

A Case Study of a Portfolio Final Exam Pilot Project: A Student and Teacher Collaboration

by
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What is the Portfolio Final Exam?

Portfolio is becoming a common term in language arts classes at all levels. Nevertheless, the word Portfolio remains a mystery to many teachers and students. What is a portfolio? The mere mention of the word often stirs debate because we don't all share a common definition. Part of this confusion arises from the fact that portfolios have multiple uses: a means of entrance assessment, a file of work in progress, a display collection of finished work, and a means of exit assessment, to name a few.

Our purpose here is to describe one of these uses in depth by presenting a case study of portfolios used as final examinations (exit assessment) in Composition I and II at Anoka-Ramsey Community College. Michelle Anderson, a student in Composition II, undertook this study as her research project for her portfolio. Elizabeth Nist, the teacher, collaborated with her in revising this research paper as a journal article. Together we present both the students' and teachers' experiences collected in this case study.

Michelle Anderson: Students' Introduction to the Portfolio Final Exam

When our teacher first said the word portfolio in our composition class, I thought of a portable case for carrying loose papers or drawings. A portfolio final exam? We had never heard of that before, so we had lots of questions.

Elizabeth Nist, our teacher, explained, "Here at Anoka-Ramsey Community College (ARCC), a group of English teachers has been piloting a portfolio final exam for about two years. In our classes, in order to pass Composition I and II, the students must submit a portfolio containing samples of their writing to another instructor, an outside reader who will determine whether the work meets the standards set by the ARCC English Division. The instructions for this final exam are printed on a folder that becomes the cover for your portfolio. Many of your questions may be answered with a close reading of these instructions" (see figures 1-4).

After reading these instructions together as a class, we still had several questions that we needed cleared up before attempting this massive project. The first and most important question was, "Do we have to be there the day of the final?"

"No," Mrs. Nist answered. "The portfolio is your final; it must be handed in on the last day of class. Your writing, not your body, must be there on the day scheduled for the final exam."

This answer took us by surprise. Maybe this wasn't so bad after all. But we persisted. "How much does this exam count on our final grade?"

Mrs. Nist explained, "Each paper you do is graded individually during the quarter. The outside reader will evaluate your portfolio as pass or fail. I will read and assign a letter grade to it. This grade, along with all your other scores, will be averaged for the course grade. You may choose to revise the papers you include in your portfolio for a better final exam grade."

At this point the class worried about finding time to get all the papers completed, but Mrs. Nist handed out a course schedule which outlined each assignment, including the amount of time given for revision before going on to the next paper. After we had talked about all of this, a sigh of relief echoed throughout the room.

We still had our worries about the portfolio. At worst, it felt like a lot of busy work that required a complicated process of organization. We knew we had our hands full, but it became easier as we got into it. A lot of the work was done in class workshops. Days were set aside for drafting and for reading one another's papers to give feedback. We also had conferences where we could discuss our work individually with our teacher. The course requirements were very clear, and we liked having the opportunity to revise.

On that last day of class, we all felt a sense of relief that our portfolios were complete, and most of all, we were proud of our work. "This is what I've done! This is me!"

Some of us were already planning to submit our portfolios with our university applications. Others talked about using theirs for future references for jobs. Meanwhile, we were anxious to see how the outside readers would respond to our work.

Elizabeth Nist: Teachers' Reading and Evaluation of Portfolios

Portfolio final exams have been an explosive issue in our English department. Most of the debate among our faculty about portfolios has seemed to focus on the evaluation process. Many teachers objected to postponing grading until the end of the quarter. They claimed their students demanded grades on their papers throughout the quarter. They also claimed that the workload presented by stacks of ungraded papers to be faced all at once during finals week was impossible.

Consequently, as we developed our process, we agreed from the beginning that instructors could choose whether to grade papers as usual throughout the quarter or move toward the Elbow/Belanoff portfolio model with teacher response during the quarter and evaluation only at the end. In either case, the portfolios were compiled by the students and presented to their instructors on the last class day of the quarter.

Meanwhile, throughout the quarter, the instructors participating in the portfolio "pilot" met about once a month to discuss assignment design and portfolio requirements. While the instructors assigned letter grades to each portfolio in their own sections, the "second" readers rated the portfolios as "pass" or "fail." These were the determining questions: "Is this Composition I student prepared for Composition II?" or "Is this Composition II student prepared for upper division college work?" During the last week of the quarter we met to read and discuss sample portfolios and establish criteria for our reading. We began with our latest draft of criteria and made revisions based on our most recent experience and current writing assignments; then we tested the criteria against sample student papers. Consequently, our criteria were evolving into a document that described the three levels of mastery students had to demonstrate for (1) entrance to college level work, (2) completion of Composition I, and (3) completion of Composition II. This drafting and norming of criteria was essential every quarter. The sample portfolios were then brought to the reading session for reference as necessary.

Each instructor selected about eight portfolios from each section (about 30%) for second readings. Usually we began our selection with those that were borderline pass/fail cases and then added others that might be borderline A/B or B/C. It was important to present a range of student work in order for the evaluation to have any validity. Ideally, all of the portfolios would be evaluated by outside readers, but given our student/teacher ratio and faculty mindset, this was difficult at first. In the future we hope to recruit and train readers from outside the English Division to participate in this evaluation process. With a larger pool of readers, all of the portfolios will receive outside readings. More importantly, by involving faculty from other disciplines in the discussion of assignment design, in the norming process, and in the evaluation of student writing, we will be strengthening writing across the curriculum.

But for now, at the time scheduled for the final exams in Composition I and II, we composition instructors met in one of the classrooms and presented our portfolios. We each randomly selected and read an agreed-upon number, often making notes to the student writers and enclosing those notes in the

portfolios. Following the reading, we discussed each of the portfolios that we had failed. Instructors also requested discussion of any portfolio that was problematic.

At about this point in the process, several other faculty joined the readers group to plan academic advisement of the students who needed help. These faculty advisors included an academic counselor, our reading specialist, and our Access Services Coordinator.

The whole process took about three hours. The atmosphere was collegial and professional. Someone acted as scribe throughout the discussions and typed up the quarterly report to be distributed to the entire English Division.

Elizabeth Nist: Teacher comments collected from the Quarterly Reports

In the June 1992 report, the faculty listed the following advantages of the portfolio final exam:

- Students have a chance to do their best work and show a variety of their work.
- The emphasis on drafting and revision and the deferment of assessment, permit instructors to be "writing coaches" in the classroom and when responding to writing.
- Assembling and managing the portfolio demands organization of the teacher and students.
- Reading and evaluating portfolios promotes collegiality and collaboration among the participating faculty. Teachers share assignments and evaluation criteria, which promotes norming of faculty grading practices.
- The portfolio process subjects individual teacher's assessment criteria to self-scrutiny; the adjustment to a common standard is initiated by the instructors, not imposed from outside.
- The readers serve as real representatives of a broad academic audience, so the process is a powerful and effective way to teach the dynamics of the rhetorical situation.

Disadvantages:

- Teachers dislike the tendency for “everything” to come in at the end of the quarter.
- Some colleagues have said they are hesitant to participate in the group readings because they feel threatened by the practice of exchanging and reading one another’s students’ work.
- Portfolios take extra time: (1) teacher time to organize the portfolios (about 1 to 2 hours/section); (2) teacher time for second readings (about 3 hours during final exam week).

Early in our portfolio pilot project we wanted to explore how portfolio assessment results compared with an in-class essay exam and the national “Subject Examination in English Composition” (the “CLEP” test published by Educational Testing Service). We discovered that the portfolio was the only assessment instrument that addressed all of the course objectives. The standardized exam primarily assessed language usage and reading comprehension; the in-class essay best assessed fluency. By including in the portfolio an in-class essay that required students to analyze a reading, students were able to demonstrate competency in all the outcomes described in the syllabus. The reflective cover letters to the portfolio readers required students to make explicit this connection between their work and the course objectives.

At the end of each quarter we evaluated the entire portfolio process and often revised the portfolio instructions and our reading process. The January 1993 ARCC Portfolio Readers Report said, “This participating faculty concluded that benefits of the portfolio assessment process, for instructors and students alike, outweigh the disadvantages.”

In addition to echoing the advantages to instructors listed in 1992, this 1993 report claimed that students enjoy the following benefits:

- The process permits, even requires, revision. Students are placed in a situation where revision is meaningful because it is shaped toward specific audiences and purposes.

- The process permits students to exhibit their mastery of the entire range of outcomes, from the development of an essay through formal presentation of it in standard language and format.
- The making of a portfolio validates students’ writing; their writing is worthy of professional presentation.

If asked, would students themselves offer these kinds of responses to the portfolio final exam?

Michelle Anderson: A Survey of ARCC Students’ Responses to the Portfolio Exam

For my research project in Composition II, I surveyed 87 students in ARCC English classes during the third week of Spring Quarter 1993 in several sections of Composition I and Composition II. Because it was early in the quarter, nearly half of the students responding were only just beginning work on the portfolio exam or the exam had only been briefly introduced by their instructor at the time of this survey. However, the other half showed a good sense of understanding about the portfolio exam and what was expected of them. Some of the Composition II students had completed portfolios in their Composition I classes.

STUDENT SURVEY

As a result of your participation in the portfolio final exam this year, how would you rate the following about the English Program and your instructor in helping you deal with the portfolio system?

1. Did the portfolio exam help you feel that your writing met these minimum standards?

Yes	No	No Opinion
74%	10%	16%
2. Did the portfolio exam give you a good sense of what is required in this writing course?

Yes	No	No Opinion
78%	9%	13%

3. Did the portfolio exam encourage you to consult with your instructor?

Yes	No	No Opinion
68%	22%	10%
4. Did the portfolio exam encourage you to work with a tutor in the Writers Workshop [peer tutors in our open writing lab on campus]?

Yes	No	No Opinion
34%	47%	18%
5. Did the portfolio exam encourage you to revise?

Yes	No	No Opinion
83%	7%	9%
6. Did the portfolio exam give you sufficient opportunity to demonstrate your meeting the course's standards?

Yes	No	No Opinion
78%	7%	15%
7. Which kind of final exam would you choose for a writing course?

portfolio	in-class essay	outside-class essay
46%	15%	20%
multiple choice		other
13%		7%
8. Did the instructor's use of portfolios influence you to register for a particular section?

Yes	No	Not sure
15%	64%	21%
9. Would use of portfolios influence your choice of sections in a course in the future?

Yes	No	Not sure
34%	29%	37%

Three-fourths of the students responded that the portfolio exam helped to clarify course requirements and minimum standards. An impressive 83% said that the portfolio exam encouraged them to revise their work. Only 34% reported working with peer tutors in the writing lab; however, 68% consulted with the instructor. I expected this to be true because the instructors were available, so students sought them first. Students tended to think of the tutors as remedial help rather than as trained readers responding to drafts. Since 83% of the students said they revised their papers, I had to conclude that they were relying on class group work and teacher response to guide revision.

From this survey I also found that many students who took part in the portfolio exam liked the final and gave positive responses. The others had very little knowledge of the portfolio system and had no opinion. I found the overall result, however, to be quite encouraging for future use. I believe the portfolio final exam to be helpful in many ways for students.

Four papers were required for my portfolio. I personally found the research paper to be the most interesting. This paper I am writing now is my research paper. I enjoy the research part because it is a learning experience—for more than one person. I collected information published by other researchers and used their findings as background information for creating my own study.

Then, in another required paper, I analyzed my findings in the context of a theoretical model; my synthesis of findings and theory became my persuasive paper for the portfolio exam. Each student in the class chose an article which pertained to his or her topic; we analyzed the theorist's thesis and wrote our own arguments. I chose an article that presented a model of assessing learner outcomes and tested this theory with students' reactions here at Anoka-Ramsey. I asked how portfolio assessment has affected their writing. While I was working with other students on my theory paper, I found we all shared a common problem—the challenge of trying to analyze the theorists' claims and the quality of their evidence. After reading the articles over and over again, we formed focus groups and discussed the readings. I found this group work to be very helpful when writing our papers. The readers' viewpoints gave me a whole new perspective from which to view my work.

After multiple drafts of our theory paper, our next paper was an in-class essay. This essay was about structural revision. I analyzed my own theory paper, describing specific areas of strength and weakness. I identified my audience and described the purpose of my paper, what type of voice I was using, and how my paper was organized. I analyzed each part of my paper in great detail. This was the whole purpose of the in-class essay—to draft a revision plan for this paper.

The last and most important paper was our cover letter written to our portfolio reader. We wrote a letter about how our portfolio demonstrated our writing competency. In my letter I explained the steps in completing my assignments and what I had learned overall about writing. I also included comments about how I planned to use my portfolio in the future.

Portfolios show our capabilities. They are our own work, our own time, knowledge, and effort spent in putting words on paper. This is my work; this is what I have done!

I believe college writing is more than just reciting information; writing has feeling, reflection and expression. Through my portfolio experience, I've learned I should set goals in my writing to express myself and to let my voice come through my words. I agree with the sixth-grader who said, "Other people may think they know me, but my portfolio shows the real me, who I really am."

Conclusion

Here we have described one case study of how portfolios are used as exit assessment. From the perspectives of both students and teachers who participated, the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. If you are interested in more information, including a sample portfolio cover, please contact us at Anoka Ramsey Community College, 11200 Mississippi Boulevard, Coon Rapids, MN 55433; 612/422-3559.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR the Portfolio Examination* in Composition I and II Anoka-Ramsey Community College

COURSE _____ SECTION _____

WRITER'S NAME _____

INSTRUCTOR _____

I.D.# _____

QUARTER _____

LOCAL ADDRESS _____

LOCAL PHONE _____

What is the Portfolio Exam?

In order to pass Composition I and II, you must submit a portfolio containing samples of your writing to another instructor, an outside reader who will determine whether your work meets standards set by the ARCC English Division.

* Based on the portfolio model developed by David Smit and Roger Friedman at Kansas State University.

What Assignments Go Into the Portfolio?

(1) For Composition I

Your portfolio for English 111, Composition I, must include three papers:

- a. **One paper** must be a factual essay organized by topics or ideas, not narrative, although it can contain narrative illustrations or examples. The essay may profile a person, place, or event; convey the results of your personal observations; or explain a phenomenon or process. It may be documented, but it does not have to be.
- b. The **second paper** must be an in-class essay which has neither been retyped nor revised outside of class. The in-class essay must have the amount of time you were given to do the assignment in the upper left-hand corner of the first page.
- c. Your portfolio must include a **letter** to the portfolio reader, presented in standard letter form. Using the list of outcomes in your course syllabus, explain to the reader how your portfolio demonstrates writing competency.

(2) For Composition II

Your portfolio for English 121, Composition II, must include four papers:

- a. **One paper** must be a persuasive essay which appeals to an audience's intellect and emotion. This paper may be any of the following: an editorial; an evaluation; a review, interpretation, or critical analysis; or a proposal for a change. You may argue a claim of fact, value, or policy.
- b. A **second paper** must be a research paper which uses outside sources of information, either from written materials or from interviews, and uses a correct form of documentation.
- c. A **third paper** must be an in-class essay which has neither been retyped nor revised outside of class. The in-class essay must have the amount of time you were given to do the assignment in the upper left-hand corner of the first page.
- d. Your portfolio must include a **letter** to the portfolio reader, presented in standard letter form. Using the list of outcomes in your course syllabus, explain to the reader how your portfolio demonstrates writing competency.

How Are the Portfolios Presented?

All portfolios must be presented in the following manner:

- (1) Submit all papers to your instructor in this required standard file folder.
- (2) Submit the revised papers written out of class typed on unlined 8 1/2 x 11" paper. These papers should contain no comments in the margins or at the end.
- (3) Submit all papers, including the in-class writing, with copies of the assignment on which the writings are based or with a sheet of paper indicating the textbook and pages from which the assignments are taken.
- (4) Attach each assignment's drafts with a paper clip to the copy of the assignment and final draft.

How Will Your Portfolios Be Evaluated?

Your portfolio will be graded either pass or fail.

At least one independent reader, usually another instructor in the program, will grade your portfolio either pass or fail.

Your portfolio reader will check to see that each paper in your portfolio is acceptable "college-level work" in each of the following areas:

- (1) Each paper must have a clear purpose.
- (2) Each paper must have a form of organization which is easy to follow.
- (3) Each paper must be supported with sufficient detail or evidence for its purpose.
- (4) Each paper must have a consistent tone appropriate to its purpose and audience.
- (5) Each paper must be well edited and generally free of errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and usage.

Will the In-Class Theme Be Held to the Same Standards?

Your portfolio reader will expect your in-class paper to be less polished than a revised piece.

Your reader will be more tolerant of editing errors and insufficient detail. The primary purpose of the in-class piece is to see what you can do on your own. (Your instructor may allow you to plan the in-class paper in advance and bring notes or an outline with you to class when you write the paper. You may also consult a dictionary while you write this essay.) Your reader will check to make sure that this piece is consistent with the other writing in your portfolio. If your revised papers are substantially better, your reader will look at your previous drafts to make sure that your final drafts were clearly the result of the work you did revising earlier drafts. If the various drafts show sudden, unexplained leaps in progress and the initial drafts are just as undeveloped and rife with errors as the in-class writing, the reader may conclude that much of the writing is not your own and fail the portfolio.

When Does a Portfolio Fail?

There are several circumstances which may cause your portfolio to fail:

- (1) If it does not contain the required papers and accompanying assignments, notes, and drafts.
- (2) If after consulting copies of the assignments your reader can still not determine what you were trying to accomplish in any two given papers.
- (3) If your papers contain too many serious editing errors which include:
 - run-on sentences
 - inappropriate fragments
 - lack of agreement between nouns and verbs or nouns and pronouns with a common referent
 - pronouns without clear antecédents
 - faulty parallelism
 - lack of consistency in tenses
 - misspelled words
 - punctuation errors that interfere with readability

PLEASE NOTE: The two most common reasons why papers fail the portfolio is a lack of focus, the inability to concentrate on a key point of theme, and a lack of detail, the inability to develop a key point or theme beyond trivial generalizations and a weak supporting statement or two.

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