

## **Portfolios Revisited**

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### **Abstract**

Being unpopular, writing courses tend to attract few students. One reason for this lies in the limitations inherent in traditional “one-shot” form of evaluation. With the dissemination of process studies, a portfolio, an ongoing index of student development, has found its place in composition pedagogy. Congruently, the attractions of technology in classrooms inspired the researcher to incorporate e-mail into an EFL writing class. The present qualitative research aimed at investigating in an electronic fashion the nature of student comments, their reaction to teacher comments, and their views on portfolio use. Twelve Iranian EFL learners doing their writing course with the researcher were required to make computer files of their works to be emailed to the instructor at the end of the study along with their own reflections on them. Descriptive analysis of the portfolios indicated a number of recurring themes, highlighted patterns of student reactions, and was suggestive of a general positive attitude toward portfolio use.

**Key Words:** Writing class, process studies, portfolios; Emails

### **INTRODUCTION**

Essays as snapshots tell us something about a student’s learning at a particular time, but they provide a picture of only a fragment of what has already been learned. When a larger picture of a student’s learning is needed, essays tend to be “reductive” (Ruskin-Mayher, 2000). They do not represent the complexity of the knowledge gained or of the learning process itself. With the dissemination of process studies and the importance attached to cognitive and metacognitive awareness (Moya and O’Malley, 1994), portfolios have found their place in teaching writing. They seem to be particularly suited to the kinds of ongoing reflection that teachers now require of their students.

The idea of the present study came to the researcher when she noticed that students rarely gave feedback on their peers' writings read out in class. So, it was assumed if students reflected on their own work and get equipped with some yardstick criteria for evaluation, then they could comment on the writings of their peers, as well, and if all this was done via a new medium, that would be still more fascinating. The bright prospects of technology use in the teaching/learning contexts and its novelty and attraction to learners appeared as a good candidate to create incentives in students. Given this academic climate, the current study aimed at incorporating portfolios and technology into an EFL writing class. In the light of this new approach, student view was brought under investigation too.

### **Background**

There is a growing accord that the heart of education lies in the processes of inquiry, learning, and thinking rather than in the accumulation of disjointed skills (Day, 2002; Paulson et al., 1991). Much in the same line, the theories encouraging reflection and critical thinking are winning popularity. "The ultimate goal of language teaching and learning is to help students ... develop critical thinking," Day notes (2002, p.74). Within his innovative methodology for teaching critical thinking, Day offers a list of activities, among which the following catches the eye: "activities to help students recognize and understand different points of view, and then express their own beliefs" (p.76). The dissemination of process studies on the one hand and discontent amongst academics and educators over the limitations inherent in traditional testing on the other gave rise to a new sweep in the academic world. Based on the constructivist theories, which advocate that learning has to be constructed by the learners themselves, and in response to the need for alternative and more authentic assessment practices, portfolios have replaced the traditional assessment methods. It is assumed that as students reflect on their experiences, learning is enhanced. While in the traditional paradigms, the students are asked to perform within a set time to answer specific questions (Yancey, 2000), with the alternative assessment, and

portfolios as one of its manifestations, they are encouraged “to see writing as an ongoing process” (Pullman, 2002, p.161).

### **Portfolios defined**

Barrett (2000) defined a portfolio as a purposeful representative collection of the works of the student that exhibit his / her independent efforts, progress, and achievements. She further suggested that a portfolio tells a detailed story of student’s learning, growth, and change. Indeed, portfolios powerfully portrays a learning experience, whereby one could trace student development. And in Ruskin-Mayher’s (2000, p.138) words, portfolios show “an individual’s unique learning route.”

### **Why portfolios?**

Students have been stuffing assignments in notebooks and folders for years, so what's so new and exciting about portfolios? A portfolio is not a haphazard collection, rather it focuses on the students' reflections on their own work and accordingly serves as a reflective tool. John Dewey (1962), cited in Nunan (1992), claimed that we don't learn from experience; we learn from reflecting on experience. Portfolios thus become an effective way to get students to take a second look at their work and think about how they could improve future work. Previous studies suggest that students become active learners only when they assume ownership and control of their learning (Armongol, 2001; Mousavi, 2002; Nunan, 1992). Since students accept more responsibility and become agents in their own education (Mousavi, 2002), the use of portfolios leads to classrooms that are student-centered rather than teacher-centered.

### **Different parts of a portfolio**

Before building their portfolios, students should have a clear understanding of what a portfolio is. They may ask for models of portfolios. The students should be told to put in their portfolios hand-

picked samples of their work as well as their self- reflection on those samples. The student would lead his journey with more ease if he reflects on a couple of questions. The questions, as put forward by Barrett (2000) are: (1) "What?": To answer this question, the student would first summarize the artifact that documents the experience, (2) "So what?" : The student would reflect on what he learned and how this leads to meeting his needs. 3. "Now what?": The student would address implications for future learning needed and would set forth goals. Also helpful to the learner could be the types of evidence included in the portfolio, as offered by Jogan et al (2001, p.343):

a. Products: Student products are their actual final work. They may include essays or other work samples.

b. Processes: Besides finished work, evidence may be collected on the students' writing processes. This type of evidence includes outlines and drafts.

c. Perceptions: Another important type of evidence to include in a portfolio is students' perceptions of their learning. These include their attitudes, motivations, and self-assessments of their learning.

### **Advantages of portfolios**

Research shows that students benefit from an awareness of the processes and strategies involved in writing, solving a problem, researching a topic, analyzing information, or describing their own observations (Armongol, 2001). Indeed, cognitive and metacognitive awareness have been proven to affect achievement (Pithis, 1997). Interestingly, Ruskin-Mayher (2000) noted that students had to use their meta-cognitive skill to piece together their portfolios. This very feature adds to the wealth of portfolios as a reflective tool. Tang and Tiwari (2003), attempting to describe how students perceive their experience of preparing portfolios reported that the students favored the use of portfolio assessment. An unexpected finding was the fact that those students who lacked motivation came to be interested in collaborative learning and their eagerness for learning increased during the process of preparing portfolios. Conducting a quantitative project, Song and August (2002) were interested to study the potential impact of portfolio assessment on passing writing assessment test (WAT) in

an ESL context. The results indicated that the portfolio group outperformed the non-portfolio group. However, the authors mentioned that both groups generally had difficulties passing a timed impromptu test (p.61).

The literature is abundant regarding the advantages of using portfolios. Paulson et al (1991) refer to student perception, mentioning that portfolio use leads to more positive attitude toward learners themselves and their learning. It allows work in a relaxed informal manner, and more importantly, encourages metacognitive skills by engaging students in the process of selection, reflection, and evaluation.

To Heurta-Marcias (1995), portfolios are particularly useful for those who search for an alternative assessment substituting one-shot essays.

Pithis (1997) pointed out that students are animated by this new tool of learning and seem to respond well to its demands by taking pride in their work. He added that portfolios assist teachers diagnose and understand students' difficulties in learning.

In Brown and Hudson's view (1998), portfolios make students be readers as well as writers. Barrett (2002) argued that, with the use of portfolio assessment, teacher commentary became more meaningful for students, particularly because the commentary was not accompanied by a grade.

Mousavi (2002) reported the advantages as regards learners, teachers, and testing processes. For learners, portfolio provided continuous, cumulative record of language development, and fostered student-teacher and student-student collaboration. Additionally, it gave the teachers a clear picture of the language growth of students. Lastly, it permitted the assessment of multiple dimensions of language learning and provided opportunities for students and teachers to work together.

And in Pullman's view (2002), over time, students came to view portfolios as more systematic, socially constructed entities.

### **Limitations of portfolios**

Portfolios do have their own weak points, of course. Sewell et al (2000) in "The use of portfolio assessment in evaluation" brought up a lengthy discussion of the cautions one might take against portfolio use. To begin with, the researchers contended that portfolios are indeed less reliable than more quantitative evaluations such as test scores. And like any other qualitative measure, data from portfolio assessments are also difficult to analyze. If goals and criteria are not clearly defined for the students in advance, the portfolio will change to just a haphazard collection that would show no pattern of growth. Also important is the fact that sound portfolio projects place additional demands on teachers and students, both.

Discussing the limitations of portfolio evaluation, Mousavi (2002) referred to validity and reliability issues, among other things. Whether and to what extent a portfolio genuinely exemplifies student work and whether a standardized scoring procedure is observed within and across raters are threats to validity and reliability, respectively.

### **E-mails and portfolios**

Spanos et al (2001, p.322) discussed the many benefits of using modern technology in the classroom; the "flexibility students have in submitting their thoughts" was just an instance. Also of significance was the fact that "technological enhancements applied to a course with clearly delineated objectives ... can make the learning experience more enjoyable for both the student and the instructor" (p.321). Computer mediated communication creates a non-threatening environment where learners can work in a relaxed informal manner (Kim, 2004; Pithis, 1997). Additionally, research shows that word processors improve student writing in terms of quality, quantity, and the writing process, allowing for more experimentation with language (Kubota, 1999). Also, aiming to marry writing portfolios and technology, Pullman (2002) put forth the "efolio" project. In so doing, he had students concentrate on writing rather than on technology in an otherwise electronic environment. According to Kim (2004), projects about the interaction of human and computer indicate that "technology exerts profound changes to the social dimension of communication" (p.

305). Bloch (2002, p.131) was of the same opinion when she pointed out that the students find “the social relationship between themselves and their teacher” as a result of email exchanges so fundamental. Clearly, this way we would go beyond class walls and students and teachers could work on the portfolio any time at their own convenience (Paulson et al, 1991). Let’s not forget that students need time for reflection and exploration. So, electronic portfolios<sup>1</sup> enable them to concentrate on the assignment at their convenience and to decide when to post their files electronically.

Gaining enough orientation on the integration of portfolio and technology in the classroom, the researcher addressed the following questions:

1. What is the nature of student comments as reflected in portfolios?
2. What is the nature of student reaction to teacher comments?
3. What are students’ views on portfolio use?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Twelve male and female Iranian undergraduates of English at Allameh Tabatabaai University, taking their writing course with the researcher, volunteered to participate in the study. They had no on-campus access to emails, so they had to log onto the internet from their email accounts at homes, offices, or from netcafes. The study started with 12

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<sup>1</sup> In the present study, students save their works in a computer file and send them to the researcher at the end of the study. In the literature, however, the electronic portfolio is a new option brought by technology into the classroom. Electronic portfolios go beyond paper-and-pencil work to include varied media such as text, graphics, video, and sound. They foster active learning, motivate students, provide instruments of feedback and discussion on student performance, are accessible and easy to upgrade, and allow cross-referencing of student work (for a detailed discussion see, Jogan et al, 2001; Spanos et al, 2001).

students and ended with 26. As they heard about the project, other students found an account and joined the group. As for the setting of the current study, it was carried out in a university where computer and network service is not generally available for undergraduate students. In fact, the participants had differing access to technology.

### **Procedure**

Since the concept of portfolio was new to students, they had to know in advance what was expected of them. An explanation of the nature, purpose, and design of portfolio assessment was provided in a briefing session prior to the commencement of the study. As for how a portfolio should be organized, the researcher explained that it should include: a table of contents, the date of the work, and a description of the task (as introduced by Jogan et al, 2001).

To make students enthusiastic, I tried to keep the process simple, as advocated by Barrett (2000). Participant received the welcome letter below to encourage them to open themselves up to this new experience.

Dear all,

You are invited to take part in an email project. You are asked to collect your writings and save them into a diskette. Next, select samples that you believe represent your academic growth. Finally, you may add a reflective statement explaining what made you place those samples. Try to evaluate them, i.e., find values in those pieces. This we call a portfolio. Yet, don't feel constrained by these suggestions; you are encouraged to devise your own alternatives in whatever format and medium you prefer. Depending on the quality of your contributions, you will receive a 5% to 10% bonus toward your final score. I'm sure you will enjoy the task.

Cheers,

When students came up to me or emailed me about their initial fear and uncertainty regarding what to include in their portfolios, or when they did not really have a clear picture of what a portfolio looked like, I tried to give them some explanation or key questions. I just ensured



them that there was no particular model of a portfolio; they could go on and build their own. Instructional practices, if encouraged, positively affect student gain (Moya and O'Malley, 1994). Barrett (2000) listed a set of tips to boost student interest. One tool for student involvement in portfolio assessment is to encourage them to arrange their writing products from most to least effective. Another would be to have them answer a series of questions about the writing; such as: what qualities separate the best pieces of writing from the others? what processes were followed in generating the written products? what difficulty was encountered in writing the least effective pieces? and what is unique or interesting about the work you have undertaken? For these very reasons, portfolio becomes a tool for student reflection and assessment. It is hoped that the students' accounts would lead to a better understanding of their experience and perception of portfolio assessment

## **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

As with any qualitative assessment method, analysis of portfolio data can pose challenges. To analyze the data, an inductive approach was adopted in which the categories and themes emerged from the data, rather than being decided beforehand. To put it another way, the data were inductively analyzed to find emerging themes. I received 21 complete files; some participants gave up or did not include a complete set of their works. Five students preferred to write me every single day, elaborating on what they were doing. It is worth mentioning that this group used a netcafe to post their writing. The rest emailed me less frequently, even if they had home access to the internet. Inspired by her reading, the researcher decided on some key functions and major themes. Thus, the major themes that recurred with some frequency were drawn up. The following examples are not meant to be exhaustive; rather, they are selected to highlight the themes that emerged as a result of trying to give sense, meaning, and significance to the data.

Addressing the first research question, on the nature of student comments, the researcher observed the following points:

1. Mostly, students did not go very far; they limited themselves to comments on spelling and grammatical errors.

-lot of grammatical mistakes, no capitalization, careless in using correct words: lonely, alone.

-I used the grammar checker on my word processor to check this but I don't know why it did not catch that error.

-I found a few grammar errors, but there were not so many of them.

-They are mistakes I could find was some misspelling.

-The first one has the problem of reference and spelling.

2. A couple of students went beyond surface level and commented on organization and content.

-This thesis statement is great, complete and also short.

-Contentwise, I guess, my essay is suffering.

These two students, as you might guess, are at advanced level. But, such comments were given by less proficient students as well.

-I never ever can be unity, oneness. Many many ideas I write, tomorrow, yesterday, now.

-When I compare my topic sentences I write better now. Short and has meaning.

3. The researcher asked the volunteers to give their criteria for a good piece. The assumption was that this way they would develop standards that would affect their own performance in the long run. Selecting the most and least favorite pieces and talking about what worked and didn't work were "as time consuming as writing the essay itself", as one of the students pointed out. "What emerges," according to Yancey (2000, p.100), "is not just insight about paragraphs or pieces...(but) histories as writers."

-I liked the part when I introduced new elements a lot.

-I choose this one as best because the best ideas developed.

-My paper is good it gets right to the point.

-this is my best work as I spent so much time, I could find good sources and I learnt a lot.

-I liked dps( dead poets society, as the assignment was a film summary) because I had a clear outline of what I was going to jot

down. The choice of words interests me. Secondly, I had a clear vista of what I was doing.

-I like my "language writing" the best. The first point about it is that the attitude was interesting for me because I like music and have learned so much through it, Especially I like the part of using song lyrics and know them very useful for learning. Although I like the body and stages I accept that there are some flaws such as not bringing examples and a little irrelevant explanation at first. I think that bad points are less than good point so we can ignore them.

-This introductory is good because the writer I starting is good and can continue it in the good way. And also it has a good thesis statement. I myself like it much than the other.

4. Students were invited to include selections that they considered weak. It was assumed that if they came to identify and become aware of weak points in a given work, they would avoid them when writing.

-When I was not conversant with it , I could not expand it. This could not be any worse.

-I think the whole paragraph is considered as a thesis statement beacusc you can't see any full stop . As we learned paragaraph composes of some sentences and then we have a thesis satatement but I don't have any sentence.

-I'm afraid the ending is rather awkward.

-The major flaw is the conclusion which is irrelevant and does not make sense.

-Concluding paragraph gets off from the subject, writer, I, is carried away and starts talking about his own desires. In the end forgets to come back to the main subject.

-Too much detail in the body, the blow by blow description of an accident distracts the reader.

-Motivator is not that much absorbing, a lot of repetitions, no indentation.

-Just wanting to write something. In concluding paragraph I write just : I like to be far from any pressure or "security", what does it mean?

- The reasoning power is not complete.
- This one has nothing to be called a motivator.
- we can make a motivator interesting by asking relevant questions, I could use a nice memory and at the beginning asking a question could be useful.

5. Many students arrived at very limited answers, some respectably fluent. Yet, they did not like to elaborate more or to bring an introduction to what they wanted to write.

- Introductory paragraph has started very well.
- A very strong introductory paragraph!
- Good motivator, points being mentioned are dealt with in order. There are details and examples clarifying the point.
- Good words were used in this essay.
- I like the concluding paragraph. The finishing point is important, really.

- As I review, I like these structures: celebrities win the hearts.

- I like examples.

6. Surprisingly, two of the students (one male and one female) were highly task-oriented; they simply responded to what they took to be the teacher's question, and they immediately started offering their comments, without any introduction:

Dear,

As I promised I went through my papers to prepare what you need... I have to apologize for my brief commentary on my own essays and that is because of an urgent trip; yet at least I did as I promised.

- According to duty that you gave us, I read those paragraph and now i want to send you my opinion a bout it:

7. Enthusiasm about the topic in turn leads to more purposeful writing. Apparently, once they find the subject matter fascinating enough, they would even go read for it if they have little or no information on that.

- If I like the topic the product would be excellent. If like the topic I try to collect examples. I liked to write about dead poet's society.

-When I have knowledge about that it's very much important. Previously I researched about language, I read many article, I wrote easier.

-Best writings written in different intervals. As with writing, I read within intervals. I have many times sitting on this , I want to tell others do like me, it does miracles, do you agree with me?

In response to the second question, an attempt was made to sort out the students' reflective commentaries on teacher comment. Bloch (2002) found the following themes as she analyzed student/teacher email interaction: creating and maintaining personal relationship, making excuses, asking for help, and making formal requests.

1. One of the comments the students made, when asked for revision, was agreeing.

-Yes the statement is long but I couldn't shorten it. I agree with you.

-Yeah, I think if I write as you think it is in much more detail than mine.

-I understand what you mean by saying "Yes good point", but, I don't understand many ideas.

2. Praising, where student would start with a compliment, was another recurrent theme.

-I like your suggestion for the whole topic.

-Many thanks, I think you must have spent a lot time in reading and commenting on the overall structure.

-“Coherent piece of work, good.”, this is great. Thank you.

-I particularly like the way you analyze my point.

-You did put a lot of effort in relation to your students.

-Great idea, you are quite diligent in defining .

3. Some students complained about the task or were not satisfied with the products.

-I've done what you said; it takes so much time.

-My language is not so good. I cannot better.

-English is more difficult than Chinese. Absolutely wrong!! ... it's more like Chinese!!

4. Still some other students contributed questions:

- why do you write this sentence here?
- Does not the body contain thorough details?
- Does this sentence make sense in English?

Portfolios allow students to postpone lower-order concerns such as grammar and usage until they've enough time to work on other aspects of writing. Students seem to respond well to the demand of preparing a portfolio by caring for its appearance and content, which means going beyond merely wanting to pass a course.

Believing that the ultimate success of an enterprise is in the perceptions of the participants, the researcher was interested to gain an authentic perspective on students' attitude to portfolio as a new tool, hence the last question: What are the views of students on portfolio use?

For that reason, the students received an email at the end of the study inviting them to write a couple of lines about their overall impressions of writing in a portfolio. Attitudes varied.

1. A vast majority of students found the portfolio approach a positive and refreshing opportunity.

-Making the portfolio was actually very easy. I have nothing to complain about that. Sometimes I wish I could do something challenging.

-Well, there was somehow an impression about it nearly in the whole group that it just did really sort of interest us.

-Personally, for me, I'm happy and recommend it to friends.

2. Several accounts suggested that in the process of preparing portfolios, some of the students developed a personal understanding of their learning process (Moya and O'Malley, 1994; Pithis, 1997; Ruskin and Mayher, 2000).

-We revise in order to include in our portfolio, I liked it.

-I became conscious of my learning process. I am learning a lot.

-I was continually working at selecting for my portfolio.

-making the portfolio made me realize how much I had learnt.

-Now that I evaluated, I placed my self in the teacher's place. Next time as I was writing I tried to answer the question that she might asked.

-This allows me to sit down and look at my paper and go through it slowly step by step and make more intelligent and helpful comments

3. For some students, portfolios just reminded them of their weak English.

-This course made me once again conscious of the fact that I don't know any English, and I most probably will never even learn.

-I have to studied in English nine years. Still I am ignorant of the language. My works are very terrible.

This student was afraid that she would not be able to assume the responsibility and would not therefore be able to do her work. All in all, the portfolio approach did not seem to suit this student. She was very stressed and worried about the responsibility and the quality of her work.

4. Some found very little self-assessment in the portfolio; for instance, one student did not select any of his pieces for the final assessment. He commented:

-The course wasn't very rewarding or productive for me, which, of course, was mostly because I'm not very hardworking.

### **Limitations of the study**

This study has several limitations. With this small sample, not much can be said or generalized. Including a control group, to provide a ground for comparison would be more revealing. Future study could also consider implementing portfolios over a longer period of time and use longitudinal studies to investigate the effect on student writing.

### **CONCLUSION**

Portfolio assessment is not an educational panacea; rather, it is a promising alternative assessment. As far as the findings of the present study indicate, when students reviewed their works, they were mainly obsessed with their grammar and spelling; that is, surface-level corrections. This was the same that happened during class discussions. If they were really interested to offer any comment, it was merely of the grammar type. Part of this can be attributed to their expectations of

the course. When students come to writing classes, they think they will be dealing with grammar rules once again, as reported by themselves. So, they may need a reorientation toward the course to better prepare and equip themselves. Also, some students provided comments in their portfolios quite perfunctorily. It seems that they are not interested in such tasks and opt for something more challenging. I found a variety of comments when the students discussed weak and strong points of their pieces. Could it be that they found this kind of look different and really had the incentive to work on that? This indeed highlights the reflective aspect of portfolios. At this stage, they proposed their own standards. For some, the topic given was a driving force; some favored reading the reasoning of the writer; a group appreciated the diction used; another group liked the assignment as they had read and learned a lot on the topic. This kind of self-awareness about their learning process was a metacognitive attempt. As for the weak works, they listed factors like irrelevant details, disorganization, lack of coherence, etc. Regarding student view on portfolio, though they did not have a unanimous seal of agreement, the pros outweighed the cons. The positive potential of portfolio assessment is tempered by some negative considerations. All in all, portfolio assessment, like other innovations, must be undertaken with caution and thought to fulfill its promise. It certainly allows the teacher to encourage their students to review their own work. As teachers, we need to assess frequently what our students know, what they can do, and how they feel about the learning process. All this will enable us to adjust our teaching plans in ways that will speed up student learning. Portfolios give students the opportunity to find their own unique themes and observe their development.

Teachers who are interested in educational reform may regard using portfolios as a wonderful opportunity for alternative assessment. Yet, change for the sake of change is of little value. They should begin a portfolio project and collect student work with a clear purpose. Making portfolios needs time and energy, and requires the teacher to develop guidelines and clearly delineated objectives for the students (Spanos et al, 2001). Considerable amount of training, moreover, has to go into this approach. Though one might find portfolios really



demanding, Barrett (2000, p.12) stresses, they “are a unique way to document student progress, encourage improvement, and motivate involvement in learning.” It is recommended to view portfolio as a complement to classroom instruction and not as a substitute. Face to face methods still remain an important part of composition pedagogy. One last extract may be cited as another support for the portfolio use, reminding us teachers of how students welcome innovations:

-Thank you for doing something differently.

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