Chapter 17

Student Portfolios as an Assessment Tool

Mary Kay Crouch, Sheryl L. Fontaine

The use of portfolios for purposes of assessment represents a major change in the way a profession thinks about evaluation. Rather than looking only for the end results of learning, professionals who choose portfolio evaluation want to understand the activities and the kinds of performance that went into the pieces assembled in a portfolio. In other words, they seek to put their assessment practices in context.

The term portfolio is defined as a selection of assignments that a student has consciously assembled from a number of pieces produced over a semester or some other period of time. Larson (1991) notes that a portfolio can be used for various purposes. It may determine students' final evaluation for a course or program. Or, if the essays are placed in chronological order, the portfolio can show students' development or demonstrate accomplishments that allow them to enter or exit a university or receive a degree in one of its majors. Although a portfolio should be "ordered and purposeful, it can also be flexible—a tool of value in bringing elements, steps, or parallel tracks in a student's academic career together for examination at the same time by a single reader or group of readers" (Larson, 1991, p. 138). Currently, portfolios are being used for these purposes in university courses as diverse as technical writing, biology, business communication, and mathematics, and in the evaluation of teaching development (see, for example, Boyer, 1990; Millis, 1991; Seldin, 1991).

As writing specialists, we draw our example of portfolio assessment from the writing program and writing center in which we work. We both feel strongly that responsibility for the teaching of writing extends beyond English departments and that a system of portfolio assessment could offer faculty from other departments a way to integrate into their courses attention to writing content and writing quality. But aside from our contention that all teachers are teachers of writing, by illustrating the evolution and impact of portfolio assessment in one particular educational support network, we hope to offer a starting point from which other educators might develop their own systems within the context of their own institutions, programs, and courses. To this end, our discussion concludes with lists of what we believe to be the components of any system of portfolio assessment and the positive consequences that portfolio assessment can have for all instructors and students.

Principles of Portfolio Evaluations

When writing-program administrators make decisions about what constitutes growth or improvement in writing—what will be measured, how it will be measured, and when it will be measured—they are also revealing what they assume to value most in student writing and in the teaching of writing. In determining the possible educational appeal and impact that any particular form of writing assessment will have for teachers and students, we must examine these assumptions theoretically and
practically. If they are to effect lasting change, they must be at once theoretically sound enough to extend beyond any individual classroom and adaptable enough to adjust to the idiosyncratic teaching styles of particular instructors.

Within the context of a whole writing program, portfolio assessment assumes that if we are to improve student writing, we must change the way students write. Improving students' editorial skills or teaching them essay structures may give poor writing the appearance of having changed for the better, but such changes are, at best, useful only in the context of the classroom and, at worst, relatively superficial. The semester-long process of creating a writing portfolio moves students beyond making mere surface changes to affecting the way they think about and produce writing. Portfolio assessment promotes the belief that good writing takes time; it includes thinking and planning, rethinking and revising. Good writing is seldom produced in isolation—no matter that ultimately the writer usually writes alone—but rather is the result of interactions between and among people that occur in social contexts. It benefits from the writer talking and sharing, listening and responding, and it meets the needs and expectations of different audiences. Finally, it is the result of the writer's acting on successful intuition and taking responsibility for the writing.

Portfolios, of necessity, require some metacognitive work: in writing classes, for example, students have to consider their composing processes and their development as writers over time. In this way, students become self-reflective about their writing; they can look longitudinally at their writing, begin to recognize change, and grow in their knowledge of who they are as writers. Yancey (1992) points out that through portfolios students are able to view their individual essays as a whole rather than as a series of unrelated pieces: they see the writings “separately and then together, in context” (p. 104). Further, rather than viewing each piece as finished at the time of its composing, student writers know they are not bound by the text as it stands at a particular moment in time. They come to regard revision as an integral part of their writing because portfolio assessment requires them to include the writing that represents the best work they can produce over a semester.

Portfolios also highlight the performance, or active process, of the learner in a particular area, much as art portfolios demonstrate the artistic act of the painter or sculptor, whether novice or professional. Because writing can be traced through preliminary drafts, it is comparable to an artist's preliminary sketchbook drawings of a painting or a sculpture that are available even after the final project is completed. These drawings may also contain added information (comments, sketches) contributed by an instructor, peers, or friends. Since writing, too, is a performance, collaboration with others is an important element for the performer in compiling a portfolio. In the case of student writers, they themselves can take advantage of their preliminary drafts and peer reviews to more effectively evaluate the growth of their own skills, since learning of any kind, looked at developmentally, must allow for errors and spurts of growth, as well as for regression as learners attempt new skills. The semester-long effect of assembling portfolio pieces permits all of these normal processes to take place naturally, rather than pushing students to turn in “perfect” work at a time when they are still developing and testing their skills.

Assembling a finished portfolio—thus meeting institutional requirements for evaluation—lets both teacher and student see the pieces included from a dual perspective. On the one hand, they can view the development of skills through drafts of papers and their revisions (taking “skills” here in its broadest possible sense); on the other hand, they can see and measure the finished pieces that represent the student's level of success at a skillful performance. In all of these processes, the students realize that they can take charge of their own learning under the guidance of their teachers and peers. The learning is interactive and socially based.

Increasingly, portfolios are being used for assessment in writing classes and programs (see Belanoff and Dickson, 1991; Yancey, 1992) because they provide both the student and the teacher with important information. Lucas (1988), for example,
Student Portfolios as an Assessment Tool

principles to tutor training. While we will take the CSUF Developmental Writing Program as the primary example of successful portfolio assessment, we hope to suggest through our model how portfolios can be used for a broader range of disciplines and courses, not only those in which writing is the sole focus.

The portfolio assessment procedures used in the Developmental Writing Program have been in effect since 1988; however, they are not static. They have evolved over that time and will continue to be modified as program coordinators, instructors, graduate assistants, and tutors learn from our changing population of students, from others who use portfolio evaluation, and from our attempt to discover our own preferences for pieces to be included in the portfolio to provide us with valid evaluation. Most important, because of its flexibility to meet the needs of our students, all involved in the portfolio evaluation find it a highly satisfactory means of assessment.

As we have already noted, portfolios are adaptable to various contexts. To set the stage for what we do at CSUF, we will describe the broad context for our particular use of portfolios for assessment: the student population in the Developmental Writing Program, the network to which students have access for assistance, the specifics of portfolio construction, and the actual evaluation of the portfolios, which we use as a criterion for exiting the course.

The Students in the Writing Program

The students who are required to take developmental writing, a noncredit-bearing prebaccalaureate course, generally are first-generation college students who lack role models for what college students do. Most are in their first year of college; many enter as part of a program for low-income students or an intensive learning program designed for students who score in the lowest quartile of the English Placement Test given throughout the California State University system. The students at CSUF make up a diverse ethnic population with 28 percent ethnic minorities. (Orange County, the site of CSUF, is home to

A Model of Writing-Portfolio Assessment in the Classroom

Our personal knowledge of portfolio assessment comes mainly from its application in writing classes: one of the authors (Crouch) began using them in her freshman writing sections and initiated them as a tool for assessment in the Developmental Writing Program at CSUF; the other author (Fontaine) has used portfolios in the freshman writing program at an East Coast university and in the basic writing program at CSUF and applies their

arguments that the attractiveness of portfolios for assessment purposes is their "ecological validity: the extent to which a text reflects (and hence reports results from) the whole writing environment of the learner, and the extent to which it impacts that environment in positive rather than negative ways" (p. 12). The environment situates real writers writing real texts, not mere writing exercises. Further, when evaluation is ecologically valid, teachers and students get more information that is of a higher quality and usefulness than they would from a timed test or a single sample. In other words, portfolios allow both learners and instructors to observe longer-term learning processes, rather than simply to prepare for one specific test or learning task.

One of the best features of assessment by portfolio rests on the contextual nature that such evaluation allows. Here context is used in two senses. First, the term refers to the ways in which a portfolio can be constructed. As we have already suggested, an instructor can develop portfolios to fit a particular class or program; he or she is not bound to follow exactly the procedures of another instructor or program. In this way, portfolios are very flexible and make possible a consideration of the needs of a particular institution and of particular students in developing assessment to meet those requirements. Second, context is used in our discussion to describe the broad areas of assistance that are available—from classroom instructors, graduate assistants, and writing center tutors—as students prepare for their portfolio assessment specifically in the Developmental Writing Program at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF).
the largest population of Vietnamese outside of Vietnam.) The Developmental Writing Program serves a population of about 70 percent minority students. For many of our students, English is a second language or, if they are Latino, a second dialect. Often they report that they have low self-esteem as writers, or they have high self-esteem (many took advanced placement classes in high school) but low productivity and an inability to produce academic writing.

*The Assistance Network for Students*

Figure 17.1 shows the context of the rich, interactive writing network that students become part of when they take the developmental writing course. Writing instructors serve as co-constructors of our teaching and assessment philosophy as well as teaching the course. They act as mentors for the graduate students (referred to as graduate assistants, or GAs) who assist in their classes and are the primary liaisons between the classroom and the Writing Center, where the GAs tutor. This center is staffed by both the GAs and undergraduate tutors (known as student assistants, or SAs).

As part of their course work, students in developmental writing are required to make at least four appointments to visit the Writing Center for help with their papers. Through this requirement, students experience another part of the contextual network of writing and come to understand the support both the program and the center provide through that network. Also, it further strengthens the idea of the collaborative nature of writing, extending out from classroom activities to the center. GAs and SAs are familiar with the nature of the assessment required of the students and tailor their tutoring to meet the special needs of the students. We also hope that through these visits students will continue to be users of this center throughout their academic lives at Fullerton.

*Creating and Responding to the Portfolio*

The portfolio process, then, becomes thoroughly integrated into all facets of the student writer's experience with the course be-
than grader, thus providing a great deal of formative evaluation. That is, various readers respond to the writing, rather than giving it a summative, or grade-based, evaluation. In this way, students see their writing from the reader's standpoint; the writing is treated as "real" writing that the reader is attempting to get meaning from rather than one more writing exercise to be graded and then cast aside. (For the notion of the teacher as coach, see Belanoff and Elbow, 1991. For responding to drafts rather than final products, see Sommers, 1982.)

Responses to writing are more effective than grades, for they allow instructors to indicate what is effective about a piece as well as where the writing fails when the reader cannot understand what the writer is trying to argue, analyze, narrate, and so on. Rather than evaluating the writing as a whole, instructors can ask questions of and give encouragement to the writers as part of their critique (for example, I'm not sure what argument you're trying to make here." "What do you mean by this term? How are you defining it?" "Good point!").

Student writers begin to understand the concept of revision, of "reseeing" their work, the process that "real" writers go through.

Writing for a particular assignment often begins in the classroom, with everyone participating in generating ideas. Other classroom activities are carried out in small groups under the direction of the instructor and the GA. In these peer groups, students read and respond to each other's papers, thus extending the collaborative nature of writing and thereby teaching students a very immediate and active way about how others read their writing. Through their experience of reading the essays of their peers, writers also learn how others will read their portfolio papers, since portfolios are evaluated by two instructors other than the student's own. In addition, the instructor and the GA continually reinforce the tutoring possibilities in the Writing Center, where yet another audience can be called on for response, thus offering students many audiences and much feedback for what they write.

For their portfolio, students are required to turn in three papers, two of which are finished (in the sense that they have been extensively revised and the final drafts are typed) and one that has been written in class under time constraints. Students do a great deal of writing during the semester, but through selecting, and assigning essays that they will make part of their portfolios, they learn something about what writers really do. They understand that not every piece they turn in needs to be finished or revised. They learn that some writing will be tentative, something on the way to a final piece but in need of much change before it can be called polished. They also learn about writing under time constraints, as the third essay in the portfolio is written in class. (Instructors are encouraged to assign two essays of this latter type so that students have a choice of in-class timed writings to put into the portfolio.)

Here is the procedure we use for this type of essay. The in-class essay is written over the period of a week and collected each day at the end of the class. Students may receive help from the instructor and GA during the class. At the end of the week, the instructor places these essays in a file until the end of the term. On the last day of class, students are given forty-five minutes to make final revisions on the essay before placing it in their portfolio.

A timed writing piece is included in the portfolio for valid reasons. First, we know that students are required to write under pressure of time in other courses; we are, therefore, preparing them for this kind of writing task. Second, timed writings provide some check on the possibility of plagiarism, an issue for portfolio evaluation because students are encouraged to get as much reader response to their papers as they can to assist with revision. However, because this is a writing course and teachers see drafts of papers as they are being produced, spotting plagiarism in student writing is relatively easy, and it is rarely an issue in the assessment process.

Finally, the timed writing provides a check on the language skills of the large number of nonnative English-speaking students who take the course. While we teach several English-as-a-second-language (ESL) sections each term, staffed by instructors specially trained in this area, ESL students are enrolled in all sections of the course. When we began using portfolios, the ESL instructors contended that without timed writings we...
would have no way of assessing the ESL students' writing abilities. They also argued that ESL students might resort to plagiarism or even have others completely rewrite their papers to eliminate the kinds of errors nonnative speakers make that might keep them from passing the course. By exerting more control over the writing—that is, watching it actually being produced in class—we could control for plagiarism, and we would also be able to better assess the students' writing skills. Thus far, the timed writing adequately addresses these concerns.

Critical Role of the Instructors

What transpired in the discussions about evaluating ESL students' portfolios—a debate that continued among instructors over three semesters as we all became comfortable with portfolio evaluation—highlights an important aspect of this kind of assessment: the involvement and commitment needed from those who participate in it. Lucas (1988) asserts quite rightly that successful evaluation "requires a continuing commitment to teamwork, to continual sharing and reshaping of assessment purposes, processes, tasks, . . . scoring criteria and methods of analyzing writing samples" (p. 16). Evaluation by portfolio is not a process that can simply be imposed on instructors if it is to be used successfully by a whole program. In the Developmental Writing Program, instructors truly have become co-constructors of our philosophy and practice, because they determine the rationale behind the types of papers that are included and they help construct the standards for evaluation, the rubric.

Instructors must "buy into" and believe in portfolios, and they have, in a number of ways. First, they had to agree to try this type of evaluation, knowing that they would have to adapt their teaching to the preparation of the portfolio. They had to understand that greater demands would be made on their time at the end of the term in respect to grading. For example, with our previous evaluation, in one long afternoon instructors could train for and score holistically the timed essays collected from 400 students, because students wrote on a common topic and their essays were relatively short, about three or four handwritten

Student Portfolios as an Assessment Tool

pages. Portfolios have tripled our essay reading, for now we read three essays on various topics from each student. (This is one of the pragmatic reasons for requiring students to type the two extensively revised essays. They are simply easier and faster to read.)

Portfolios, as we evaluate them, require about ninety minutes of training and two grading sessionsex because each portfolio is read twice. The first reading takes place over a weekend, with individual instructors scoring the portfolios as Pass or No Pass. Depending on the instructor's experience and the number of students who are taking the course, this grading can take from three to six hours. The second reading is carried out in small groups, usually made up of four instructors, once they have met and reminded themselves of the norms for Pass/No Pass. This grading session usually takes about three to four hours. Then individual instructors look at the scores and determine whether students will exit the course or take it for a second term. If, for example, a portfolio receives two passing scores, clearly the student will pass. However, if there is a split score, the student's instructor reads the portfolio and determines whether the writing merits passing or not.

Instructor investment and belief in this kind of evaluation has been strengthened in another way. With the guidance of the program director, instructors have determined the general criteria by which portfolios will be judged. Because most instructors were already familiar with holistic scoring of timed essays when we began portfolio evaluation, we decided to score the portfolios holistically. We do so in two senses: (1) we read the papers themselves holistically, focusing attention on values of coherence, voice, and audience awareness over correctness of grammar and punctuation; (2) we score the portfolio as a whole—that is, rather than scoring each of the three essays individually and then arriving at a final evaluation through averaging the scores, we look at the quality of each portfolio as a whole and assign either Pass or No Pass. By reading sample portfolios submitted at the end of the term and matching them to our set of criteria, we can make informed judgments about portfolios that pass or fail. We look for general, not absolute, agreement among
the evaluators, since portfolios do not lend themselves to absolute judgments in the way that timed writings often can, especially when we are looking at two finished papers as well as one written under time constraints and that is, therefore, less polished.

**Involving Faculty and Students in Assessment and Feedback**

As part of the sharing process among teachers that Lucas (1988) refers to, program instructors talk both formally (in meetings) and informally (in offices, hallways, at the copy machine) about their students and the portfolios. Thus far, two practices have arisen from this sharing of information. The first is to exchange topic ideas for the timed writings, those that have been effective in eliciting good writing from the students. A second, and more elaborate, practice was developed by several instructors. The assignment is designed to help students get a sense of an unknown audience for their writing, much like that for the portfolio grading. A paper exchange takes place between two classes toward the end of the term, a time when we feel students are most familiar with the critiquing and revision processes and the standards by which they will be judged. Students are asked to read one paper from another class set and write a reader’s response to it. This response is attached to the paper and returned to the student writer in the other class. Through this practice, the context of the portfolio assessment extends further into the program.

Instructors involved in this latter process train their students to respond constructively to the papers from the other class. Students have their own teacher’s past comments on their papers to use as a model for responding to a peer’s paper. Through the exchange, students see themselves in a concrete way as both producers of writing and as readers of the writing produced by others. The students often decide to include this particular paper as part of the portfolio because the exchange is usually a pivotal experience for them. They understand what “audience” means in yet another way. When the student reader writes in her critique, “I don’t know exactly what bilingual education is.
network engenders new and often innovative practices and provides a sounding board for overcoming the problems encountered when instituting and continuing such an assessment method.

As instructors of the same course, they also appreciate having common standards for evaluation that they have an investment in, since they helped develop the standards. Sharing the standards with their students allows the instructors to demonstrate the criteria that guide the evaluation of all students taking the course, no matter who their instructor is. Students do not feel that their passing or not passing is left to the grading whims of an individual teacher. Common standards also add to the feeling of cohesiveness among the instructors in the program, especially because some of them never see one another until the regular meetings before, during, and at the end of the term. Yet the adaptable nature of the portfolio allows individual instructors to teach according to the style that suits them best; it is not necessary to impose a common syllabus for the course. What they all have in common are the standards. Even in a large program, then, portfolios are flexible enough to fit individuals.

Extending the Model to the Writing Center

The context for learning and teaching writing at CSUF includes the Writing Center, a student facility that acts as an extension of the classroom. The job of any university or college writing center is to provide students with one-on-one tutorial assistance that is either an adjunct to or, in some instances, a replacement for classroom writing experiences. Beyond this common definition, writing centers vary widely: tutors may be undergraduates or graduate students, full-time or part-time faculty; tutor training courses can last from one weekend to one semester; tutors may provide a diagnostic/testing service or oral response to essays tutors have written for various classes; available resource materials might include grammar exercises, handbooks, computers, or simply the tutors’ expertise; the center itself may be a small converted office or a space designed specifically for the purpose of tutoring. However it is structured and whatever tutoring strategies it advocates, a writing center implies a particular set of assumptions about what it means to write, to learn to write, and to help others learn to write.

Because students in our developmental writing classes are required to visit the Writing Center, and because graduate student tutors also assist with sections of this course, it is especially important that our tutors understand what the portfolio implies about writing and the learning of writing and that their tutoring reinforce these implications. Moreover, if the assumptions and philosophy supporting the use of portfolio assessment are as institutionally contextualized as we believe, they should be integrated throughout the entire writing instructional network—from the classroom to the Writing Center. For the tutors and the tutees, the center should come to represent the same philosophy of writing that underlies portfolio assessment, a philosophy in which writing is produced slowly, in rich rhetorical contexts, with the help of others, but always with the writer in control.

As with the classroom instructor who concentrates students’ attention on drafting the essays that may be included in their portfolios, our Writing Center tutors ask students to bring their earliest drafts to their half-hour tutorial sessions. Knowing that the portfolio will not be assembled until the end of the semester, tutors can focus on providing students with formative responses to their writing and on encouraging students to revise. Since the final “due date” is weeks or months away, students have the unfamiliar luxury of really working through a piece of writing, and tutors have the responsibility of helping students postpone the final revision and understand that creating better pieces of writing requires that they change the way they write as much as it does what they write.

One common misperception that students hold about writing centers is that they are “fix-it shops” staffed by individuals who will repair broken sentences and ensure passing grades. Surely this image doesn’t fit with the philosophy of writing espoused by the portfolio—a philosophy in which the writer takes control and good writing takes time and revision. But until students understand the nature of revision—that it occurs in response to unresolved questions raised by the text—they will be
hesitant to let go of their fix-it shop profile of the Writing Center. One way of bringing students to this understanding is for tutors to emulate the kinds of open-ended, facilitative writing response used in the classroom. Rather than supplying students with the fixes or gold stars for which they eagerly wait, tutors must play the role of readers, asking questions that lead to revisions.

For example, while reading an essay draft aloud, the tutor finds the focus of the piece to be unclear. Rather than writing "unclear focus" on the draft or rewriting the sentences, the tutor asks the writer about the purpose of the essay or about the contradictions that grow from the garbled ideas. In another instance, the tutor may come across an especially disorganized paragraph and stop to ask the writer questions that may arise in a reader's mind because the events or propositions are out of order. In this way, the tutor becomes an audience, and the student writer comes to understand the consequences of a poorly focused or disorganized essay in terms of the reader's experience. Students learn that, like their instructor and their final portfolio readers, this audience reads first, evaluates next.

If we turn back the clock on any teacher's evaluation, we see that it originated in a reader's reaction. And by focusing on reader response, the real source of any evaluation, tutors—like instructors—help students learn to become their own readers, to understand the process of drafting and revising that will improve their writing and strengthen their portfolio.

In the Writing Center, even editing for the portfolio becomes a matter of audience response. Spelling, usage, and grammar are important because they aid or impede the reader's understanding of the writer's meaning. Their importance becomes especially visible when a student actually sees a tutor's furrowed brow or quizzical expression as the tutor pauses or struggles over a misspelled word or an incorrect sentence construction. Students who experience this moment in the Writing Center may be more eager to edit their portfolio pieces, knowing that "correctness" is not a white glove that teachers carry but an integral element of communication, one on which the success of a portfolio may rely.

Student Portfolios as an Assessment Tool

Finally, tutoring sessions in the Writing Center both support and enlarge on the social context for writing that begins with students' instructors and peers in the classroom, may include students in other classes, and ends with the portfolio reading. When students come into the center for their first tutorial, they are introduced to a situation much like the portfolio reading: a stranger, someone more expert than they, but someone other than their instructor, will be reading their essays. This situation, like the portfolio reading, usually proves to be both frightening and frustrating for students. Few of them have had readers outside the familiar structure of the classroom or the reassuring circle of family and friends. But as portfolio assessment emphasizes, writers must often be prepared to meet the needs and expectations of audiences with whom they have no previous or current history. It is common for students to shrug off tutors' queries with a "Well, you know." But a tutor—or a portfolio reader—who knows nothing more about the writer or the prompt than what is provided in the text, does not know. Once the student writers recognize the limitations of their readers' perspective, most will write more specifically, with fewer unclear sentences or references. Meeting with tutors, they may overcome—or at least reduce—their fear of such an audience. Listening to the tutors' questions about their drafts, they may learn how to predict where readers would be troubled, where revising might take place.

Most important to each of these tutoring strategies is the student writer's own sense of responsibility and control. If we are to affect the way our students write, we must affect the way they feel about themselves as writers. Developmental writers are frequently insecure either because they have been labeled as failures for so long or because they have so little experience with written English. Portfolio assessment seeks to strengthen writers' self-concepts by helping them make effective rhetorical decisions. Indeed, success in these decisions results in a successful portfolio. At the end of the semester, students must select and submit the essays that they perceive most likely to contribute to a passing portfolio. Because insecure students may fervently resist making this choice, feeling inadequate to the task,
our goal in the center is to make this choice easier by having students make comparable choices all semester. In asking questions and offering responses, being a reader rather than an evaluator, the tutor continually hands control back to the writer. If tutors were to make judgments about what is good or bad in a piece of student writing, prescribing changes for it, any resistance students raise against selecting essays for a portfolio might be warranted. But we hope that students' classroom experiences, reinforced by the experiences they have in the Writing Center, prepare them to accept the responsibility of becoming a writer.

So far we have described ways in which tutoring strategies in the Writing Center reinforce for developmental writing students the general philosophy implied by our means of portfolio assessment. For these strategies to be used successfully, for this philosophy to emerge and have a significant impact, the undergraduate and graduate students who tutor in the Writing Center must not only learn about the assumptions supporting this philosophy, they must have experienced them. Just as the instructors must be committed to the philosophy if it is to work, so, too, must the tutors.

As in any tutor-training course, our tutors read about how to conduct tutorial sessions, what the writing process is, and what special problems they may encounter in the center. They must also understand portfolio assessment in relation to other forms of writing assessment and to their responsibilities as tutors. To this end, they read descriptive articles about using and understanding writing portfolios in the context of a writing program (see, for example, Belanoff and Elbow, 1991).

Because they will focus tutees' attention on revising, tutors themselves must understand the difference between evaluating writing and responding to writing: evaluation assumes the writing is complete and ready to be awarded a degree of merit; responding assumes the writing is still being revised and deserves a reader's reaction. In the course of their own learning, most students have become quite familiar with having their writing evaluated, "slashed" with the red pen, or terminally judged with a letter grade. Few students have much experience with responses to their writing, with reader questions and observations.

Student Portfolios as an Assessment Tool

When they have received such responses, many have been unsure of their significance, looking around to find the grade. So, in the tutor-training course, we look at essays that the tutors themselves have written and to which they have received an evaluation or a response. We ask tutors to read one another's essays, to "translate" the instructors' responses for one another. What does it really mean when a sentence is labeled "awkward" or "wordy"? What makes a reader stumble over a clause or get lost in a description? In effect, we treat these responses as a language that tutors must learn—not only because they will be expected to perform such translations for tutees but also because they will have to develop their own language for responding to student writing.

Beyond learning about a philosophy of writing and tutoring writing that is consistent with the one evoked by portfolio assessment, the tutors-in-training experience such a philosophy. The course creates for them the same emphasis on drafting and revising, the same unfamiliar audience experience that their tutees experience with the portfolio. From the first day of the semester, tutors are aware that they will have to submit an essay on any topic they choose related to tutoring. Apart from being used to evaluate tutors' performance in the training course, these essays become part of an anthology that will be used in the following semester's training class and also serve as a reference book in the Writing Center. Early on, tutors must bring their topic proposals to class; they then read and respond to one another's drafts. Similarly, the instructor responds to drafts, asking the kinds of questions and making the kinds of observations that the tutors will be expected to make of student writing in the Writing Center. On the last day of class, the essays are arranged and, with the instructor's introduction, taken to a copy center where they are printed into textbooks for the next semester. By the time tutors have completed the project, they have experienced the same process of drafting, responding, revising, and editing that their tutees are experiencing. And, like their tutees, they will have experienced this process in the context of a fairly complicated and intimidating rhetorical situation—writing for both familiar and unfamiliar, novice and expert audiences.
Finally, like the students who will be submitting writing portfolios, the tutors are encouraged to establish their own diverse social contexts for writing, a community other than the classroom into which they can take writing for conversation and response. In addition to the peer response provided in the training class, several other situations can be established for this context and can exist after tutors complete the class. For example, we “built” a tutor lounge by arranging some tables and room dividers where off-duty tutors can share their own writing and their tutoring stories. We have encouraged tutors to conduct student workshops on various writing concerns—workshops that their peer tutors help plan and often attend. Tutors who are socially connected writers themselves, who regularly seek response to their own writing, will conduct themselves in the Writing Center with greater commitment to and understanding of its purpose in relation to the portfolio.

Conclusion

The greatest strength of portfolio evaluation is that it embodies a set of consistent elements and assumptions about teaching and learning, while it is adaptable to many different kinds of classes, programs, and schools. The portfolio assessment procedures we use at the Developmental Writing Program and the Writing Center at CSUF is in some ways idiosyncratic to the structure and requirements of our English department and university. However the portfolio is used for assessment, certain elements remain the same:

1. Portfolios represent work assembled over time and draw on the continual learning of the student over that period of time. A portfolio must be an “ordered” and “deliberate compilation, gathered according to some plan, for use by an identified reader or readers for specific needs or purposes” (Larson, 1991, p. 138).

2. Portfolio evaluation does not penalize students for poor skills with which they may enter a course. It allows them to develop skills over time.

3. Portfolios stress reworking, rethinking, and revising.

4. Portfolios allow students to work toward expert or mastery level of a subject or skill by engaging them in the kinds of activities experts carry out.

Finally, no matter how portfolio assessment is adapted, it has important consequences for instructors and students:

1. Instructors get a better sense of what is working and what is not working in the classroom. Because pieces are not judged summatively until the end of the semester, both students and instructor can discuss assignments as trials for a final product.

2. In programmatic use of portfolios, instructors collaboratively design the evaluation rubric and learn from one another practices that enhance both teaching and learning.

3. Students learn that they cannot expect everything they produce to be of equal quality but that they have time to bring pieces up to some standard. They also learn how to judge their own work and develop their own standards, rather than waiting for someone to impose standards on them.

4. If students choose a limited number of pieces for the portfolio, they also learn they can abandon work that they are not interested in or that is not—and may never be—successful.

5. Students have the opportunity to show what they have learned about writing, not simply what they have learned for a midterm or final exam.

6. Students have the pleasure of putting together something truly “finished” for a course because they have time to do so.

The extent to which writing portfolio assessment can be adapted to a variety of institutional contexts and to which it effects changes in the way students write and think about writing suggests the profound impact this form of assessment has
had on the teaching and evaluating of writing. As more instructors and programs replace traditional forms of assessment with the portfolio, making it fit their particular needs and requirements, using it in ways that have yet to be tried, the value of portfolio assessment will continue to be revealed.

References

Sommers, N. “Responding to Student Writing.” College Composition and Communication, 1982, 33, 148-156.

Assessment’s Role in Strengthening the Core Curriculum

James L. Ratcliff

Assessment can be seen as a threat or as an opportunity for changing college classrooms. As a threat, it may be seen as the long arm of some superordinate body (the accrediting agency, the legislature, the higher education system office, or "the administration") placing its ugly hands on the faculty’s sacred domain, the classroom. Assessment may also be seen as an additional chore that a faculty member has to do, such as compile student portfolios or read and grade student essays. For some, assessment has become an end in itself. Some colleges wish to say that they "do assessment" in hope that those superordinate forces will leave them alone; they settle for making broad statements about how they are meeting public demands for greater accountability.

Assessment can be a powerful and much needed tool in the reform of general education curricula. In the coming decade, we need to envision general education as more than a smorgasbord of courses from which to choose to fulfill degree requirements. Similarly, assessment in the 1990s can go beyond meeting the expectations of external agencies, providing usual