



REVIEW

Describing the Chameleon: The Shapes and Functions of Assessment Portfolios

SUSAN CALLAHAN

Northern Illinois University

Sandra Murphy and Terry Underwood. *Portfolio Practices: Lessons from Schools, Districts and States*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon, 2000.

Guided by evidence that portfolios have a chameleon like ability to adapt themselves to diverse environments, Sandra Murphy and Terry Underwood have analyzed eight portfolio systems that represent a range of roles formal portfolio assessment was asked to play in the late 1980s and early 1990s. To date, university portfolio systems have been studied much more extensively than those developed for K-12 students, so this volume provides much needed information about how portfolios have been used to assess younger students and their writing programs. Murphy and Underwood limit themselves to systems created in the public schools that were designed to be read outside individual classrooms. The eight portfolio systems that form the heart of the book range in size from departmental experiments to the national New Standards Project, and range in purpose from a desire to integrate Navajo culture within coursework and assessment to a state-mandated effort to hold teachers accountable for student learning.

Susan Callahan is an associate professor in the English Department of Northern Illinois University where she teaches courses in composition, rhetoric, and English education. She has published articles in *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Assessing Writing*, *English Education*, and *Educational Assessment*. Currently she is working with Elizabeth Spalding on *Changing How Writing is Taught*, a book about the Kentucky portfolio assessment that examines the issues raised by juxtaposing the voices of Kentucky students, teachers, academics, policymakers, and parents.

Direct all correspondence to: Susan Callahan, English Department, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115

Beginning with two small departmental projects, the authors then move outward to examine increasingly large assessment systems.

Their primary intent is to help would-be portfolio designers avoid some of the pitfalls encountered by others. To this end, the authors have created what they call a “framework for thinking about educational systems and the roles portfolios might play in them” (p. x) and have applied this analytical framework within each chapter. Their efforts result in a text that can itself be viewed as a portfolio—a carefully organized selection of illustrative materials introduced, supported, and concluded by thoughtful reflections. The resulting book-length portfolio reveals a great deal about the values and beliefs of the authors who created it.

Murphy and Underwood begin by tracing the theoretical currents that have helped to shape contemporary portfolio assessment and use this discussion to stress their belief that any portfolio system can be understood only within the particular context that generated and sustains it. Throughout the remainder of the book, they draw on the concept of *symptomatic reading* to examine each portfolio system for evidence of the explicit and implicit theories that drive it. In particular, they highlight the tensions that often exist when designers have grounded parts of a portfolio system in learning theories developed in anthropology or social psychology and other parts in the testing theories developed by measurement specialists. They demonstrate how the design of each portfolio system affects individual classrooms and the professionalization of the teachers using it; they also examine how well the system does or does not work in harmony with local reform and accountability efforts.

Each chapter begins with a sketch of the original context and purpose for a given system; the authors then use a detailed questioning of the collection, selection, reflection, and evaluation practices embedded within the system to identify intended and unintended consequences of the design. They also trace any design changes that occurred during the life of the system. Each chapter is further enriched by the authors’ examination of four crucial elements of portfolio design: What does the system reveal about the designers’ aspirations for students? What does the system reveal about the designers’ understanding of learning and curriculum? What models of reform, assessment, and accountability does the system reflect? And how does the system address issues of fairness, reliability, and validity? This approach results in a series of complex portraits in which the strengths and weaknesses of each system are clearly delineated. Moreover, as in any good portfolio, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Readers of *Portfolio Practices* soon become aware that a fifth unstated question haunts the text, and it is this question that, like the uninvited fairy at Sleeping Beauty’s birthday party, ultimately has the power to shape the future of any portfolio system. Prospective portfolio designers would do well to consider this fifth question as carefully as the other four: In what ways can even the most thoughtfully created portfolio system be weakened or destroyed?

The first two portfolio systems Murphy and Underwood analyze were developed in California, the authors’ home state. They are relatively small systems, developed by teachers within individual schools to meet needs they themselves identified. The authors begin by analyzing the Mt. Diablo High School portfolio system, which was developed by a volunteer group of English teachers to investi-

gate their own teaching. The analysis demonstrates the potential of a collaboratively designed system to evolve as teachers and students gradually come to understand what it can do. Responding to changes in their teaching and changes in their students' writing, the Mt. Diablo teachers alter the system each year to reflect their new goals and concerns. As the teachers and students develop, so does the system. After discussing the positive effects the portfolios have had for individual teachers, for the department as a whole, and for students, the authors conclude with the information that the portfolio project has lost its initial funding and is scrambling each year to secure financial support. They note that the project's "on-going problem of financial instability would be easily solved if either the District or the State would set aside monies expressly marked for activities that engage teachers in the periodic and systematic review of student work" (p. 44). Such support is not a high priority within either administrative budget, however, because the systematic review of student work generally is seen not as a teacher responsibility, but as a district and state responsibility. Consequently, the future of the Mt. Diablo project seems unsure at best.

This initial portfolio story establishes the pattern for the remaining seven: In each chapter, the authors make the portfolio system come alive by describing the context that gave rise to it. They explain the designers' hopes for the system, often in the designers' own words, and include snippets of student work as well as samples of supporting materials such as hand-outs and scoring guides. They thoughtfully apply their analytical framework, using a question-and-answer format, to examine the system. Each chapter ends with a short list of questions titled "Opportunities for Discussion and Inquiry," which would be useful for groups actually planning a portfolio system for their own school, district, or state or for graduate students in a course on assessment or curriculum design. The extensive bibliographies that accompany every chapter are an invaluable resource for all teachers and researchers.

But somewhere in each chapter lurks an answer to that unstated fifth question: In what ways can even the most carefully designed portfolio system be weakened or destroyed? And the answers begin to mount up—loss of financial support, changes in district or state policies, insistence on standardization, loss of leadership, lack of time and support for faculty development, unfamiliarity with cultural differences. Six of the eight portfolio systems described in *Portfolio Practices* are either in grave danger or no longer exist. One of the most disheartening stories is the loss of Arts PROPEL, the innovative Pittsburgh program designed to foster students' awareness of their own learning processes as they engage in the creative arts. The fact that this portfolio system was abandoned before long-term data could be collected is particularly disappointing because it was one of the earliest and most thoughtfully planned portfolio systems to emerge in the public schools. It served as an inspiration for many educators who were interested in making fundamental changes in the ways assessment can affect classroom activities.

The story of the beginning and revision of the Chinle system evokes similar feelings of loss and regret. This portfolio system, originally planned by a district that serves the Navajo Reservation in Arizona, actively sought community involvement in its design to help teachers better understand their students. Whether the system

would have succeeded in its goal to create an educational bridge between the Navajo culture and the wider community is unknown because the system did not have the opportunity to develop as intended. Almost as disappointing is the shift in the Vermont writing portfolio system from its inception as a voluntary program designed to improve instruction toward a required assessment with increasing emphasis on standardization of content and scoring reliability.

Of the systems Murphy and Underwood describe that extend beyond individual departments, only two remain much as they were originally designed, the large portfolio system used by the state of Kentucky and the much smaller system designed by Connecticut Pomperaug Regional School District 15. The fact that the Kentucky system is still viable after 10 years should be encouraging. It was designed as an integral part of the state's reform effort and is deeply embedded in the political and financial structures of the state. However, Murphy and Underwood's analytical framework clearly exposes the inconsistencies and contradictions that were built into the Kentucky system, beginning with the tension between the state's desire to improve writing instruction by having students write for authentic audiences and purposes and its desire to gather reliable portfolio scores to use for school accountability. Of all the systems profiled in *Portfolio Practices*, Kentucky best exemplifies the problems that result when one system is expected to be all things to all people: It ends up really pleasing no one. Moreover, because it already represents an investment of much time and money, it will be very difficult to alter even if all the interested parties could agree about the kinds of changes that would improve it.

In contrast, the system designed by the Connecticut Pomperaug Regional School District 15, seems to please everyone involved in it. Unlike the Kentucky system, which was created very quickly by the Department of Education in response to a legislative mandate, the Pomperaug system grew out of a school culture that was ready for it. The district had a solid, 10-year history of supported professional development, with emphasis on involvement with process writing instruction and with performance-based learning and assessment. Portfolios themselves were instituted in stages over a 5-year period. An important element of the system was that teachers and administrators also kept portfolios and used them to focus on the district's central goal of using portfolios to help students develop as independent learners. The district portfolio system was fully supported by the state. Murphy and Underwood's analysis of the Pomperaug system suggests the way some conflicting design elements might be avoided and highlights the many complex relationships that need to be nurtured for a portfolio system to succeed. The only danger in including an analysis of this one seemingly "perfect" portfolio system is that other schools and districts, with different goals and different contexts, might be tempted simply to borrow the Pomperaug model instead of reviewing their own writing pedagogy and faculty development structure to determine whether some form of portfolio assessment is even appropriate. Murphy and Underwood doubtless would be horrified if that were to happen.

Because the book identifies some significant limitations to portfolio assessment as it has been developed thus far, *Portfolio Practices* might discourage some idealists from attempting portfolios. It might also encourage some traditional testing

theorists to say, "See, we told you portfolios wouldn't work." But both of these responses would ignore the very positive gains this book describes and the even greater gains it suggests as possibilities. The application of Murphy and Underwood's analytical framework can help portfolio designers build on the work that already has been done. Past mistakes can be avoided, and new possibilities can be explored. Although helpful for portfolio designers, the book is not meant to be a design manual; it is meant to be a guide to the thinking that must take place before specific design elements are considered. The book acknowledges the importance of reliability, fairness, and validity in any portfolio system, but these issues are subordinate to the authors' belief that portfolios best serve teachers and students when designers begin their work by articulating their aspirations for students and their understanding of how students learn. Consideration of reform, accountability, and assessment technicalities must be secondary.

Teachers and administrators who want to use portfolios for assessment would do well read all the case studies in *Portfolio Practices* before applying Murphy and Underwood's analytical framework to their own portfolio ideas. As they do so, they will discover that portfolios should not be used to assess things that can be assessed more easily and inexpensively some other way. At the same time, they will learn how a well- designed portfolio system can be used to assess important curricular elements that are beyond the scope of other forms of assessment. They will then be ready to design an assessment that will reinforce good teaching and encourage active student engagement in learning.

Not all portfolio designers will have the same vision of the kind of learning that is best for their students, and it is this diversity of contextual needs and standards that the authors are counting on to keep portfolios chameleon like. For Murphy and Underwood, standardization of form and function is probably the greatest threat to the future of portfolios. They fear that the diversity of portfolios could be lost in the growing pressure to make portfolio assessment function like other formal tests. I, for one, would be sad to wake up one day to discover that all the chameleons had become a uniform shade of pale, bland, gray. *Portfolio Practices* should go a long way toward preventing that possibility.

Not many books succeed in being both scholarly and practical, but this one does. Murphy and Underwood have analyzed a large and complex amount of data and presented their findings in a form both testing theorists and classroom teachers will find useful. Moreover, they have made their philosophical position crystal clear. Readers of *Portfolio Practices* will have no doubt that the authors view portfolio assessment as a sophisticated, effective application of constructivist learning theory. Readers who question this paradigm doubtless will also question Murphy and Underwood's insistence that portfolio assessment primarily should serve the needs of students and teachers rather than the needs of interested external parties. Those who approach assessment from a different perspective would do well to familiarize themselves with this text, however, as they contemplate the effects of the growing number of tests American students are required to take. Finally, those who have the authority to create or eliminate departmental, district, state, or national tests would be well served by reading *Portfolio Portraits* as they consider the kind of education they want to provide for the students under their care.