The Case for Curated Portfolio Assessments in English and Language Arts Classrooms

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NEH Seminar: Philosophers of Education

Summer 2017

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Paper submitted per requirements of the National Endowment of the Humanities

Seminar: Philosophers of Education, July 28, 2017.

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When the academic year draws to a close, you will inevitably find me staring down that last stack of English essays (or rather that excess of Inbox file attachments blaring out at me in insolence), and I will probably be wondering out loud (yes---to myself) *why* I felt the need to assign *yet another* formal essay due the last week of school. Because my students are *always* in the process of writing a formal paper, chances are they have just received comments and grades on their last writing assignment only days prior to their next one's due date (substantive feedback takes time, as any English teacher will gladly explain). When this overlap occurs at the end of the year, students have little to no time and 'mind space' for follow-up, re-writes, or self-reflection.[1] Is the value of the feedback they receive diminished because they are limited in its practical application at the end of the year? Likewise, I am awash not only with the need to quickly mark these individual assessments for a cumulative grade, but to then also synthesize and evaluate each writer's growth in order to offer feedback in summative narrative comments. To this end, I want my students' most representative writing--- those pieces that best reflect the depth, breadth, and variety of their abilities to communicate ideas clearly and artfully styled (as I urge them, "give me your 'gold medal' performances"). I also want my comments to be useful touchstones that the students can return to if and when needed, so it is of vital importance that the feedback be insightfully personalized, precise, pragmatic, and instructive, all of which is achieved more effectively through the evaluation of a richer body of exemplar work. The solitary final essay (or similar summative assessment) does not serve these purposes adequately, exposing a fruitful area for growth in my curriculum plan.[2]

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[1] Students do receive grades and written feedback on these final papers, but do they actually have time to internalize the feedback at the end of the year so that they can actualize it in subsequent work?

[2] To clarify---though I recognize the importance of summative assessment in the evaluation of learning objectives, I question the necessity of both the timing and composition of the standard essay form I have traditionally used. This

I am essentially asking two primary questions regarding this pedagogical and practical quandary:

- How can a teacher incorporate a curriculum component that encourages students to more longitudinally reflect on their own critical growth as readers, writers, and thinkers?

- In what ways can this type of introspective assessment be valuable to the teacher in a holistic evaluation of the student's writing growth?

In my own course, one solution might be to offer a comprehensive portfolio submission of work self-evaluated and self-selected by the students as representative of their own growth and ability. A loose definition refers to a portfolio as a compilation of work accumulated over a period of time. As with most assessments, a portfolio's configuration may vary widely across disciplines and grade levels, its goals and use varied by teacher, curriculum objectives, student need, etc. An extensive body of literature on portfolios explores their effectiveness as graded assessments (both formative and summative) of vocabulary, grammar, literacy, and writing outcomes for ESL and ELL students (Andrade & Evans, 2013; Belgrade, 2013; Lam, 2014; Lam, 2016), while in English composition courses, portfolios often function to show the stages of writing (outlining, drafting, revising) that culminate in a final essay (a single exemplar) (Burke, 2015; Murphy & Smith, 2013). For the purposes of discussion in this paper, I am interested in the idea of portfolios as curated collections of a student's self-selected, representative work through the course of an academic year (multiple exemplars rather than a singular writing). My primary aim in this reflection is to explore the potential role and value of portfolios as self-

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is something I am more at liberty to explore because my current department does not give a final exam and almost all major assessments are formal essays. I am not here to argue against a cumulative exam or some other type of graded summative assessment; schools and departments vary so widely in their practices and requirements, and I recognize that in a standardized curriculum, a portfolio assignment may be impractical.

regulated learning (SRL) opportunities in both formative and summative assessment, as they engage the student's centrality to their own learning, foster multi-dimensional learning, enable self-evaluation of growth, and cultivate practical habits for success in life.

The progressive SRL model emphasizes "learner independence and self-monitoring in the learning process at different stages of schooling" (Lam, 2014, p. 699) as a critical component of a student's ongoing educational experience. In addition to direct instruction, the teacher's role in SRL is to anticipate, facilitate, and encourage opportunities for student autonomy in their interaction with learning concepts and materials. In this respect, SRL echoes the philosophical and pedagogical work of Maria Montessori (1917), who saw student-centered choice (enabled and supported by teacher-guides) as a critical wedge for students to use in accessing their own learning potential. Montessori advocated a "blend of order and free choice" (Lillard, 2008, p. 328), and I envision a curated portfolio as a means by which that "free choice" can be directed more towards recursive self-reflection and self-awareness. The importance of student agency in SRL extends beyond just the basic production of work to include "the setting of, and orientation towards, learning goals; the strategies used to achieve goals; the management of resources; the effort exerted; reactions to external feedback; [and] the products produced" (Nichol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 199). As with skills and knowledge acquisition, SRL assumes that learner independence occurs over time and through cumulative growth (Lam, 2014). A portfolio would prioritize the connection between feedback and subsequent work throughout the course (or across years, program-permitting), asking students to return to their writing over and over again to re-evaluate, look for connections and patterns, and make decisions about their representative strengths. Self-monitoring of their evolving writing style (and the setting of goals in response) echoes one of the core tenets of education theorist Howard Gardner (1997)-- the

belief that the "child himself or herself is at the center of learning," not positioned as a passive

recipient of teacher-centered instruction. As Gardner (1997) emphasizes, "let [students]

internalize the feedback so they themselves can say what's going well, what's not going so well."

I think the key word here is "internalize"---it is essential that a portfolio assessment allow

students ample space and time to understand its purpose and then to enact meaningful,

autonomous self-evaluation and reflection.

A portfolio assessment can be what Gardner terms "a rich experience, enabl[ing[students

to learn along several dimensions at once" (Moran, Kornhaber, & Gardner, 2006, p. 25); for

Gardner, these dimensions are intended to be fluid and interactive with one another, not isolated

or mutually exclusive. These "dimensions" are the foundation of Gardner's (2011) "Theory of

Multiple Intelligences" (MI), and a portfolio assessment could, at minimum, directly engage a

student's linguistic (written and spoken communication), intrapersonal (self-awareness, self-

understanding), and existential (exploration of larger, universal life questions) intelligences.

Writing education is inherently built on a foundation of developing linguistic skills. Traditional

single-exemplar writing portfolios ask students to track their linguistic development through one

essay or assessment, but a curated portfolio could encourage students to view their writing

progress across assignments (and possibly curricular disciplines), rather than in isolated chunks.

As examples, a student could evaluate how their sentence variation has evolved through the

course of a year or be asked to explain how their particular grammar and syntax patterns

contribute to a characterization of their individual writer's voice. In the process of self-evaluating

their linguistic growth, students will simultaneously engage their faculties of introspective

understanding, and "students who strengthen their intrapersonal intelligence gain a better

understanding of areas in which they can expect to excel, which helps them plan and govern their

own learning" (Moran, Kornhaber, & Gardner, 2006, p. 27). Using a portfolio as a means of

iterative goal-setting can maximize the direct correspondence between student work and their

individual learning targets[3], and subsequently encourage more purposeful practice at progressing

towards those goals. Gardner also emphasizes the diagnostic value of "rich experiences," as

"teachers can observe student performances to find root causes of misunderstandings and to

figure out how students can achieve superior understandings" (Moran, Kornhaber, & Gardner,

2006, p. 26). This idea returns me to my original impetus for exploring student-generated

portfolios---collecting student work and my feedback on it is a regular diagnostic routine of my

evaluation of students, but when I meet them to discuss my observations, the "rich experience" is

more teacher-driven than student-centered, limited by definition as coming from a single

observer (and not an "interna[l]" (Gardner, 1997) stimulus). I would argue that this diagnostic

value needs to apply to students as active evaluators as well; if I can offer students a tool (the

portfolio) to participate more fully in those conversations, I would hope that the learner-teacher

evaluation relationship could more fully embody Gardner's "rich experiences."

  Through a more holistic, longitudinal view of their own work, students may more readily

recognize their own growth, a key word in my prior discussion of the SRL model and Gardner's

MI theory. Though this a key term that may preliminarily seem sort of messy and intangible, it is

growth that is at the heart of philosopher John Dewey's conceptualization of education. For

Dewey (2004), "(i) the educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end; and that

(ii) the educational process is one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming" (p.

59-62). The learning becomes "conscious and retrievable" (Murphy & Smith, 2013, p. 107)

when achieved through an iterative process of self-reflection and self-evaluation, and one which

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[3] This would be a welcome change from the more general, sometimes generic goals I have seen from my students when they did not have a self-generated, cumulative way of seeing their own work.

the student more comfortably owns and can internalize because it stems from their own intellect,

not from an external construct of evaluation (like the teacher). Dewey's emphasis on

"reorganizing, reconstruction, and transforming" speaks to one critical goal of a curated portfolio

assessment---that in the self-selection and review of representative writing a student will not only

perceive how they can more holistically improve their own work, but that they are then inspired

to do so for personal fulfillment, without merely the incentive of just a grade[4]. In this respect, I

see a connection between Dewey and psychology scholar Carol Dweck (2006), whose

exploration of "growth mindset" versus "fixed mindset" helps to bridge the ideological goal of

self-improvement and its practical role and application in the classroom. A student with a

"growth mindset" learns to "understand that important qualities can be cultivated" (Dweck,

2006, p. 13-14), and that 'cultivation' is an ongoing process worthy of time and effort beyond a

single assessment or grade. Curating a portfolio of work will hopefully lead students to feel the

forward, progressive momentum of writing and learning and encourage them to naturally ask the

questions, 'what is next?', 'how can I continue to improve and grow?,' 'how is my personal

writer's voice changing, developing?'

　　　In addition to the benefits of multi-dimensional engagement and the exploration of self-

growth, the compilation of portfolios can help students develop utilitarian and long-lasting habits

for success in any discipline. In his famous *Talks to Teachers* in the 1890s, philosopher William

James (1983) urged his readers to consider education a deeper reservoir of cultivation beyond

just evaluation, as "the teacher's prime concern should be to ingrain into the pupil that

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[4] A common counterargument from educators is that students are not intrinsically motivated to look back at their own work if they don't see a potential for raising their grade. This reasoning often leads seamlessly into an assertion that all work must be graded in order to motivate students. A successful, fruitful portfolio assessment might challenge these preconceptions. I also wonder if regular participation in self-evaluation or self-assessment activities (like a portfolio) can help to mitigate student perception that grades simply measure them against their peers, rather than reflect their own growth and/or potential.

assortment of habits that shall be most useful to him throughout his life. Education is for behavior, and habits are the stuff of which behavior consists" (p. 43). Practically, assembling a portfolio requires consistent organization (the ability to keep track of and maintain papers), patience (the very nature of a portfolio means that it develops over time; one must live with its state of constant flux and wait for the final product), and self-discipline (a student must make time to periodically go back and assess their new writings to decide on its inclusion), all skills that can be used readily in many facets of life. In addition to practical habits, portfolios may be instrumental for students in fostering more abstract or intellectual habits of the mind. For example, as a student self-assesses their own writing, they will have to face feelings of both pride and disappointment (connected to the sense of ownership discussed in the prior paragraph); they may wrestle with whether or not to feel confident in their own ability to self-evaluate; they will likely confront what it is like to change one's perspective on one's work after a long period of time has passed; they may feel motivated to revise particular parts of their writing because they want to improve. Working through these experiences can help students develop habits that stem from more abstract concepts such as pride, self-confidence, and intrinsic motivation, just to name a few. These are, of course, habits that one might argue a student could learn through many different types of classroom activities, not just portfolios; one would hope that this is *absolutely* evident in all classrooms, that teachers *do* consistently use a variety of dynamic assessments to engage students' interdisciplinary practical and intellectual skills. Yet I am eager to explore how portfolios can "give evidence of range," an interesting word in that it implies breadth and staying power--- the learning is not isolated in disciplinary silos, but rather cultivated in flexible, applicable interdisciplinary habits (Murphy & Smith, 2013, p. 105). Educators and researchers Murphy and Smith (2013) characterize this as the "necessary elasticity" of portfolios (p. 105), a

term I find fitting because it connotes flexibility, resilience, and cohesion (ideas are held together).

Ultimately, I want my students to use their writing and reflection to dig into what Thomas Jefferson (2009), in his *Letter to Eldridge Gerry*, Philadelphia, January 26, 1799, called "the texture of the human mind, and the slipperiness of human reason" (p. 146), as their dynamic ideas move back and forth from rough to refined, concrete to abstract, on an ever-expanding, sometimes messy continuum of growth as we work through our curriculum. These are not quantifiable, concrete skills that can be easily evaluated by any one assessment, essay, or test, but rather complex, sometimes unpredictable areas for recursive exploration. Embracing the "diverse intellectual profiles" (Moran, Kornhaber, & Gardner, 2006, p. 23) of my students, I see portfolios as a way to maximize learning opportunities that provide longitudinal, introspective self-reflection as part of the learning and evaluation process, another way they can "stretch [them]selves" (Dweck, 2006, p. 14), for it is in the "stretching" that Dweck sees an opportunity for learners to "thrive on [challenge]" (p. 21).

Questions for Further Exploration:

- In what ways does the portfolio medium (print versus digital) affect student engagement in the self-regulated learning process?

- What role might peer feedback and peer critique play in a student's compilation of their portfolio?

- How can curated portfolios be sustainable and practical across disciplines and with a population of vastly different educators?

- How might a more common acceptance of portfolios as part of an admissions application

  process alter the ways in which institutions of higher learning evaluate potential students?

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