

A Study on Portfolio Assessment as an Effective Student Self-Evaluation Scheme

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Portfolios are collections of students' works over time. They often document students' best works and may include other types of process information such as drafts of the students' work, the students' self-assessment of the work, and the parents' assessment. Portfolios may be used for evaluation of students' abilities and progress. The study involved the analysis of 156 reflective essays written by college students taking a basic course in English. The reflective essays were part of a portfolio project, which is one of the requirements of the course. The data showed that through this alternative self-evaluation scheme, students were able to identify the various linguistic problems involving all the macro-skills. Moreover, through this assessment students were able to address these deficiencies through the learned independence and self-autonomy in learning that they have developed.

Proponents of the process approach to writing believe that traditional assessment techniques are often incongruent with English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom writing practices. The standardized written test given at the end of the school term is seen as particularly antithesis to the process approach to writing (Moya & O'Malley, 1994).

Writing experts have begun to explore viable means to measure the development of the writing skills of both ESL and EFL students. Portfolio development is increasingly being recognized as a better alternative to the traditional standardized testing. With the introduction of this new form of evaluation, the portfolio assessment serves as an effective measuring device to determine student achievement and competencies specifically in writing.

The study aims to explore the effectiveness of this evaluation scheme in the development of the writing and reading competencies of college

freshman students who are enrolled in an introductory English class for college students (ENGLONE). Also, the study seeks to determine if the students have improved in their reading and writing competencies through the self-evaluation they were supposed to write as part of their portfolio requirement for the course.

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

Portfolios are collections of students' work over time. Portfolios in classrooms today are derived from the visual and performing arts tradition wherein they serve to showcase an artist's accomplishments and personally favored works. A portfolio may be a folder containing the student's best-written works and the student's evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of his/her works. It may also contain one or more works-in-progress that illustrates the

creation of a product, such as an essay, evolving through the various stages of conception, drafting, and revision.

A portfolio often documents a student's best work and may include other types of process information, such as drafts of the student's self-assessment of the work, and the parents' assessment. Portfolios may be used for evaluation of a student's abilities and improvement.

More teachers have recently begun using portfolios in all curricular areas. Portfolios are useful as a support to the new instructional approaches that emphasize the student's role in constructing understanding and the teacher's role in promoting understanding. For example, in writing instruction, portfolios can function to illustrate the range of assignments, goals and audiences for which a student produced written material. In addition, portfolios can be a record of the activities undertaken over time in the development of written products. They can also be used to support cooperative teaming by offering an opportunity for students to share and comment on each other's work.

Portfolios are valued as an assessment tool because, as representations of classroom-based performance, they can be fully integrated into the curriculum. And unlike separate tests, they supplement rather than take time away from instruction. Moreover, many teachers, educators and researchers believe that portfolio assessments are more effective than "old style" tests for measuring academic skills and informing instructional decisions.

Portfolios are actually composed of two major components, the *process* and the *product* (Burke, Fogarty, & Belgrad, 1994). To derive the greatest benefit from the use of portfolios, it is imperative to fully understand the relationship between the developmental process and the product.

The portfolio is the actual collection of work that results from going through the development process. The development process is at the heart of successful portfolio use. Although this process may be a new experience for students and initially a time-consuming one for their teachers, most find it well worth the time and effort. The developmental

process of portfolio transforms instruction and assessment (Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997).

The portfolio development process consists of four basic steps: collection, selection, reflection and projection. The first step in the portfolio development process is the collection of various pieces of students' works. Collection is the primary activity in creating a working portfolio. When using the assessment or evaluation portfolio, it is imperative that all writing assignments go into the working portfolio for evaluation at the end of the school term (Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997).

The second step in the development process is selection. In selecting pieces for an assessment portfolio, students look for their best works that exemplify the criteria established for the work by the writing teacher or as imposed by the course curriculum. The criteria used for portfolio selection should reflect the learning objectives of the curriculum. The more precisely and explicitly the learning objectives are stated and the clearer the guidelines for evaluating student work, the more focused the criteria for portfolio selection can be (Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997).

The third phase of the portfolio development process is the reflection phase. The reflection phase is a distinct stage in which students articulate (usually in writing) their thinking about each item in their portfolio. Through the process of reflection, students become aware of themselves as learners (Danielson & Abrutyn, 1997).

The final stage of the portfolio development process is projection. Projection is defined as looking ahead and setting goals for the future. At this stage, the students have the opportunity to look at their work as a whole and make their own evaluation and judgement.

As previously mentioned, the concept of portfolio development was adopted from the field of fine arts where portfolios are used to display illustrative samples of an artist's work. The purpose of the artist's portfolio is to demonstrate and showcase the depth and breadth of the work as well as the artist's interest and abilities (Jongsma, 1989). In education however, the portfolio provides descriptions of students' writing and

reading experiences (Wolf, 1989). It has been observed that portfolio assessment is a useful system, which benefits the writing instructors, the students, and the whole writing program as it reveals to us the processes of writing and how it is evaluated (Wolf, 1989).

The use of the portfolio assessment as an alternative evaluation scheme has several advantages in writing. Initially, the portfolio assessment provides the teacher with a wealth of information upon which to base instructional decisions and by which to evaluate students' progress (Gomez, Graue & Bloch, 1991). It is also an effective means of communicating to students' parents their developmental status and progress in reading and writing. Portfolio assessment allows the teachers to keep a record of their observations and the collection of student's works will support conclusions they draw which they will report to the parents (Flood & Lapp, 1989). Lastly, portfolio assessment provides the teacher with a comprehensive record of the students' progress at the end of the school term including the amount of pre-writing, drafting, revision, and effort that has gone into the student's writing.

Portfolio evaluation also has several benefits for the writing students. First, portfolios motivate students to promote student self-assessment and self-understanding (Frazier & Paulson, 1992). It also allows the total writing process to be considered as an assessment of writing proficiency rather than one "final" paper. The portfolio also helps improve the writing process by making the students examine their own writing process as it teaches them to value writing. Lastly, portfolio evaluation motivates them to put their best effort into each writing assignment, to take pride in the ownership of their work, and to be more accountable for their writing.

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. Portfolios can serve as a vehicle for enhancing student awareness of these strategies for

thinking about and producing work—both inside and beyond the classroom.

Recent studies show the effectiveness of the portfolio assessment evaluation scheme as a means to measure development and performance of students and as an alternative method for evaluation. Tanner et al. (2000) found that using portfolios as an instrument for professional development during a one-year pre-service teacher education course for language students demonstrate a trainee's learning process overtime. It also illustrates an individual's development by strengthening the student teachers' reflective skills.

In a similar vein, Song and August (2002) discovered that portfolio assessment is as valid as any standardized test in predicting the students' success in an English course. They found that non-native English students are likely to pass their English courses when they are evaluated through the portfolio evaluation scheme than when they are required to pass their standardized final written test. Song and August (2002) believed that the use of the portfolio assessment seems to be a more appropriate evaluation alternative for the ESL students.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The portfolio assessment as an alternative means to evaluate the reading and writing competencies of both ESL and EFL students has gained acceptance over the years. The use of the portfolio evaluation scheme vis-a-vis the process approach to writing espoused in the introductory English course for freshman students in the university may help in the development of both their writing and reading competencies. In this regard, the current study aims to answer the following questions:

- A. What language problems of the students were addressed that can make portfolio assessment an effective tool in students' self-evaluation?

B. How did the portfolio assessment evaluation help the students develop their communicative competencies in the course?

METHOD

Corpus Data

The corpus data comprised of reflective essays written by freshman students from one private university in Manila, as part of their portfolio project requirement. The reflective essays were the essays written by the students at the end of the school term in which they were requested to evaluate their performance for the whole term. Moreover, students were asked to assess the introductory English course and to make some suggestions for the improvement of the course.

The 156 reflective essays that were analyzed came from 26 sections of students from the seven different colleges of the university. These were collected from the first until the third terms of one school year. For each section, six essays were requested from different teachers of the introductory English course.

The selected reflective essays were classified into three categories: High, Average, and Low to get a balanced representation from all the classes. These classifications were based on the ratings given by the English teachers in the evaluation of the students' portfolio projects. A student's essay is categorized as High if he or she has a grade between 4.0-3.5; Average if he or she garnered a grade between 3.0-2.0, and Low if he or she has a grade between 2.0-1.0; the grades range from 4.0 (Excellent) to 1.0 (Pass) to 0.0 (Fail).

Procedure

First, the Portfolio Assessment project was introduced to the teachers. They were informed of the rationale of this new evaluation scheme. The objectives, procedures, and the benefits of the portfolio evaluation were presented to them. They were then instructed to request their students to bring a clear book or an envelope which will serve

as the receptacle for their students' written outputs. They were also told to instruct their students to put all the drafts and the final copies of their best written output in class. The "best" works could be either high stakes essays or low stakes written products. The following written products were included in the portfolio envelopes:

1. Checklist of the written outputs included in the portfolio envelope
2. One major essay (either argumentative or informative)
3. One minor essay (low stakes writing activities-descriptive, narrative, comparative and contrast and journal writing activities)
4. Diagnostic essay - written evaluation of the students' communicative competencies (Usually written at the beginning of the course)
5. Reflective essay - written evaluation of the students' improvement in the class (Usually written at the end of the course)
6. Assessment essays - written evaluation of the students' evaluation of the best-written outputs they produced for the whole school term (Usually written at the end of the course)

After the introduction of the Portfolio evaluation scheme to the English one classes, teachers proceeded with their usual classroom activities that they had planned for the whole term. After all writing activities were accomplished and completed, teachers asked their students to collate and compile all their best written output. These papers were subjected to self-evaluation on the part of the students. The teacher provided writing prompts to facilitate the writing of the two evaluation essays.

Students were required to submit the final portfolio project to the teachers. Some students were very creative in their projects. They came up with unique presentations that made their projects very interesting. The teachers made their evaluation of their students' performance for the

whole school term based on the students' self-evaluation essays.

Analysis

Data were analyzed by identifying all the written perceptions of the students regarding their improvement and development in their communicative competencies in the course. All the essays were read and the students' comments regarding the improvement they had made in the course were identified.

It was noted that students went beyond the linguistic assessment of their performance in class. They also attribute their success to the other learning dimensions that were involved in the development and enhancement of their communicative skills. The students were also able to identify other areas of learning where improvements had been observed, which were identified and labeled as cognitive, affective and social dimensions of learning. These learning indicators, which are described in the next section, were instrumental in the development of the communicative competencies of the students for the entire school term.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study looked into two issues regarding the effectiveness of the portfolio assessment as an effective evaluation scheme. First, the study inquired into language problems that were addressed by the portfolio assessment as an effective tool in students' self-evaluation. The data found that through this alternative self-evaluation scheme, students were able to identify some language problems they had. Moreover, they were able to make some improvements in these identified linguistic problems. The following items were the linguistic problems identified by the students:

1. Inability to write coherent paragraphs.
2. Difficulty in organizing thoughts prior to actual essay writing.

3. Minimal knowledge of writing techniques needed for effective writing of the essays.
4. Vocabularies need to be enriched.
5. English grammar needs to be improved specifically, tenses, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, etc.
6. There is a need to develop writing style.
7. Students have to be stimulated and encouraged to write and read.
8. Oral skills need to be developed.
9. Problems in reading and comprehension should be addressed because they do not find this communicative skill appealing.
10. Students need to be taught basic rubrics in speaking, writing and reading.

The study also inquired into the students' perceptions as to how the portfolio assessment evaluation helped them develop his/her communicative competencies in the course. The self-evaluation indicators were categorized as: linguistic, cognitive, affective and social. The *Linguistic Dimension* of the students' self-evaluation actually refers to the specific language improvements they have made. Examples are improvements in writing, development of reading comprehension etc. The *Cognitive Dimension* of the students' self-evaluation pertains to the development of critical thinking pertinent in writing and reading of texts. On the other hand, the *Affective Dimension* of the students' self-evaluation refers to the enjoyment the students experienced in the production of their written texts. Finally, the *Social Dimension* of the students' self-evaluation refers to their experience of writing as a social act.

Tables 1 to 4 present the different self-evaluation indicators as revealed by the students when they evaluated their performance in class and the assessment of the development of their reading, writing, and even oral competencies for the course.

Table 1 shows that the students generally observed improvement in their writing skills. Most of the students feel that the course had somehow helped them develop their skills and competence

Table 1
Linguistic dimension of students' self-evaluation

Indicators	F
Developed writing skills	98
Developed reading skills & comprehension	80
Developed oral skills & confidence in speaking	45
Improvement in writing the essay through the various writing strategies learned in class	39
Improvement in writing through the various activities done in class	23
Improvement in vocabulary	14
Improved ability to use the English language	11
Peer editing has helped improve their writing skills and style.	9
Improvement in grammar	8
Appreciated sessions in the English Language Laboratory which helped improve their writing skills	7
Developed the habit of writing	5
Developed awareness in various research methods	5
Developed discipline	5
Developed writing style that enabled them to produce good essays	4
Developed the ability to produce good essays	4
Writing has made them more aware of their strengths and weaknesses.	2

in writing. Below are some examples of passages taken from actual reflective essays indicating the students' observations of the improvement in their writing competencies.

Example 1

I can firmly say that the ENGLONE course thoroughly met my expectations. It fulfilled it in many ways. It helped me to become a better writer to hone into my writing skills. It helped me to learn my own individual writing style.

Example 2

In the case of writing area, this is the most noticeable part of ENGLONE in which I greatly improved. Since we have writing exercises almost every meeting, I managed to correct my mistakes in grammar, sentence construction and usage of punctuation. I do not regret writing so

many drafts and doing numerous revisions. Instead, the more I become open-minded towards my mistakes and I get to see where my weakness is.

Moreover, we can notice that the students showed improvement in their reading and comprehension skills as presented by the data. They claim that reading became very easy when their respective teachers introduced to them different reading strategies and when they were exposed to very interesting reading texts. Below are some of the students' testimonies on the progress they made on their reading skills and comprehension.

Example 3

In terms of reading, I can say that it is much easier for me to understand whatever text I read. Familiarity with printed, visual and

geometric text was established. The reading comprehension after each sample lessons have (sic) trained me to read even between the lines of the author. I apply strategies like context clues or I activate my schema to understand it better. I did predicting which is the third one, is exciting and keeps me as well focused as I go through a text, and if an essay is quite loaded with information like a procedure of an experiment in Chemistry, I simply construct a flow chart. In that way, I can see how the ideas are presented and related. I make use of this everyday whether I read a newspaper in the morning read a chapter on my Botany book on lunch or put myself to sleep while reading my current novel.

Example 4

Reading was a hard thing for me before. I had trouble understanding the meaning of texts even if I read it a million times. However, I am proud to announce, that today there is a new whiz-reader in town. I have developed my comprehension skills through much training and encouragement. I have also found a new technique to read and understand texts faster, both at the same time.

As seen in the data, students also claim that they had made progress in their oral competencies. The English course had somehow helped them develop confidence in speaking. Moreover, the basic rudiments in speaking that were introduced by their respective teachers was very useful in the development of their oral skills. Below are passages taken from the reflective essays written by the students presenting their observations on the improvement of their oral competencies:

Example 5

Through constant use of English with peers in and out of ENGLONE class, my oral English skills have, as expected, continued to improve. I now have more confidence than ever with my command of the language... I suppose it is

inevitable that I now feel more confident in communicating through these means.

Example 6

The subject gives the students opportunity to express themselves, may it be in oral and written form. We are also taught the right ways in speaking and writing. ENGLONE has personally helped me improve my skills. In this class everyone got the chance to share their new ideas and express themselves on certain issues. I exploited that advantage, through that, my ability greatly developed. I could say things directly and at the same time be careful not to offend others.

Students also attribute the improvement on their writing competencies to the various writing activities they had written in class for the entire school term. They believe that writing activities such as the *pre-writing activities (semantic webbing, free-writing, journal writing etc)* were effective writing tools that aided them in the production of the two major essays (*informative and argumentative*) that they wrote in class as part of the major requirement of the course. Below are samples of students' testimonies on the importance of the introduction of various writing activities that helped them improve their writing competencies:

Example 7

Our professor, Miss Sydney Gonzales, laid out the plans for our course the whole term. I found out that the ENGLONE we're having wasn't going to be a monotonous course. There were a lot of activities which appealed to me...the rigid draft requirements of Ms. Gonzales played a major role in my writing development.

Example 8

Some the essays were fun to do and really got me thinking. I also learned various ways (pre-writing strategies) in order to organize my thoughts, which used to be a big problem for me... Almost everyday, we do reading and

writing exercises that on my part is a burden. But as the term goes on, I am able to realize how important this exercise for me and the rest of the class. It helped me develop more writing and reading skills and I don't anymore see reading and writing exercise as a burden but as a blessing for all of us.

The students also observed other improvements aside from the development of their communicative competencies. They had also observed improvement in the development of critical thinking pertinent to effective writing and comprehension of texts. They also claim that the course helped them organize their thoughts when they wrote their essays or when they were presenting oral reports.

Table 2
Cognitive dimension of students' self-evaluation

Indicator	F
Developed critical thinking	27
Developed the ability to organize thoughts	8
Developed awareness of important tools for learning	1

As shown in Table 2, students attest that the course was instrumental in the development of critical thinking. Through the class discussions they had with their teachers and the introduction of different reading text types, their higher cognitive skills were honed. Below are some of the passages taken from the students' reflective essays attesting to the development of critical thinking.

Example 9

Analyzing texts is one of my weaknesses before I enrolled in this class. There are times that I really wanted to read complicated books, but I always end up reading the dictionary just to look for the meaning of unfamiliar words. Now that I'm more exposed to different essays with much more mature tone, I was able to enhance my skill in critiquing each of them and to come up with a valid judgement.

Example 10

Reading and comprehension also took place within our fourteen weeks of classes. We had critically read essays by going beyond knowledge and comprehension. Thinking skills are important while reading to fully understand, the thinking skills involve application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

The writing experiences that the students had appears to have contributed also to the development of their communicative competencies. Specifically, the students claim that the teachers' comments and suggestions on their written output had made them more conscious of the act of writing and the development of their written products in class.

As shown in Table 3, students noticed that their written outputs were more meaningful when their respective writing teachers exerted extra effort to put comments on their written works that they value very much. Moreover, the encouragement they received from their teachers inspired them to write very good and substantial written output. Others even claim that their writing teachers were instrumental for the love for writing which they had developed while taking the course. Below are some of the testimonies written by the students that showed the importance of their teachers' comments and suggestions and how it made them better writers.

Example 11

With English One, my hungry thoughts were filled, my raging ideas were consoled, my naive attitude was enlightened, and my dreams- for

Table 3
Affective dimension of students' self-evaluation

Indicator	F
Comments & suggestions made by the teacher helped them develop their writing	34
Developed a sense of fulfillment in writing	4
Writing the essays challenged them to do their best	2

sure, are acknowledged. What is more to life than having a beautiful experience with a mentor who is able to grasp the peculiarity of my subsistence? Just when I thought that there is no place for my writings to be read, here comes a journey with great students and a great mentor who have unconsciously, molded me to become the writer that I have always wanted to be.

Example 12

I have felt that our teacher tried to reach us and help us by giving suggestions and private conversations about our work...It is a privilege to be a student and study a course that has just been starting with a teacher to guide us all throughout.

The students did not only evaluate the improvements they had made in their written, oral and reading skills for the whole term. They also observed that these communicative skills are essential to their existence as students in the university. The different strategies in reading, writing and speaking were very useful for their other courses. They also realized the value of reading and writing in their lives.

Below are some of the testimonies of students as they claimed that the development of communicative competencies is essential in their daily existence.

Example 13

Indeed, this course did not only teach me as a student but also developed me as a human, ready to face the challenges of life. I found out

Table 4
Social dimension of students' self-evaluation

Indicators	F
They were made aware of the importance of reading and writing in one's life	8
The writing skills learned were useful in other subjects	8
The writing experiences exposed them to the different social realities.	6

that whenever we write something about it would be best to put feelings and to try to converse with the readers so that they would drive with the thoughts and emotions we had created and placed in our essays.

Example 14

I may say that my ability to use the English language has certainly improved because of the things that I have learned in ENGLONE. The workshops and sessions in ENGLONE helped me enhance my ability to read and comprehend English. Even though I hadn't mastered English well, I believe that my skills will be enough for me to compete in the outside world where the English language is the basic means of communication.

CONCLUSIONS

This study looked into two issues regarding the effectiveness of the portfolio assessment as an effective evaluation scheme. First, the study inquired into what language problems are addressed by the portfolio assessment as an effective tool in students' self-evaluation. The data found that through this alternative self-evaluation scheme, students are able to identify the language problems they had. Moreover, they were able to make some improvements in these identified linguistic problems.

In addition, the students were able to identify four areas of improvement as reflected in their evaluation essays. These are: *linguistic, cognitive, affective and social*. The students' evaluation of their performance and the improvement of their communicative competencies went beyond the identification of the linguistic problems they had. Through their honest and sincere assessment of their performance in the English course, the freshman students also shared their insights on their appreciation of the course and the teachers they had who were instrumental in the improvement of their communicative competencies.

The portfolio assessment opened channels of communication between the teachers and the students. Students were given free reign to evaluate their own performance and assess their best essays which they themselves chose. This alternative evaluation scheme has given the students the awareness to know their strengths and weaknesses. Also, they were made to appreciate their written output as they were challenged to produce substantial and good essays.

What is really important in the institution of the portfolio evaluation is the ability of the students to develop learning autonomy (Mirador, 1998). It is only after the students are trained to think for themselves and trust their capabilities that success in ESL writing can be achieved. Students learn to be independent thinkers when they are given the opportunity to monitor their own progress in the development of all the macro-skills needed for their course. The learning process cannot be successful unless the learner achieves full autonomy for himself.

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