Designing Portfolios for L2 Writing Instruction

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Much has been written and said over the past decade or so on the use of portfolios in the teaching and assessment of writing. Indeed, it has been difficult, if not impossible, in recent years to attend conferences and read professional literature on writing without encountering portfolio-based discussions. These discussions fall within two major areas: 1) **assessment** (the validity and reliability of portfolios as a means of assessing student writing for such purposes as assigning course grades, placement into writing courses, exit from writing courses, and for writing program evaluation), and 2) **design** (what type of portfolio to assign, what students should include in a portfolio, etc.). However, this focus on portfolios has been almost exclusively in the L1 context.

In the L2 world, portfolios have begun to attract interest, especially at recent TESOL conferences. There is, though, a dearth of L2 portfolio literature, as Hamp-Lyons (1994) notes. This places L2 writing teachers interested in working with portfolios in the awkward position of having to turn to the research into and insights on L1 portfolio work while teaching L2 students. Given the main differences between L1 and L2 writing instruction, L2 teachers must be cautious in their borrowing from L1 portfolio resources. On the other hand, there are perspectives in L1 use of portfolios which can, with appropriate adjustments, be of great value in the L2 domain. This paper will discuss what seems to be the most beneficial of these perspectives for L2 portfolio use in an effort to establish some sound principles upon which to build L2 portfolios, especially for students in undergraduate university writing courses. The emphasis will be on portfolio design, with a secondary focus on portfolios as a self-assessment rather than an assessment device. (See Black et al, 1994; Cohen, 1994; Hamp-Lyons and Condon, 1993; and White, 1994 for helpful discussions of the complexities of portfolio assessment.)

Portfolio Overview

Before examining relevant perspectives on portfolios, a few words about the general purposes and uses of portfolios are in order. Portfolios are collections of student writings which are eventually submitted for evaluation. The evaluation itself may be by the students' course instructor, by another instructor or instructors, or by a combination of course and other instructors. If more than one instructor is involved, assessment is conducted in a holistic manner. As in the case of L1 assessment purposes noted earlier, the assessment of L2 portfolios may serve a variety of purposes. The amount of writing

included in portfolios will vary according to the pedagogical and assessment purposes at hand. In terms of pedagogical models to work from, Lucas (1992, p. 6) points out that the major distinction is between a "display portfolio" which contains all of a student's work involved in the writing of course essays and a "working portfolio" which contains only a few samples of the student's work. Normally, these samples represent different genres of writing or those samples which the student believes best exemplify her/his work in the course. In either approach, the fundamental purposes are 1) to allow for assessment of writing on the basis of a more comprehensive and informative picture of students' performance than that permitted by traditional forms of writing assessment, and 2) to reinforce the process approach to writing instruction. The end result, says Wauters (1991), is this: "This method of assessment provides all students with a tangible demonstration of writing ability, a portfolio of accomplishment similar to those of professionals such as artists and architects" (p. 62).

Creating an Atmosphere for L2 Portfolio Use

In designing a portfolio pedagogy for L2 students, we must first establish a clear sense of the atmosphere required by portfolio designers and L2 students alike if the endeavor is to be successful. Here, as in the case of key design features to be discussed later, certain perspectives from L1 portfolio work are helpful. It is also necessary to remember who the portfolio pedagogy is designed for: students writing in a language not their own and probably not a very comfortable fit for them; students who, as contrastive rhetoricians explain, are being asked to adopt rhetorical patterns of organization and development different from, and perhaps in direct contrast to, their own; students who, for a variety of reasons, may well lack confidence in their ability to write in the target language and who may, at the same time, be unable to measure their progress and ability in the writing of that language.

What does a portfolio approach to instruction require, and at the same time make possible, by way of addressing the conditions just described? First, an atmosphere which supports and encourages L2 writers is essential. And here, says Elbow (1991), is where a portfolio pedagogy offers its strongest feature, because it "**rewards** rather than punishes the essential things we place at the heart of our writing courses: exploratory writing, in which the writer questions deeply and gets lost; discussion with peers and teacher; and extensive, substantive revision" (p. xv). Given the insecurities and uncertainties which L2 writers are likely to be battling in learning to write in the target language, this opportunity to be rewarded for the experiments in writing which are an essential component in the bumpy journey to the acquisition of L2 writing ability is of critical importance. Yancey (1992) lends support to this perspective when she explains that in the portfolio classroom, "the writer is invited to try new ways of seeing, new methods of development, new voices"

(p. 104). For L2 writers, writing in the target language is by its nature the very thing Yancey describes, i.e. new in every way, and as such these writers have an even greater need for the encouragement to explore, the license to play rhetorically (and linguistically), that portfolios provide.

Second, it is important to create an atmosphere in which students are allowed to look at the whole body of writing they have produced in a course. Here, too, a portfolio pedagogy not only needs but facilitates the development of such an atmosphere. Weiser (1992) explains how this occurs:

> the portfolio. . . serves as concrete evidence to the student that he or she
> can write. Students are often both surprised and pleased at how much
> they have written during the semester, and not only do they take pride in
> the sheer amount of writing they have done, they take pride in the
> progress they have made. They read their earliest papers with new
> vision, with a consciousness of what they know now about writing that
> they did not know before. They realize that they have ideas about
> improving their work that they did not have and could not articulate
> early in the term. They have, in short, begun to see themselves, if not as
> writers, as people who write. (p. 95)

These advantages that Weiser cites for L1 writers may well be of even greater importance for L2 writers. Writing, again, in a language and within rhetorical expectations foreign to them, these students have an even stronger need for the "concrete evidence . . . that he or she can write" that Weiser notes, in addition to the other points he raises. Such an atmosphere will provide L2 writers with the conditions and encouragement they need for the examination of their own writing that leads to increased awareness of their strengths, weaknesses, and progress in L2 writing. Equipped with such insight, they are better prepared to pursue further development of their writing ability.

Components of an L2 Portfolio Pedagogy

Given the kind of atmosphere just described, where L2 writers are enabled, through portfolios, to experiment constructively in writing in the target language, what features would best serve an L2 portfolio pedagogy? Based upon my own experience in developing a portfolio approach to undergraduate L2 writing instruction at Ohio State University, four components seem especially suitable in terms of an overall portfolio design. These are: a "learning portfolio" conceptualization; "working portfolio" model; an emphasis on student ownership; and a stress on student reflection and self-assessment. Each of these is informed by L1 portfolio pedagogy and adapted to meet the needs of L2 writers.

First Component: "Learning Portfolio" Conceptualization

The notion of a "learning portfolio" comes from Graves (1992), who says that in this application of portfolios "students put all kinds of work into their portfolios that they see as important to them as learners. . . . As a result, students are drawing a much better profile of themselves as learners" (p. 7-8). The work he refers to is material L1 writers have been influenced or affected by in other courses, in their experiences outside school, and so forth. The value of this idea in the L2 context is that L2 writers can view the portfolios created in their writing courses as repositories of what they have learned about writing and about themselves as writers in the target language. Here the portfolio operates in the spirit described earlier by Weiser as a place where students analyze, and find evidence of, their learning vis-a-vis writing. Furthermore, their portfolios can be submitted as evidence of that learning, rather than as proof of fully evolved writing skills they may otherwise feel represent the only marker of success. Conceptualizing the portfolio as something emphasizing learning rather than polished writing skills creates invaluable opportunities for students to identify, and appreciate, their developing competence and control in writing.

Second Component: "Working Portfolio" Model

As noted earlier, a "working portfolio" model is one in which students select which samples of their writing are included in the portfolio submitted for evaluation. During the course, all writing--notes, outlines, drafts of essays, etc.--may well be compiled in the portfolio. Meanwhile, as the course proceeds, students are encouraged to look through the portfolio and revise earlier work that, in accordance with their growing knowledge of writing, can be rewritten to reflect this increased competence. This is one way in which the portfolio is a "working" one, in that the ongoing process of revision makes it a dynamic, rather than static, collection of writing. Then, near the end of the course, students examine the contents of the portfolio and choose samples of writing which best illustrate their effort and growth as writers. Here the portfolio again is a "working" one because students "work" it like a miner working a coal mine in a hunt for writing they feel proudest of or most satisfied with for any of a variety of reasons. This, too, is where the "learning portfolio" conceptualization is applicable. Within this framework, the term portfolio, as Privette (1993) sees it, "suggests a collection of selected but not necessarily polished or finished pieces. The owner of the portfolio values each of the writings in it for one reason or another" (p. 60). In view of the fact that L2 writers are likely to be writing from more of a developmental mode than the L1 writers Privette refers to above, this "working portfolio" approach in which students can include for evaluation a wide ranging sampling of their work reflecting their learning and development, however unpolished the product, is especially appropriate. In this way, Privette (1993) explains, the portfolio

becomes "a story of a writer growing" (p. 61). This is a story of great value for students and teachers alike, especially in ESL.

Third Component: Emphasis on Student Ownership

According to Murphy (1994), one of the key decisions in portfolio design is "the degree of choice allowed the student" (p. 192) in determining how much writing, and which writing, is to be included in the portfolio submitted for evaluation. This is the question of student ownership or authority, and it has particularly important implications for L2 portfolio design. As indicated earlier, the "working portfolio" model in which the portfolio is seen as a portfolio of learning about writing appears to be the most appropriate design for L2 undergraduate writing courses. Within this design, students are allowed to exercise great authority, in that they decide upon the samples included in the portfolio given to the teacher at the end of the course (though there are numerous variations possible whereby teachers can set parameters for inclusion). While writing about L1 students, Dellinger (1993) offers a defense of this approach which highlights the benefits of allowing L2 writers authority in the selection of portfolio samples when she notes that "this act of choosing introduces the students to the idea that the judgment of what is best is their own and that they need to share the reasons for that choice with their reader" (p. 15). Because L2 writers are working within the developmental mode cited earlier, they are perhaps in the best position to determine what a particular sample of their writing represents in terms of growth from previous writing ability or effort expended in trying to improve.

When we give students ownership of the kind just described, we are, says Murphy (1994), allowing students "greater authority and responsibility for demonstrating their learning and accomplishments" (p. 190); in this way, she adds, they can "demonstrate more completely in their own terms what they know and can do, and to set their own goals and assess their progress toward them" (p. 200). Furthermore, she says, "it is in exercising judgment that students learn how to assess a piece of writing, or a whole collection of writing" (p. 191). For L2 writers negotiating the difficult paths toward confidence and control in their target language, engaging in the processes just described can make that a far more rewarding and successful journey. It enables them to experience what Ingalls (1993) describes when he notes that "portfolios encourage student writers to speak with authority about their work. It is a rich moment when student writers discuss their writing honestly and show a mixture of pride and understanding" (p. 66). An authority component in L2 portfolio design makes possible such rich moments.

Fourth Component: Stress on Student Reflection/Self-Assessment

An L2 portfolio pedagogy which allows for at least some student authority in the construction of the portfolio simultaneously creates opportunities for students to engage in

self-assessment of their writing through reflection upon that writing. As D'Aoust (1992) defines it, "reflection is the act of pausing to see oneself as a writer" (p. 43), and the portfolio, because it is a collection of writing, allows the student to pause more meaningfully and comprehensively over her/his writing. She goes on to say that through reflection upon them, portfolios "are a way for writers to meet themselves and shape their writing development" (p. 48).

Through the combination of ownership and reflection and the process of self-assessment generated by that combination, L2 writers engage their writing and what they have learned about writing in ways far richer than isolated self-evaluations of single pieces of writing. What Murphy and Smith (1992) say of L1 writers using portfolios takes on even greater significance with L2 writers: "By shifting responsibility to our students, we ask them to be more than mere recipients of someone else's paper-and-pencil tests. They must be active, thoughtful participants in the analysis of their own learning" (p. 58). Here L2 writers experience a golden opportunity noted by Sunstein (1992) in a comment on the value of reflection in portfolio pedagogy: "As we reflect on growth, we grow still mode" (p. xvi). Hamp-Lyons (1994) sees another benefit of such reflection when, writing specifically about L2 writers, she explains that "seeing how much progress they have made seems to balance a tendency among many L2 writers to undervalue their own written work" (p. 50). Reflection upon and self-assessment of writing through the medium of a portfolio thus makes possible a much deeper and more productive experience of writing in the target language for L2 writers, and it is certainly this kind of experience we want our students to have.

Conclusion

In L1 composition teaching and assessment, portfolios have become a very visible part of the landscape. In the L2 context, they are attracting increasing attention, thereby creating a need to look at ways of designing them and ways of using them for assessment purposes. This paper, drawing on my experience as an L2 portfolio designer and upon relevant perspectives from L2 portfolio advocates, has tried to create a framework from which to design an L2 portfolio pedagogy for university undergraduate students. This pedagogy stresses the value of portfolios as learning devices and encourages a reflective approach in which students assume authority over what is included in their portfolios. This opens up more meaningful opportunities for them to examine their writing for evidence of growth as writers—evidence of value to them and to those who are assessing them.

With regards to assessment issues, the approach described in this paper suggests that L2 writing portfolios may have much greater impact from a self-assessment rather than an assessment point of view. That is, if the primary goal of the portfolio pedagogy is on the

portfolio as a learning device through which students reflect on their growth and effort in a writing course, a heavy emphasis on instructor evaluation will be both problematic and counter-productive. My own experience has been that students gain far more from the portfolio oriented classroom when evaluation focuses on their own self-assessment. This approach to assessment reinforces the learning which has already taken place. Portfolios submitted in an environment stressing teacher evaluation and a grade of significant value in the course marking scheme tend to be directed at saying whatever will produce the most favorable assessment rather than the far more important objective of learning through the portfolio.

In a conventional university undergraduate teaching context, then, a reflective "learning portfolio" stressing student self-assessment rather than teacher-dominated evaluation may be the most attractive portfolio option in these early days of L2 portfolio design. At my own institution, this approach has generated considerable enthusiasm and valuable insight among both students and teachers.

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