

Using Authentic Assessments to Better Facilitate Teaching and Learning: The Case for Student Portfolios

Matthew R. Hodgman

Dept. of General Education, Goodwin College

1 Riverside Drive, East Hartford, CT, 06118, USA

Tel: 1-860-528-4111 E-mail: mhodgman@goodwin.edu

Received: June 30, 2014 Accepted: August 21, 2014 Published: August 22, 2014

doi:10.5296/jse.v4i3.6149

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/jse.v4i3.6149>

Abstract

The debate over how to construct appropriate and meaningful assessments for students of all ages continues to polarize scholars and educators. Various forms of student assessments have been employed in modern classrooms in accordance with varying theoretical perspectives on what “meaningful learning” consists of. Authentic assessments have often been considered productive tools for increasing student engagement, learning, and confidence. One particular form of authentic assessment, student portfolios, can be seen as useful authentic assessments tools when used in certain capacities. This article outlines research on the use of authentic assessments by instructors in the classroom and specifically discusses the use of student portfolios to enhance student learning, creativity, and confidence. The merits of student portfolios as a learning tool are discussed and demonstrated through a specific example of classroom practice.

Keywords: Education, Authentic assessments, Student portfolios, Standardized testing, Student engagement

1. Introduction

The debate over how to construct meaningful and appropriate academic student assessments continues to be an important one. Educators have questioned the proliferation of standardized testing with an eye toward creating assessments that focus more steadfastly on measuring the quality of teaching and learning. Progressive scholars such as Alfie Kohn (1996) assert that American students are victims of standardized tests which are ubiquitous, often measure superficial thinking, and are overly used as the basis for important decisions such as graduation or promotion (pp. 244-245). Kohn (1996) contends that many disenchanted prospective teachers are leaving the field due to the overemphasis on standardized testing in America's schools (p. 246). Indeed, assessment reform has been a hot-button issue and many educators and scholars have chimed in with ideas to counter the standardized testing swell. Nationally recognized assessment expert Grant Wiggins extols the value in utilizing authentic assessments instead of standardized tests. Wiggins (1989) explains that academic tests should be standard setting, not merely standardized; they should test essential habits in context (pp. 252-253). At the heart of authentic assessments is the idea that tests should be instructional; they should clarify and set intellectual standards. With this in mind, this paper will investigate and articulate the value in using authentic assessments in the classroom as a way to better serve teaching and learning.

The permeating use of standardized testing in today's schools is undeniable even though instructors often have no substantive role in the standardized test construction process. Students may or may not rush through standardized multiple choice tests without thinking critically about the disembodied content they are being tested on or orally explaining their work in any capacity. This disheartening reality has prompted instructor coalitions aimed at reforming assessment procedures in America's school. Needless to say, this reform initiative has not been able to downplay the significant use of standardized testing in schools. Instructors can benefit from considering how they might include authentic assessments in their classrooms.

Wiggins (1989) explains the four basic characteristics of authentic assessment; these tests: are designed to be truly representative of performance in the field before scoring reliability and testing logistics are considered, focus on the teaching and learning of the criteria to be used in the assessment, include a prominent self-assessment component, and implore students to publicly present and defend their work (p. 259). Wiggins (1996/1997) contends that authentic assessments ensure that desired effects are designed in and must inform all our work from the beginning; as educators, we must constantly rethink our designs using feedback based on clear design standards (p. 19). Assessments should be credible, user-friendly, and feasible; they should be central to instruction, focus on the purpose of assessment, enlighten students about real-world tasks, and be of high intellectual quality (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004; Wiggins, 1996/1997).

2. Research on the use of Authentic Assessments in Classroom Environments

Research wholeheartedly supports the use of authentic assessments in classroom environments. Fook and Sidhu (2010) examined the implementation of authentic assessment

in higher education through qualitative methodology including interviews, document analysis, and classroom observations. They found that assessment strategies should be closely related to teaching and learning and concluded that authentic assessments are more widely accepted by students as opposed to standardized tests and thus should become integral parts of the instructional cycle. After studying writers with learning disabilities, Karge (1998) found that the writing process can be significantly improved through the use of authentic assessments; authentic assessments helped students self-monitor their personal writing abilities, evaluate their own creativity levels, and developed the skills and confidence necessary to become literate writers (p. 329). It is encouraging to know that students are receptive to authentic assessments and that such assessments can help students self-assess and gain confidence in academic settings.

After reviewing literature on conceptions of authenticity in teaching, Kreber, Klampfleitner, McCune, Bayne, & Knottenbelt (2007) found that authenticity in teaching is an important yet under-researched phenomenon. They contend that authenticity is a complex and multi-dimensional practice that includes a moral component where the needs and best interests of learners need to be negotiated and critically reflected on (p. 41). In addition, authenticity in teaching implores educators to critically reflect on how contextual factors influence how they see themselves and their students; this reflection allows teachers to question what, how, and why they are teaching (p. 42). This is truly an interesting point as it asks us to take responsibility for our own possibilities as teachers in addition to serving the needs of students and helping them take responsibility for their own possibilities as learners.

3. Student Portfolios

A student portfolio is a collection of student work and related material that depicts a student's activities, accomplishments, and achievements (Scherba de Valenzuela, 2002). This collection should include evidence of student reflection and self-evaluation, guidelines for selecting the portfolio contents, and criteria for judging the quality of the work. Generally there are two types of portfolios, "process portfolios" which document the stages of learning and provide a progressive record of student growth, and "product portfolios" which demonstrate mastery of a set of learning objectives (Scherba de Valenzuela, 2002). Many educators do not choose to employ portfolios in their classrooms out of fear that they will be too time-consuming, hard to manage, and difficult to score (Cimer, 2011; Scherba de Valenzuela, 2002). If teachers can get past these initial concerns there is much to be gained from student portfolios. Portfolios have been touted as one of the most innovative learning tools in the last two decades because they offer both learning and assessment advantages by encouraging learners to study regularly, promoting learner self-awareness, and producing positive affective learning outcomes (Cimer, 2011). After analyzing students at a small tertiary educational institution, McDonald (2012) found that students reported learning much from portfolio assessment and felt an integral part of the assessment process; portfolio assessment appeared to empower students and provide them with the self-respect they desired.

Firstly, before implementing a student portfolio assessment educators should consider student conceptions of authenticity and question their own ability to commit to a time-consuming and

extensive project. As for the former point, studies have found that students may have different conceptions as to what “authenticity” is and thus the term should be explained to students in a way that is easily understood so that students know the extent of student portfolio projects from the start (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004, pp. 82-83). One key point to relate to students is that portfolios are not simply collections of previously completed assessments, but rather a way to gather information about someone for a meaningful purpose. In addition, teachers need to be willing to commit an extensive amount of time to enacting a portfolio initiative and be prepared to go through setbacks in terms gathering large amounts of information and scheduling to plan, conduct, and assess portfolio steps. Portfolio presentations, for example, can be lengthy and thus interfere with other instructional activities planned on a particular day (Scherba de Valenzuela, 2002). Once these things are considered, a portfolio project may commence.

4. Student Portfolios in Application

One particular hypothetical employment of student portfolios in a college remedial writing course will be outlined hereafter. In a writing course that introduces productive writing techniques with an emphasis on the writing process student portfolios may prove to be important assessment tools. Course topics include brainstorming, critical reading and thinking, analyzing audience and purpose, developing clear thesis statements, developing effective sentences and paragraphs, drafting, revising, and editing. Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to use the writing process to produce effective essays. More specifically, some of the desired student outcomes for this course might include:

- Identify purpose and audience.
- Analyze written materials.
- Develop ideas for original writing.
- Produce essays using the writing process.
- Deliver an oral presentation.
- Reflect upon the effectiveness of their writing process and progress.

These outcomes must be kept in mind when designing student portfolio assignments. Because these particular students are at a remedial level and can benefit from increases in self-confidence, a process portfolio can be employed that will: show student growth over time, help develop process skills such as self-evaluation and goal setting, and help identify strength and concern areas. Students will benefit from constructing a tangible record of growth that they can take with them to future courses; this will give them a sense of pride and increased self-esteem by showing them how they have improved over the course of the semester.

Students will receive a packet explaining how their portfolio will be built over the course of the term. This packet will include samples from previously successful student portfolios to illustrate what is and is not expected from them in their portfolios. Other contents of the packet will include: a cover sheet, a list of goals/objectives for the semester (which will be

reassessed and added to by the student throughout the semester), weekly journal entries (including attitudes toward the course in general, reflections on personal progress, reflections on strengths and things to improve upon, reflections on what has been learned), samples of students' best and uninspired work (and explanations as to why students felt these samples evidenced great and lackluster work), miscellaneous items and justifications for their inclusion by the student, an extensive reflection on the portfolio at the end of the semester (identifying areas of improvement, areas that still need improvement, an explanation of whether goals were met).

Student portfolios will be carefully kept by each student and periodically reviewed by myself and peer students. Time will be set aside throughout each week to work on portfolio related work. Students will work with other students throughout the semester to discuss the items in their portfolios. These discussions will generally allow students to talk about the portfolio process as it stands at that point and for conversation surrounding items that may be included or removed from portfolios.

It is important to further discuss the type of work that should be included in each portfolio. For this process portfolio, portfolio items should be linked to specific purposes. For example, to serve the purpose of showing growth over time, possible portfolio item might be: early and later pieces of work, rough drafts and final drafts, reflections on growth, and reflections on progress toward goals. To serve the purpose of identifying strengths and weaknesses, possible portfolio items might be: samples of work embodying strengths and weaknesses and reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of samples. Miscellaneous items might include various multimedia products such as videotaped performances or blog entries. These items need to be justified by students in terms of how they serve a specific purpose within their respective portfolios. It will be important to emphasize process over products during a portfolio initiative. This means that teachers must emphasize the processes that undergird the creation of the items that are included in each portfolio. For example, teachers should take time to discuss the process involved in selecting items for inclusion in the portfolio. Teachers should also discuss how, when, and why reflection and presentation are crucial processes endemic to successful portfolios.

Portfolios will be evaluated according to a rubric that will be included in the packet handed out at the beginning of the semester. This rubric will explain what is necessary to be included in the portfolio and how "completeness" is determined for each required item. For example, the items for inclusion will be listed as cover sheet, journal entries, work samples, student goals, understanding of related processes, and reflection on the portfolio process. An item will be marked incomplete if it does not include all the necessary components according to the rubric. In addition, the rubric will provide guidelines for: assessing the degree to which portfolio items demonstrate that desired learning outcomes were achieved, assessing students' reflections, and assessing students' portfolio presentations. For this particular course, the portfolio may not be "graded" per se since a process portfolio is more about growth than mastery or documenting achievement for grading purposes. Instead, the evaluation rubric will reflect the desire to evaluate the portfolio in terms of completion and to use each portfolio to inform feedback to students in relation to their continual progress.

In order for student portfolios to be successful, teachers need to monitor the effects of this practice. One useful way to monitor portfolios is through portfolio conferences. These formal and informal meetings with students allow students to review their work to date and discuss their progress (Scherba de Valenzuela, 2002). At these conferences teachers can assess the degree to which students are compiling portfolio items and reflecting upon these items and the portfolio process in general. By reading student reflections, teachers can get a better idea of the various difficulties students might be having with portfolios and make adjustments accordingly to facilitate future portfolio progress. For example, if a student is behind in reflecting on portfolio items, the teacher can guide the student toward reflection responses.

Further, teachers will benefit from keeping their own journals that monitor student progress and things that seem to be working and not working portfolio implementation. For example, teachers can reflect on the degree to which students are maintaining their portfolios and make notes as to which items may or not be working as appropriate portfolio items. Other reflection topics might include recording students' responses to feedback in portfolio conferences and devising general questions to ask students throughout the semester. Teachers might ask students: "How did you feel about portfolios at this point in the process?" or "Can you talk to the class or a peer about a recently included portfolio item?" Teachers should generally keep track of students' attitudes toward portfolios and make adjustments to better serve students interests and needs throughout the process.

In addition, parents should be encouraged to discuss portfolios with their children and share their opinions on how they think their children are responding to the initiative. Teachers might ask parents, "Do you think your child is benefitting from the portfolio process, why or why not? Or "How do you think the current portfolio process might be adapted to better satiate your students' needs? This feedback will further help teachers gauge the effectiveness of their portfolio practice.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that authentic assessments and more specifically student portfolios can be effective tools to encourage student self-evaluation, reflection, and critical thinking. Portfolios allow educators to evaluate student performance and progress based on authentic samples of student work, this importantly allows students to share the responsibility for setting learning goals and evaluating progress toward meeting those goals (Scherba de Valenzuela, 2002). Although portfolios can provide important opportunities for self-reflection, interpersonal interaction, and student autonomy, teachers are often weary of implementing portfolio initiatives due to the perception that portfolios require excessive time and resources that may interfere with other instructional activities. Teachers need to carefully consider their willingness to commit to a portfolio initiative before implementation.

References

- Cimer, S.O. (2011, May). The effect of portfolios on students' learning: Student teachers' views. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 34(2), 161-176.
- Fook, C.Y., & Sidhu, G.K. (2010). Authentic assessment and pedagogical strategies in higher

education. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(2), 153-161.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.3844/jssp.2010.153.161>

Gulikers, J.T.M., Bastiaens, T.J., & Kirschner, P.A. (2004). A five-dimensional framework for authentic assessment. *Educational Technology Research & Development*, 52(3), 67-86.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF02504676>

Karge, B. (1998, Jul-Sep). Knowing what to teach: Using authentic assessment to improve classroom instruction. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 14(3), 319-331.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1057356980140306>

Kohn, A. (1996). Standardized testing and its victims. In B. A. Marlowe & A.S. Canestrari (Eds.), *Educational Psychology in Context: Readings for Future Teachers* (pp. 244-250). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Kreber, C., Klampfleitner, M., McCune, V., Bayne, S., & Knottenbelt, M. (2007, November). What do you mean by “authentic”? A comparative review of the literature on conceptions of authenticity in teaching. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 58(1), 22-43.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0741713607305939>

McDonald, B. (2012, May). Portfolio assessment: Direct from the classroom. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 37(3), 335-347.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2010.534763>

Scherba de Valenzuela, J. (2002, July 30). Defining portfolio assessment. The University of New Mexico. Retrieved from <http://www.unm.edu/~devalenz/handouts/portfolio.html>

Wiggins, G. (1989). Teaching to the (authentic) test. In B. A. Marlowe & A.S. Canestrari (Eds.), *Educational Psychology in Context: Readings for Future Teachers* (pp. 252-263). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Wiggins, G. (1996/1997, Dec/Jan). Practicing what we preach in designing authentic assessments. *Educational Leadership*, 54(4), 18-25.

Copyright Disclaimer

Copyright reserved by the author(s).

This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).