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S

tudent Portfolios

A Collection of Articles

Learning preserves the errors of the past, as well as its wisdom.—Alfred North Whitehead

A case for keeping loose sheets of paper, drawings” is the unassuming definition given to the word *portfolio* in the Concise Oxford Dictionary. It is this idea of “a case that holds the papers and drawings” that encapsulates the current use of a student portfolio in the learner-centered classroom of the 1990s. Of course, the actual development and use of the student portfolio in today’s kindergarten to university classrooms encompasses much more—a cadre of philosophical, organisational, and implementational considerations.

Questions that accompany this idea range from the most basic and practical questions—“What are portfolios, really?” “How do we produce them?” “Who does them?” “Where do we store them?”—to the more philosophical questions of “Why should we use them?” and “What do they provide that traditional assessments don’t already provide?” In addition, procedural questions arise, including “How are they used?” “What weight do they carry in terms of the overall assessment of the student?” and “Do portfolios replace all other methods of assessment?”

In fact, the idea of student portfolios, while simple in its initial concept, may quite possibly be more like the proverbial Pandora's box than the aforementioned "portable case." For the idea of student portfolios does indeed create a boxful of decisions that must be made, as indicated by the plethora of questions suggested above.

With these concerns voiced clearly at the outset, the motive behind *Student Portfolios: A Collection of Articles* begins to come into focus. This collection of pertinent articles, from leading voices in the field, is provided as a primer to the idea of exploring, deciding to use, and actually using student portfolios in the classroom. All written within the past few years, the essays gathered here are organized into three distinct groupings that target the areas of choosing, using, and perusing portfolios.

Section 1: The Vision: Choosing Portfolios focuses on the initial concerns that accompany the exploration of the student portfolio as a viable assessment tool. The articles in this section provide the "big picture" about student portfolios, giving readers the opportunity to survey the concept of portfolio assessment as a bridge from traditional assessment to more authentic measures, as well as to look at portfolios as a new instrument in the changing paradigm of schooling created by the constructivist philosophy of learning.

Section 2: The Mission: Using Portfolios highlights the practical concerns of implementing portfolios in the classroom, and the many and varied aspects of the actual implementation process. Essays in this section address the issues of purpose, content, value, assessment of work samples in portfolios, and the role of electronic portfolios. The authors approach questions of what we really care about in portfolio use, how to make them user friendly, the actual contents of portfolios, ways to evaluate through student work samples, and how technology enhances our use of portfolios.

Section 3: The Message: Perusing Portfolios targets the reflective sharing of the portfolio in the total assessment process. In this final collection of writings, the authors discuss the self-assessment element of portfolios, the role of student-led parent

conferences as an enhancement to portfolio use, questions parents have regarding portfolios and portfolio conferences, and the serendipitous benefit of portfolios in terms of reflections for staff as well as for students.

In concluding these introductory remarks, it seems prudent to note one perhaps not-so-obvious truth about the use of student portfolios. The opening definition of portfolios as “a case for keeping loose sheets of paper,” chosen for its simplicity in presenting a complex idea, may also be a bit misleading. For the authenticity of portfolio assessment rests in the process itself: collecting work samples over time, periodically selecting key pieces for final inclusion in the portfolio, reflecting on the meaning of each artifact, and eventually showcasing the portfolio for peers, parents, and teachers. In fact, it is this continual process of portfolio development and the sharing with an audience that is alluded to in the term “processfolio,” often used by Howard Gardner (see *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory into Practice*, 1993). As stated so eloquently by Robert Louis Stevenson, “To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive.” It is the reflective journey and the anticipation of an audience that provides the motivation for student involvement. And it is the striving for perfection that drives the student to select and reflect with care, judgment, and insight. In sum, it is the process *in total* that undergirds the value of portfolio assessments.