



REVIEW

Portfolios Across the Centuries A Review of *Assessing the Portfolio*

TERRY UNDERWOOD

California State University Sacramento

An examination of the status and uses of writing portfolios in university writing programs at the close of the 20th century, *Assessing the Portfolio* was written out of the firsthand experiences of two writing program administrators (WPAs) who worked together in the mid-1980s at the University of Michigan just at the time that Belanoff and Elbow (1986) published their germinal piece on the demise of timed writing tests and the birth of university writing portfolios as exit measures at Stony Brook, ushering in a period of profound interest and attention to portfolios in the writing classroom. Pat Belanoff and Marcia Dickson's 1991 anthology *Portfolios: Process and Product* and Kathleen Blake Yancey's (1992) *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom* began a half decade or so of conferences and publications that has helped establish the portfolio as a mainstay in the writing classroom and as a viable option for large-scale assessment as well.

Hamp-Lyons served as associate director of assessment for the English Composition Board (ECB) at Michigan from 1986 to 1990; Condon served as associate director of instruction from 1986 to 1994, then as director until 1996. When they began their work together at Michigan, writing instructors relied on notions of prompted, timed, single-shot writing assessment—an improvement on the multiple-choice tests they replaced. When they ended their day-to-day partnership in 1991 (only to begin their writing partnership for this book), Michigan students and teachers alike understood the full benefits of a writing portfolio because the uni-

Terry Underwood is associate professor of Language and Literacy at California State University, Sacramento. His current interests include sociocultural perspectives on reading comprehension and composition, performance-based assessment of preservice teachers, and investigation of the effects of the process for certification of the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards.

Direct all correspondence to: Terry Underwood, 403 Kelse Court, Roseville, CA 95661, tandj@surewest.net

versity had abolished the one-shot writing test and replaced it with a portfolio. Their successful, collaborative struggle in the late 1980s to stimulate institutional evolution beyond a timed, one-shot writing assessment as an exit measure for students who were required to take a course called Writing Practicum and move to a careful, thoughtful portfolio assessment approach seems to constitute the cauldron in which this book was made. Their careful, thoughtful scholarship, however, in my view constitutes the jelly cloth used to sift their experiences, blend them with the experiences of other WPAs and related types, and (re)present them in a theoretical and conceptual framework that makes the book interesting and useful for a wide readership well beyond the realm of WPAs.

Having never worked in a university writing program except for a brief period as a graduate student assistant, having no professional inclination ever to do so, I nonetheless found this book well worth reading on several levels. First, it provided an in-depth look at the inner workings of university writing programs and the problems of assessment; anyone who has ever taught writing at any level—and has tried to assess it—will find this account fascinating. Second, it spelled out a clearly articulated model of the relationships among a variety of theoretical approaches to the teaching of writing (from the formalist or essayist tradition to a social-constructionist stance) and features of portfolio assessment. Again, writing teachers across the grade levels and contexts will find this model provocative and interesting. Third—and perhaps most important of all—the book leads to a well-reasoned, clear, and elegant statement of the nature of any portfolio that can rightfully be called a portfolio, an important step for research because it gives the basis for deciding whether one piece of research is in fact about portfolios or about something else.

The book consists of five chapters organized inductively such that narrative accounts of portfolio projects, including those at Michigan and elsewhere, are presented in the first three chapters followed by a chapter that explores a theory of portfolios and another that looks at the implications of this theory for research into portfolios. The first chapter explains the historical and conceptual roots of writing portfolio assessment as a context-sensitive, consequentially more valid measurement strategy than on-demand writing assessment and delineates three distinct “communities” with an interest in portfolios: (a) the measurement community, (b) the K-12 community, and (c) the college writing community. Chapters 2 and 3 clearly stake out the college writing community for its audience, although as I have already pointed out, I found these chapters useful in thinking about writing instruction and assessment across the grade levels. Chapter 4 opens the aperture considerably and nails down some essential characteristics of any portfolio (more about this later). Chapter 5 discusses the rhetoric of research on portfolios and analyzes the differing needs of audiences who read research about portfolios.

Portfolio assessment has traveled a long, hard road since 1991, the year Liz Hamp-Lyons and William Condon tell us in their introduction that they began writing *Assessing the Portfolio*. Published finally in 2000 as a volume in a series of works edited by senior editor Marcia Farr on the general topic of writing, a series including three volumes on the specific topic of writing assessment (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Smith & Yancey, 2000; Williamson & Huot, 1993), this book

fleshes out many of themes, issues and conversations started in their 1993 *College Composition and Communication* article, "Questioning Assumptions about Portfolio-Based Assumptions" and carries between its lines echoes of the triumphs and tribulations portfolio advocates experienced across the decade of the 1990s as the field marched into the future "two steps forward, one step back," as David Pearson has described it.

In chapter 1, for example, Hamp-Lyons and Condon proclaim in language one might have heard at a portfolio rally in the late 1980s or early 1990s: "Our tests have to test what we teach, not what someone in New Jersey thinks we teach" (p. 3). In this early chapter, the authors join forces with other portfolio theorists in pointing out the fatal flaws of essentialism and decontextualization in the positivist epistemology underpinning standardized tests and other measurement tools built on the assumption that complex human performances can be excised from time and place (pp. 7-8). By the last chapter, presumably penned more toward the close of the decade, however, the authors temper this stance by acknowledging that different audiences for research on portfolios have "different ways of knowing" which must be accommodated: "Legislatures and bureaucracies operate on facts and figures; in the halls of government, there is a high level of distrust for 'warm fuzzy' evidence" (p. 174).

The heart of this book, in my judgment, is the ever-deepening notion of portfolios that emerges by the time the reader reaches the final chapter in which these "differing ways of knowing" are analyzed. Early in the book, writing portfolios are discussed from the perspective of what the authors later call "interior communities"—students, writing teachers, and WPAs. Concern with writing instructors dominates chapter 2, wherein the authors treat a constellation of theories of writing and their proponents with the respect one would expect one writing teacher of one persuasion to show another writing teacher of a different persuasion. "So how might a formalist portfolio work?" our authors query. "A portfolio, at its base, is a collection of products—actually, a selection of products. Therefore, portfolio assessment should fit nicely within a formalist context because the nature of the portfolio as a set of products readily accommodates formalism's product-based pedagogy" (p. 39). What about an expressivist portfolio? "[B]ecause expressivists tend to center authority in the learner, rather than in the teacher, . . . portfolios enable expressivist pedagogy by allowing the learner both to present a fuller picture of his or her development . . . and to take advantage of the lessons of expressivism in the process of reflecting" (p. 41).

Although Sandra Murphy (1994) acknowledged the existence of a range of theoretical and epistemological orientations that support a range of portfolio practices, her argument is that such pluralism can dilute the potential of portfolios. On the other hand, establishing that portfolios can work well within the full range of theoretical models of writing and writing instruction, the authors move to a broader discussion of the practical concerns of learners, teachers, and WPAs, participants in the "interior community" who must not just tolerate, but embrace portfolios for their full effectiveness to be seen. They cite evidence from their experiences and the experience of others to illuminate their argument that portfolios, well done, improve experiences of teachers and learners in university writing programs. They

write, for example: “[T]he ‘underlife’ of the TA [teaching assistant] group contains a strand of discussion about how to ‘do’ portfolio assessment, talk about the kinds of assessment TAs have seen in other teachers’ portfolios, the informal swapping of essays via mailboxes with appeals for advice on how the student would ‘shape up’ in the colleague’s class—a range of small but positive signs” (p. 85). The most poignant bit of writing in the book appears in this practical context when the authors comment on the Michigan experience with an entry portfolio begun after several pilots in 1994: “After 3 years of experience reading more than 5,000 portfolios each year,” the authors write, “Michigan can declare its entry assessment an unqualified success” (p. 89). On the next page in a footnote, however, we read this: “Despite the successes described above, Michigan is discontinuing its entry-level assessment as of Fall 1999.”

Almost as a way to defend against backlash—David Pearson’s “one step back”—the authors gird themselves for intellectual skirmishes in the political arena in chapter 4 and develop their model of what makes a portfolio a portfolio. It is as if the authors decide that despite the benefits of portfolio assessment well articulated in this book and others, this strategy for measuring learning seems destined to die unless proponents win the battle for acceptance by entering the official discourse of assessment well prepared to define and defend portfolios on all grounds—even positivist grounds. Although readers will need to consult the book to understand the full measure of this model, Hamp-Lyons and Condon develop a set of criterial features for portfolios useful in helping the measurement community distinguish portfolio assessment from any other kind of assessment. As I considered this model, it became increasingly clear that the set of features define the portfolio construct not just in the area of writing, but in virtually all other areas as well—including what has become a front burner issue in California in 2004, the assessment of teacher credential candidates.

With the portfolio construct carefully and thoroughly laid out, the authors then turn their analysis toward defining the needs of the different audiences who have an interest in portfolio research. Being good writing teachers, the authors understand that research articles are rhetorical in nature and as such demand attention to the needs of the audience. In addition to the “interior communities” of learners and teachers, the key exterior community, which portfolio proponents need to understand, is the measurement community. In discussing the needs of this community, the authors provide a lengthy and useful summary of changes that have taken place in the assumptions of psychometrics, which have huge implications for portfolios. Of special importance, according to the authors, is the current emphasis on consequences of assessment: “This new dimension of concern in educational measurement can be said to focus on test use and the impact of test use on teaching and access to or events in wider contexts, first labeled as *backwash* . . . and currently usually known as *washback*” (p. 185). Measurement experts now must concern themselves not just with reliability as a non-negotiable expectation of external consumers of assessment data like school administrators and policymakers, but with the consequences of an assessment for those whose lives it may impact: “The fact that the testing and measurement community has begun to ask these questions, after decades of simply discounting new tools that could not be validated by the old

measures, means that this community has become of necessity more allied with learners, teachers, and [WPAs]" (p. 172).

Assessing the Portfolio is a fine book with a great deal to offer the broad community of educators interested in writing assessment and in assessment of complex human learning performances in general. As I read it, I could only imagine the persistence and commitment Hamp-Lyons and Condon demonstrated in sticking to the text over almost a decade. Because the book is so firmly rooted in their personal professional experience and in scholarship, it has a credibility that transcends much of the literature on portfolio assessment. This is a serious piece of scholarship that demands careful attention by a wide readership that extends from university writing teachers to educators in general, measurement experts, and policymakers.

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