

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	v
Chapter 1: Project Purposes	1
Chapter 2: Collect and Organise	17
Chapter 3: Select Key Artifacts	31
Chapter 4: Interject Personality	49
Chapter 5: Reflect Metacognitively	57
Chapter 6: Inspect to Self-Assess	69
Chapter 7: Perfect and Evaluate	87
Chapter 8: Connect and Conference	99
Chapter 9: Inject/Eject to Update	117
Chapter 10: Respect Accomplishments	125
Conclusion	135
Table of Activities	155
Bibliography	161
Index	165

INTRODUCTION

Rationale

“Portfolios in classrooms today are derived from the visual and performing arts tradition in which they serve to showcase artists’ accomplishments and personally favoured works” (Zimmerman, 1993, p. 1).

Teachers are borrowing the artists’ portfolios to support new educational practices that emphasise the students’ role in constructing their own understanding and in assessing their own progress. Portfolios also allow students to use creativity and originality to display their work in ways traditional tests cannot. They provide more effective ways to measure academic skills and to make informal decisions about instruction (Zimmerman, 1993). Portfolios allow students to show their *process* and their *products* as well as to move learning from the abstract to the concrete.

The Portfolio Concept

Zimmerman (1993) points out that the portfolio concept is gathering momentum in education, but it is not a new concept. Graphic designers, artists, architects, investment brokers, performers, and models often use portfolios to organise their work and to showcase their skills and talents. The items in the portfolio provide concrete examples of what a person is capable of doing and, therefore, provide another dimension beyond the written résumé or a test of skills.

“Using portfolios for assessment is an idea that is gaining popularity across the curricula. With increased attention being given to whole-language learning, meaningful mathematics, thematic science, and co-operative learning, multiple-choice tests no longer seem adequate for measuring student abilities” (Hamm & Adams, 1991, p. 18).

Authentic Assessment

The portfolio has emerged as one of the more powerful tools for assessment and evaluation in education. *Assessment* is the process of gathering evidence of what a student can do and *evaluation* is the process of interpreting the evidence and making decisions based on it (Burke, 1993). *Authentic assessment* is a term used to describe real tasks that require students to *perform* and/or *produce* knowl-

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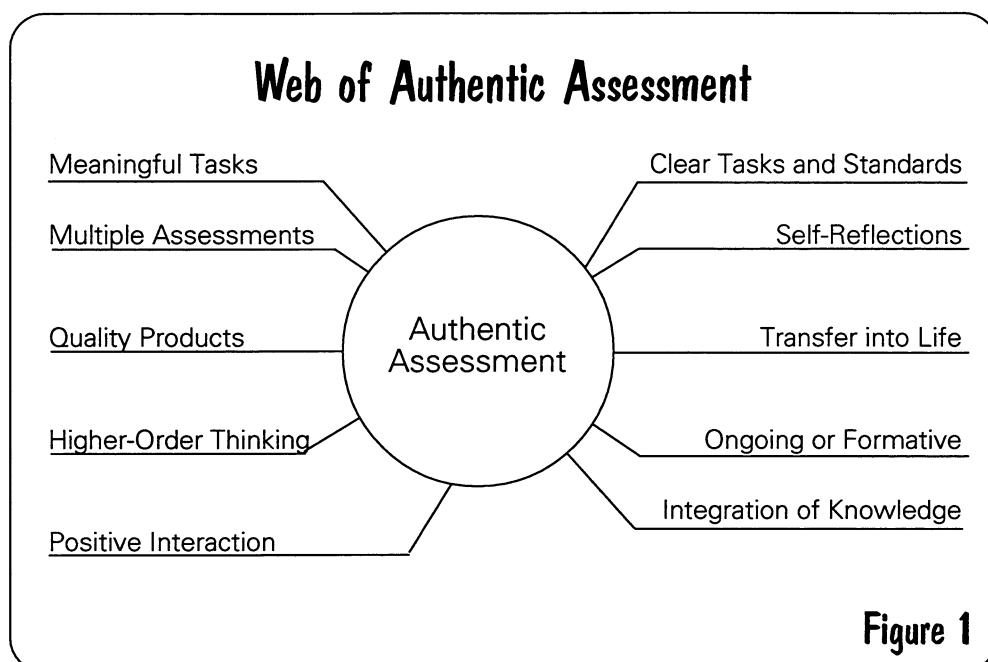
Performance assessments require students to “generate rather than choose a response.”

edge rather than *reproduce* information others have discovered (Newmann cited in Stefonek, 1991). The assessment/evaluation process has become a major focus of school reform. Teachers recognise that standardised tests and traditional paper-and-pencil tests do not always capture what students understand and are capable of doing. They agree with Brown (1989) when he says, “The concept that testing is initiated externally from the students, separate from the learning process, and primarily aimed at determining whether inert knowledge is in students’ short-term memories exercises far too much influence over school people today” (p. 115).

The emphasis today is shifting from standardised tests and traditional multiple-choice tests to alternative forms of assessment that require a “direct examination of student *performance* on significant tasks that are relevant to life outside of school” (Worthen, 1993, p. 445). Performance assessments require students to “generate rather than choose a response” (Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters, 1992, p. 2). Students need to perform a task, demonstrate a skill, show a process, or produce a product that shows what they know and can do rather than take a test that may only measure how well they can memorise or take tests.

“A valid assessment system provides information about the particular task on which students succeed or fail, but more important, it also presents tasks that are worthwhile, significant, and meaningful—in short, *authentic*” (Archbald & Newmann, 1988, p. 1).

Experts like Collins, Wiggins, Newmann, and others (as cited in Stefonek, 1991, p. 1) offer these characteristics of authentic assessment: meaningful tasks, clear standards, reflections, transfer, formative and integrative, emphasis on higher-order thinking, and quality performances as well as quality products. (See Figure 1.)



Repertoire of Assessments

Just as the artist chooses from an array of watercolours to paint her picture, the creative teacher chooses from a repertoire of assessment tools to paint her picture of a student as a lifelong learner. Both works of art require planning, organisation, careful selection, and frequent pauses to step back and view the “work in progress” from afar to see if the colours are “working” before the picture is finally finished. The more varied the colours, the more vivid the picture; the more varied the assessments, the more meaningful the evaluation.

Portfolio as a Palette

The artist’s palette serves as an organiser for all the various paints, just as a portfolio serves as an organisational palette for all the authentic assessment tools. The portfolio pulls all the “loose ends” together to paint a picture of the whole student—not just an isolated or fragmented picture of the student. “A portfolio is more than just a container full of stuff. It’s a systematic and organised 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” (Vavrus, 1990, p. 48).

Teachers need to select from an assortment of “different tints of paints” to motivate students and to help them understand important concepts and learning processes, regardless of their cultural diversity,

The portfolio pulls all the “loose ends” together to paint a picture of the whole student—not just an isolated or fragmented picture of the student.

ability levels, behaviour dispositions, or socioeconomic backgrounds. The richer the palette, the more chances the students will have to appropriately demonstrate their skills, explore their talents, and discover knowledge for themselves. (See Figure 2.)

While a standardised test score is only a “snapshot” of a student on a particular day, a portfolio shows how the student’s work evolves over time.

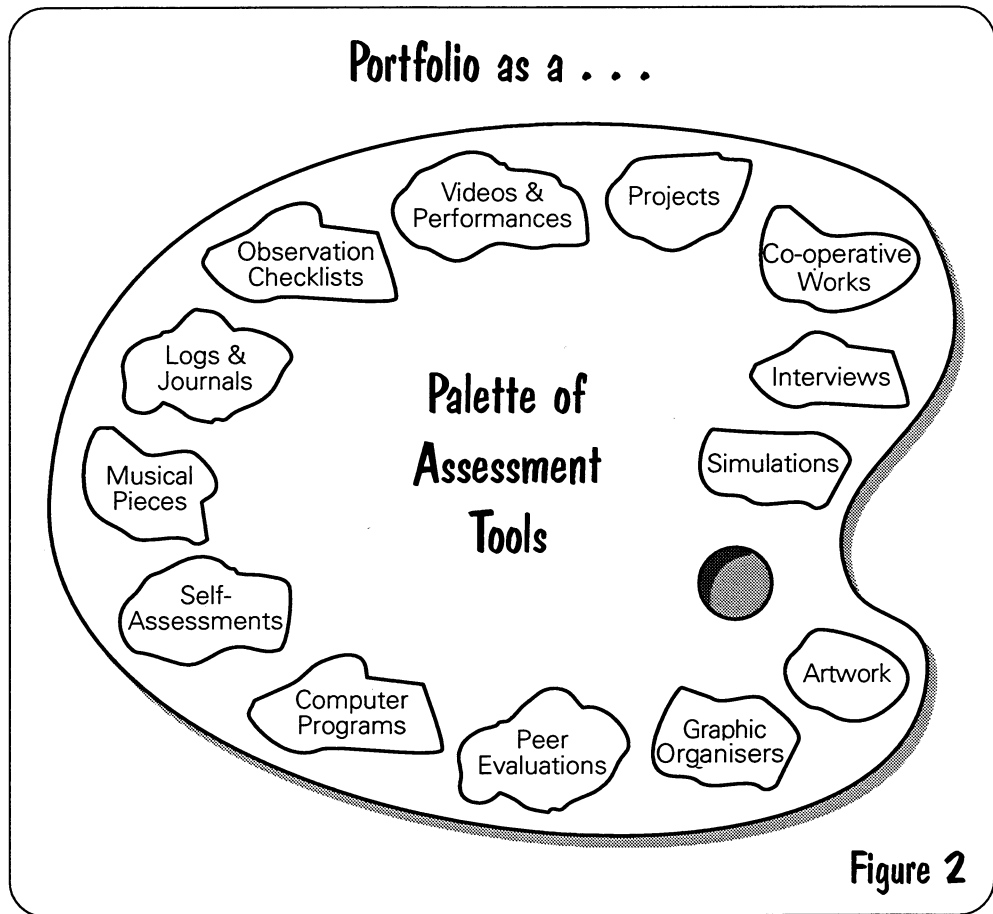


Figure 2

What Is a Portfolio?

A portfolio can be both a container of evidence of a student’s skills and a portrait of a student’s development through the school year. While a test score is only a “snapshot” of a student on a particular day, a portfolio shows how the student’s work evolves over time. Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer (1991) and the Northwest Evaluation Association (a group of teachers from seven states) formulated this definition: “A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student’s efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merits, and evidence of student self-reflection” (p. 60).