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[Home](#) >> [Prof. Development](#) >> [Prof. Development](#) >> [Prof. Development](#) >> [Student Portfolios](#)

[Essentials](#) ▾ [Administrators](#) ▾ [Lesson Plans](#) ▾ [Technology](#) ▾ [Prof Dev](#) ▾ [Jobs](#)

[Print](#)

The New Teacher Advisor

Student Portfolios as an Assessment Tool

Teachers and administrators have been making a move from traditional paper-and-pencil type tests to alternate forms of assessment. Teacher observation, projects, essays, and other more creative ways of evaluating student achievement have gained a larger following within the classroom. Although its use has declined, one type of assessment tool that can be used very effectively is the student portfolio. Portfolios remain quite popular in education coursework and with administrators evaluating senior teachers. Why, then, do so many classroom teachers forego the use of portfolios as assessment tools?

One reason might be that the portfolio is a very subjective form of assessment. For anyone uncomfortable without a grading key or answer sheet, subjective evaluation can be a scary task. Secondly, teachers often are unsure themselves of the purpose of a portfolio and its uses in the classroom. Third, there is a question of how the portfolio can be most effectively used to assess student learning.

The following suggestions will help you come to terms with those three factors and allow you to utilize student portfolios to evaluate the learning occurring in your classroom.

Set a goal, or purpose, for the portfolio. Your goal should be tied to how you plan to use the portfolio. Do you want to see student improvement over the long term or a mastery of a specific set of skills? Is it important for you to see the scope of student learning over time or do you merely want to collect samples of student work to pass along to the next teacher? Are you looking for a concrete way to show parents the amount of work completed and their child's improvement over time? Take some time to think about what kind of data you want to collect and how you plan to use it.

Next, determine how -- or if -- you will grade the portfolios. If your purpose is merely to collect work samples to pass along to another teacher or parent, there is no need to actually grade the portfolios. If, however, you are looking for an overall mastery of skills, you will want to grade the work collected. The most efficient way to grade a portfolio is through a rating scale. If you're looking for specific skills, you might begin with a checklist. That checklist will ensure that all necessary pieces are included. I use the following guidelines: Is the work completed correctly (mechanics), completely (information), and comprehensively (depth)? Each area is marked on a scale of 1-4. My scale is 1 = not at all; 2 = somewhat; 3 = mostly; and 4 = entirely.

Say, for example, that as a teacher of writing, I'm looking for examples within the student portfolios that show each writing mode covered during my course. Each piece then is determined to be correct, complete, and comprehensive based on a scale of 1-4. The three scores are averaged giving each piece an overall score. I then average all the scores to give a grade for the entire portfolio. A math teacher might be looking for samples showing various problems solved based on the skills taught during a particular unit or year. A social studies teacher might be looking for comprehension and understanding of major events during a specific time period. Each teacher must determine what skills or learning are to be evaluated through student portfolios.

It also is important -- especially if you plan to use the portfolio as a major grade for your course -- that you get another teacher to help with the evaluations. That ensures that your assessment is reliable. Teachers often cut some slack for less academically inclined students, while holding others to higher standards. That is especially prevalent in subjective assessments. By asking a teacher who is unfamiliar with your students to read over the work and assess it using your rating scale, you are making a more authentic evaluation. The two scores then can be averaged

to get a final grade. That will show you and the student a more accurate assessment of their work products.

One thing to keep in mind is that, although many portfolios reflect long-term projects completed over the course of a semester or year, it does not have to be that way. You can have students create portfolios of their work for a particular unit. That portfolio might count as a project for that particular topic of study. The next unit might not include the use of a portfolio as an assessment tool. There is no need to collect work in a portfolio, give an end-of-unit test, *and* have students complete a major project in connection with the unit. All three activities are tools to evaluate student learning and its overkill for both you and the students to use all three. Choose the type of assessment that best meets the goals and objectives of a particular unit.

Finally, student involvement is very important in the portfolio process. It is vital that students also understand the purpose of the portfolio, how it will be used to evaluate their work, and how grades for it will be determined. Make sure students are given a checklist of what is expected in the portfolio before they begin submitting work. Take time at the beginning of the unit to explain the type of evaluation it is, so students clearly understand what is expected in terms of work product.

It also is important that you allow students a choice of what is placed in their portfolios. Although you might have a few specific pieces you require, permit students to include two or three pieces of their own choosing. Additionally, be sure to offer students the opportunity to reflect about the work included in the portfolio. What are their thoughts and feelings about each piece? Does it represent their best work or were they goofing off when they completed it? Why did a student choose a particular piece? What was his or her thought process in determining which pieces to submit? Those kinds of questions force students to actively think about their work and the portfolio as a whole rather than simply throwing any old assignment into a folder. Reflection provides further meaning to the assessment.

The portfolio is not the easiest type of assessment to implement, but it can be a very effective tool. Portfolios show the cumulative efforts and learning of a particular student over time. They offer valuable data about student improvement and skill mastery. Along with student reflection, that data provides valuable information about how each student learns and what is important to him or her in the learning process.

When starting the portfolio process, remember to keep it simple. Start with a single unit. Determine your goals and purpose for the portfolio. Create a checklist. Explain the process to students and encourage them to take an active role in the development of their portfolios. What you might discover is a very valuable and meaningful evaluation tool that effectively assesses student learning.

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