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A Portfolio Program for Teaching English Composition

By CHARLES J. FOX and ROBERT TIPPETTS

The idea of an artist compiling a portfolio of his best paintings is an old one in the visual arts. Many of the great masters at some time in their lives carried a collection of their work to prospective patrons or teachers who could then view the tangible documentation of their creative imaginations. The very fact that the portfolio was a compilation assembled over a period of time enabled the viewer to see the artist's thematic and technical development as well as assess his weaknesses and failings.

A limited, though revealing, profile of the man's thoughts and ability was thus assembled for the interested viewer to evaluate.

Charles J. Fox is an Assistant Professor of English at Church College. He did his doctoral work at Purdue University where he was a David Ross Fellow with the Purdue Research Foundation.

With the belief that writing is no less an art than its sister genre, some of the faculty members at Church College proposed last fall that a portfolio program be instigated in the first semester of our composition sequence. Of two hundred seventy students in the first semester freshman course, only

sixty-six were from the U.S. mainland; eighty-one were local students of mixed

Robert Tippetts did his graduate work at Brigham Young University and is presently Director of Freshman English at Church College

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ethnic backgrounds, and the remaining half were students from Samoa, Tonga, the Orient, the Philippines, Fiji, and Tahiti. Concern for the English language ability of this last group provided the immediate stimulus for a more effective method in teaching composition. Most of these students learn English as a second language and graduate from the English Language Institute at the college. During the rigors of the ELI program, the students often acquire considerable proficiency in the spoken language, but usually require further encouragement to continue to improve their writing. Our former Freshman English program simply did not provide sufficient incentive for success; the portfolio program of last fall, however, seems to be a partial answer to our needs.

Each student was informed at the beginning of the semester that he would prepare a portfolio of eleven essays which would be read first by the regular teacher of the course and then the completed portfolio, identified only by a number, would be read as a unit by a second faculty member who would grade and comment on the portfolio as a whole. This last provision, of course, proved to be extremely time consuming, but its motivational effect on the student was electrifying. The teacher now became an ally who was helping the student prepare a "showing" of his best work rather than just an authoritarian wielder of the red pencil. Having a second reader proved to be effective, too, in providing the original teacher with a corroborating opinion of his assessment of the student's work. This was especially valuable to rather inexperienced special instructors. Even the older faculty members were gratified with the results because every teacher reported a surprisingly high correlation between his grades and the anonymous reader's grade. (The folios were divided in such a way that each faculty member received four or five essays from each of the other faculty members in a proportion equal to the number of students enrolled in his composition classes.) Since both readers were in general agreement on grades, students tended to regard the whole grading process as more objective. Most teachers showed no hesitancy in allowing the students to see both grades and read the comments of the second grader in an individual conference at the end of the semester. In fact, many teachers gave the

students the second grade, especially when it was higher, because theoretically it was based solely on the writing in front of them to the exclusion of any personal prejudices of the regular classroom instructor. A pragmatic though unhappy benefit of a second reader resulted in the detection of a few cases of that ubiquitous problem of plagiarism in freshman writing.

This article was written in response to the invitation issued in the Fall, 1970, issue of **TESL Reporter** for teachers to share with us successful plans for teaching specific English skills.

The first essay was placed in the portfolio unrevised as an indicator of the student's writing ability at the beginning of the course. This initial essay was followed by two description, two narration, two definition, two comparison and contrast, and two persuasion essays with the tenth essay written outside the class, the eleventh written in class--both unrevised by the help of the teacher's comments. The first essay and last two essays thus represented what the student could do on his own both in and out of the classroom. The student could revise the remaining eight essays as many times as he desired before they were placed in the portfolio. This facet of the plan was perhaps the most valuable to the student. Again, the teacher served as a consultant who was available in weekly conferences to help the student revise his work. We found that second language students respond to suggestion and direction much more readily in a private discussion of their writing than they do in the classroom. Our plans for next fall are to publish the best student essays in a booklet that will serve as models for next year's students.

Above all, the portfolio program unified the efforts of the department and put the emphasis back where it belongs in composition courses: on the writing, and not on the reading of great ideas or the quickie-humanities course approach. This is not to say, however, that suitable readings cannot be used to stimulate thinking about theme topics, but writing is the essential goal of the portfolio program, writing that is hopefully prepared with the seriousness and pride that a sincere artist would use to prepare a work of art.