowered by this collection that clearly demonstrates how far they have come, that is concrete evidence of their growth as learners. They often laugh with chagrin at the earliest drafts, delight in later versions, and quietly take pride in the final products. (107)

And portfolio grading systems are set up in a manner that is conducive to learning. As composition classes have shifted over the last 30 years to focus greater attention on the writing process, particularly revision, it
seems natural that portfolio assessment has followed close behind. Jeffrey Sommers points out that just as students are encouraged to revise their writing, indicating that writing is not a one-shot deal, the portfolio is not created in a single sitting, but changes or develops over a period of time. In addition:

The notion that writing occurs over time in response to the rhythms created by the individual writer [is] a notion that makes eminent sense when one considers that no two writers seem to work at precisely the same pace and that no two pieces of writing seem to take form at the same pace even for the same writer.

Nevertheless, the portfolio by its very nature suggests self-rhythm because some pieces will require more drafts than others, even if explicit deadlines are prompting their composition. (Sommers 154)

The claim that ideas, and thus writing, take form at different paces for different writers is one that most standardized writing tests do not recognize. In the classroom, however, students and teachers working with portfolios have the opportunity to implement this long-ingored truth. In other words, portfolio assessment takes the pressure off of grading by allowing students to have time: to think, to write, to respond to writing, to talk, to think more, to write more, to write less, to edit, and finally, time to reflect on all the time they have spent in their unique writing process. The fact is, good writing takes time. There is simply no getting around that. Moreover, realizing what one has learned about writing takes even more time; some students in portfolio-based classrooms have been known to revise “finished” first-quarter pieces in the final quarter of the school year simply because they had a writing revelation. This last point is gravy on top in that it reveals more proof that students feel a sense of ownership in regard to their writing. They want to make pieces as good as they can be, going so far as to revise pieces that have been “finished” or graded long ago. This last point on self-realization moves us to the next section: reflecting on writing.

Roberta Camp believes that reflective pieces in writing portfolios serve two main functions: (1) to help students learn about themselves as writers and writing in general; and (2) to help teachers learn about what students have or have not learned or demonstrated (10). Reflection, I believe, does not play a direct role in deemphasizing grading, but instead asks students to become major players in their own learning. They are
asked, for instance, to reflect on significant changes between drafts, to explain why they used first person point of view over third, to admit deficiencies that need to be addressed in the next draft, and to explain what they might try next, to name a few. With all this emphasis on thinking about writing, who has time to worry about grades? Moreover, most reflections are not graded, but are used by the teacher in conjunction with the whole portfolio to help him better understand the student’s writing decisions.

The ability to reflect critically on writing is essentially the difference between able writers and not so able writers (Swartzendruber-Putnam 88). Anne Frank might have exemplified this notion best when she wrote the following in her diary: “I am the best critic of my own work. I know myself what is and what is not written well” (177; April 4, 1944). It is not difficult to argue that Anne was an exceptional writer at the tender age of 14. It’s also not difficult to argue that she knew what good writing was and was not. This is the goal of reflection. Teachers want their students to see the light, to understand that thinking about their thinking provides first-hand feedback for self-directed improvement in their writing (Mondock 59). And, according to Terry Lee Underwood, students do eventually see the light. Underwood, who studied in 1998 a middle school language arts portfolio assessment system for one year, found that “average students” who are prompted with reflective questions and events “become more aware of the increasingly more sophisticated challenges that writers face” (21). For instance, Underwood notes that in the beginning of the year half of the student writers were challenged by simply writing the paper. Length, in particular, was a major concern. By the end of the year, however, none of the students mentioned simply doing the writing as a challenge, and only one mentioned length. In contrast, writing in unfamiliar genres, tackling new topics, and writing with a specific purpose for specific audiences, to name a few, were the major challenges most of the eighth graders believed they faced when they sat down to write in the third trimester (20-21).

While reflective pieces do assist in removing thoughts of grading from writing classrooms, they can also be used when the time for administering grades arrives. Whether one grades individual pieces in the portfolio or grades the portfolio as a whole text, students have the opportunity to play a significant role in soliciting their grade. First off, they should be allowed to choose which pieces go into the portfolio (most are). Secondly, it should be noted that “soliciting their grade” was intentionally written because students should be allowed to defend the grade they choose. Using generalized or specific portfolio rubrics, students can
compute their own grade and then in a reflective piece defend their computation. Although some teachers who read this might wince at the thought of their own students holding the key to their grades, sharing the grading responsibility with students has been found to be a rather effective grading method.

For Howard Miller, grading, before he began sharing the responsibility with students, was comparable to “being a one-legged chair, trying to maintain [his] balance while holding up the weight of 100-plus students” (42). As it turned out, the missing chair legs had been nearby all along; He simply neglected to attach them. The missing chair limbs, he says, were the students, their peers and their parents. While not all teachers can succeed in involving parents in the portfolio process, getting at least the individual students involved is a must, especially in student-centered classrooms where teachers should be relinquishing control over to students anyway.

Windsor Middle School teacher Carol Mikoda, for instance, asks her eighth graders to formulate goals at the beginning of each grading term. When the time for grading arrives, she asks students to reflect in a letter to themselves how well they met those goals. Based on their reflection, students choose the grade they feel they deserve and submit their portfolios. Nearly all of the grades go into Carol’s grade book unchanged. Rarely, she says, does she have to override a student’s choice. I suppose this truth boils down to yet another truth: you can lie to others, but never to yourself. Still, when she does have to make a grade change, forewarned students understand that she reserves the right to step in and make the proper adjustments. Now, I’m not, by any means, implying that teachers should always look for the easy way out, but isn’t adjusting a handful (if that) of grades much easier than formulating hundreds, especially considering that students are more or less on the mark with their self-assessments anyway?

Finally, since time (the time to think, talk, read and write) is a major player in transforming the “grading environment” into a “writing environment” in portfolio-centered classrooms, it should be pointed out that time is also a major player in students’ ability to work in these same classrooms. Although writing portfolios have been utilized for as many as 20 years now, teachers can not assume that students are familiar with all the components. The fact is, there are several versions of the writing portfolio (showcase and work-in-progress are two). I have saved you the trouble of distinguishing between these versions simply because what I have written in this paper applies to all of them. And, since portfolio is
now a fairly common word in education, thus fairly self-explanatory, I did not feel the need to define it in any restricting manner. Still, behind pointing out that there are various types of portfolios is a purpose: to explain that just as students need time to produce writing, they will also require a great deal of time to get used to the aspects of this uniquely intense classroom environment. In this regard, there is no such thing as assuming too little.

Works Cited


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