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Developing Portfolios to Document Student Performance and Accompishements

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Abstract

Portfolio assessment was introduced as a pilot assignment during a senior-level departmental capstone course in winter quarters 1994 and 1995. Student and instructor response was very positive toward the development of a portfolio. The portfolio process encouraged students to continually improve the materials to be included in their portfolios, to select the materials that best documented their accomplishments and achievements, and to develop competence in self and peer assessment. This paper describes the requirements for the capstone course, student and faculty perspectives toward the portfolio assignment, and recommendations for improving the process.

Introduction

Assessment reform encourages the educational community to focus on the context within which learning occurs and to address the broad scope of student capabilities (Vavrus, 1990; Wolf, 1989). Authentic assessment transpires when educators use more than one method to evaluate student learning. Multiple assessment methods are required to secure a more distinct portrait of student growth and achievement (Matthews, 1990). Student assessment should consider the multiple effects of education and should not focus exclusively on traditional testing methods (Simmons, 1990). Portfolios are a form of authentic assessment that is continuous, multidimensional, knowledge-based, and genuine (Valencia, McGinley, & Pearson, 1990).

Portfolios are developed to display materials that represent the abilities and accomplishments of a student during a specified time period. The presentation of materials over an extended time helps to chronicle student improvement and competence that cannot be measured by paper and pencil tests. One of the primary purposes of a portfolio is to provide a more reliable and comprehensive picture of student growth and achievement. When students reflect on their professional goals and accomplishments, assess their strengths and weaknesses, and investigate ways to present their materials, the process of developing an individual portfolio becomes more valuable than the final product.

The use of portfolios to document student achievement and growth was incorporated into a senior-level capstone course in the Department of Agricultural Education in the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences at the Ohio State University during winter quarters 1994 and 1995. One of the main goals of the capstone course is to provide an opportunity for students to reflect on their undergraduate experience and to refine their philosophy of the teaching and learning process. The portfolio allowed students to present a cross section of their achievements during their undergraduate education and to display a representative sample of their writing abilities. The main purposes of including a portfolio assignment in the course were to document growth, demonstrate competence, and illustrate individuality.

Capstone Course Description

Contemporary World Issues in Agricultural Education focuses on the debate, consideration, and integration of agricultural education from a wider agricultural perspective. The course is required of all departmental majors in their senior year and is designed to fulfill the third writing course requirement in the major. Students typically enroll in the course after completing a 10-15 week internship in either the public schools, an agribusiness, or a county Extension office. The course includes topics on international awareness, the history, philosophy, and future of the agricultural education profession, and ethical decision making. Development of analytical thinking skills is also emphasized.

The specific objectives of the course include:

a) identify the components of effective writing in agricultural education,
b) develop and defend a personal philosophy of agricultural education,
c) critically analyze the impact of selected events on the future of the profession,
d) discuss ethical issues in agricultural education,

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e) compare and contrast agricultural education systems worldwide, and

f) compose written materials used in the agricultural education profession.

Four assignments are required in the course:

1. An editorial news release with an accompanying radio program discussing an ethical issue facing agricultural educators.
2. A formal business letter and a written agenda for an advisory committee meeting discussing the student's philosophy of agricultural education.
3. A multi-page newsletter that introduces the student to the community, outlines goals and expectations for the coming year. and provides general agricultural information.
4. A portfolio that includes the final versions of the three writing assignments plus other materials that document the students' abilities and accomplishments. These additional items could consist of: resumes. career goal statements, self assessments of strengths and areas for improvement, letters of recommendation, awards and honors, teaching plans, news articles, evaluations, and course outlines. As a part of the fourth assignment, students present their portfolio during a formal interview session during finals week to either a school administrator, an agribusiness representative, or a state-level Extension administrator. The course objectives and assignments are process oriented rather than content oriented. Students are encouraged to incorporate their existing knowledge and skills into the class discussions and during the development of their portfolio.

Faculty Perspective

The portfolio/interview assignment helped students develop and strengthen the characteristics of an effective educator: a) **the ability to work alone**—the students were responsible for producing their own portfolios: they had to select the type of information and documents to include in the portfolio and they had to decide on the format and presentation of the portfolio, b) **the ability to work in groups**—when completing the writing assignments for the portfolio. students worked together: throughout the quarter. the students had the opportunity to work with all members of the class, c) **the ability to listen**—when preparing and presenting their portfolios, the students had to listen and attend to other people's opinions and reactions. d) **the ability to speak**—the students had to express and defend their views in both formal and informal settings, and e) **the ability to learn**—the students had the opportunity to demonstrate their accomplishments and abilities in a non-traditional manner: they learned that knowledge and success can be measured in different ways.

Figure 1. Writing Assessment Sheet

PEER, SELF, AND INSTRUCTOR ASSESSMENT OF WRITTEN DOCUMENTS

Student's Name _____ Reviewer's Name _____

Assignment (Please circle one)
a. Editorial
b. Business Letter
c. Newsletter

	3 To a Great Extent	2 Some-what	1 Very Little	0 Not at All
I. CONTENT—24 pts.				
Information is accurate.	___	___	___	___
Writer is aware of audience.	___	___	___	___
Sufficient details are provided.	___	___	___	___
Analytical thinking is evident.	___	___	___	___
The content is....				
Timely	___	___	___	___
Relevant	___	___	___	___
Interesting	___	___	___	___
Creative	___	___	___	___

_____ Total Pts. / 24 = _____%

II. STRUCTURE—15 pts.				
The writing style is....				
Clear	___	___	___	___
Concise and to the point	___	___	___	___
Focused	___	___	___	___
Flows in a logical order	___	___	___	___
Organized	___	___	___	___

_____ Total Pts. / 15 = _____%

III. GRAMMAR/SPELLING—6 pts.				
Words are spelled correctly.	___	___	___	___
Correct grammar is evident.	___	___	___	___

_____ Total Pts. / 6 = _____%

_____ TOTAL POINTS OUT OF 45   _____ % OVERALL PERCENTAGE

Strengths:

_____

_____

_____

Suggestions for Improvement:

_____

_____

_____

Figure 2. Portfolio/Interview Assessment Form

PORTFOLIO/INTERVIEW ASSESSMENT

Student Name _____

Portfolio
Strengths— _____

_____

_____

Areas to Improve— _____

_____

_____

Interview
Strengths— _____

_____

_____

Areas to Improve— _____

_____

_____

| Interviewer Signature | Date |

Figure 3. Letter Grade Recommendation Guidelines

PORTFOLIO/INTERVIEW LETTER GRADE RECOMMENDATION

Directions: Based upon the portfolio and interview, please circle the letter grade category that best describes the student's performance.

A, A–
Outstanding Performance. Superior in all aspects. Unusual ability, exceptionally impressive. Recommended without reservations.

B+, B
Good Performance. Possesses a number of outstanding qualities. Impressive. Needs improvement in selected areas. Recommended with minor reservations.

B–, C+
Questionable Performance. Neither conspicuously impressive or unimpressive. Cannot predict excellent or good success. Possesses as many strengths as weaknesses. Needs considerable improvement in selected areas. Recommended with major reservations.

C, C–
Poor Performance. Some major weaknesses. More weaknesses than strengths. Serious risk. Recommended with hesitancy.

D+, D
Unacceptable Performance. Definitely unimpressive. Little, if any, effort demonstrated. Not recommended.

One of the most challenging aspects of the course from a professor's perspective was evaluating student performance. To assess written documents, the students and the professor developed an evaluation matrix (See Figure 1). Students identified three major components of effective writing and provided descriptors for each component. Differential weights were assigned to the three components with content receiving the highest percentage of the total points possible. In addition to the numerical scale, the students requested an opportunity to provide and receive written feedback on their assignments. Peer review was an important aspect of each assignment. The assignments, including the portfolio, could be "recycled" throughout the quarter with final versions due one week prior to the formal interview. The three writing assignments were worth 45% of the total grade with the portfolio and interview contributing the remaining 55%. An assessment sheet (See Figure 2) was developed for the formal interview to provide written comments regarding the student's portfolio and performance by the designated interviewer. Upon completion of the formal interview, the interviewer discussed the strengths of the student and made suggestions for improvement. Each student received a letter grade recommendation from the interviewer (See Figure 3). Using administrators from actual schools, businesses, and Extension provided an authentic environment for the students to present their portfolios and demonstrate their abilities.

Student Perspectives

When students were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of developing portfolios as part of an undergraduate course they identified several benefits: a) **closure**—the portfolio brought closure to the undergraduate program. The portfolio helped the students summarize their educational career and provided a tangible means of documenting accomplishments. Upon completion of the portfolio, the students were able to reflect on their total educational experience. The collection and organization of materials to be included in the portfolio helped students to interrelate the various components of their undergraduate education, b) **student to professional**—the portfolio helped transform the student to a professional. The compilation of written work, letters of recommendation, awards, internship accomplishments, resumes, and transcripts portrayed the student as a professional educator. By including a career statement, a philosophy of education, and a self assessment in the portfolio, many students were forced to re-evaluate their position in life; their time as a student was coming to a close. The preparation of the portfolio laid the ground work for making the transition to a professional. In addition, the portfolio was an excellent marketing tool to give students a competitive advantage in their job search, c) **collaboration**—the portfolio process encouraged peer interaction. Group work allowed opportunities for the students to share experiences, express opinions, receive constructive criti-

cism, and deal with differences. By combining efforts, students learned from each other and depended upon each other's strengths. Peer feedback provided students with varying viewpoints which uncovered alternative possibilities for improving the portfolios, d) **self-evaluation**—the portfolio process fostered self-assessment. The portfolio highlighted and documented student strengths and also identified areas that needed improvement. Selecting and compiling the materials to be included in the portfolio compelled students to focus on their future goals and past accomplishments. An unexpected outcome of developing the portfolio was an increased awareness of and appreciation for each student's individuality, and e) **self-expression**—the portfolio provided an avenue for the students to express their creativity. Within general guidelines, each student developed a unique set of materials illustrating his or her own philosophy, values, and beliefs regarding agricultural education. The portfolios depicted a distinctive image of the student as a professional educator. An important component of the process encouraged students to continually improve the materials to be included in their portfolios; they appreciated being able to re-submit written documents and to establish their own standards for quality.

Recommendations

Several suggestions for improving the portfolio process were offered by the students and instructor. Students expressed the need to learn how to present their portfolio during an interview. The students were reluctant to refer to the portfolio unless the interviewer specifically requested to see the contents. An in-class practice session was suggested to demonstrate ways to incorporate the portfolio into the interview process. The students also advised the instructor to consider having the portfolios on display in the department for all faculty and students to observe and examine. The public presentation of the portfolios would add credibility to the assignment and encourage students to concentrate on display-

ing their best work. The students appreciated the opportunity to interview with genuine administrators. However, the students suggested locating people with vacant positions to serve as interviewers to provide an even more realistic environment for the interviews. The portfolio was developed as part of a senior-level capstone course in the major. Both the students and the instructor believed that the process needs to begin much earlier in the student's undergraduate experience. Since recording student growth is a primary purpose of portfolio assessment, the students should be gathering materials to document their progress and performance throughout their entire university education. Of special interest to the instructor is the documentation of each student's transformation into a professional educator as reflected in a more realistic philosophy of teaching and learning. Similarly, the students recommended incorporating the portfolio assignment into the other courses in the major. By introducing the concept of authentic assessment early in their undergraduate experience and developing the portfolio throughout coursework in the major, the students will have the opportunity to reflect on their education, to become more active participants in their own learning, and to expand their concept of assessment.

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The 1996 NACTA program includes time allocated in 30 minute blocks for members to share ideas designed to enhance college teaching. Although a presentation may address any teaching or educational issues, members may want to consider submitting ideas related to the conference program theme. Papers should be geared to a 20-minute presentation and allow for 10 minutes of audience questions.

An abstract of about 300 words should be submitted by March 31, 1996 to Harvey Peterson, University of Minnesota, Crookston, 13 UTOC Building, Crookston, MN 56716, or e-mail: nacta@mail.crk.umn.edu. The abstract must include: title, name of author(s), institutional affiliation, complete mailing address, and telephone number.

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A poster presentation consists of a series of illustrations and textual information affixed to a poster board. Poster presenters are expected to be present during sessions breaks to answer questions.

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