High School Teachers’ Attitudes Toward the Student Portfolio as a Tool for Writing Assessment

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High School Teachers' Attitudes

Toward the Student Portfolio as a Tool for Writing Assessment

by

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Abstract

Since no uniform manner exists of how teachers should instruct students to write, teachers use their discretion to do so. With the age of standardized testing entering many teachers’ classrooms, teaching to the test as a means of writing instruction has gained popularity. Yet, these practices reinforce writing that is mechanical, formulaic, and limiting because of the means by which standardized rubrics define “good writing.” Research suggests that standardized writing assessments do not form distinctive assessments of student writing ability but generalized assumptions. Students are confined to certain sets of writing skills and could not break out of these patterns. As a result, student writing remains at a standstill with little to no improvement per grade level.

The student writing portfolio, as a means of writing assessment, incorporates feedback, teacher and student involvement, and process-based revision which all lend to student growth as writers, which allow them to break free from the formulaic writing tendencies that standardized writing assessments promote. In many classrooms, student writing portfolios are currently being utilized to create environments that incorporate many different types of skill sets that standardized assessments neglect to take into consideration.

In this thesis, several secondary instructors and administrators were interviewed to understand the extent to which student writing portfolios could not only alleviate the penchant to teach to the test in classrooms, but also allow students to alter their writing habits and improve their writing abilities with instructor guidance and eventual self-directed practice.
Conclusions suggested that portfolios could potentially solve the problems of teaching writing and assuage standardized testing concerns but that successful application of portfolios could only occur if teachers were open to making the change to implement portfolios uniformly into the curriculum. Limitations to the study were not present within the potential effectiveness of the student-writing portfolio but in teacher perception of the effectiveness of the portfolio.

As an outlook, the student writing portfolio would need to exist as a department wide endeavor where teachers would have to view the portfolio as part of their teaching practice and not as a single, extended assessment. Though pros and cons exist with the student-writing portfolio, it could potentially aid the student and the teacher alike if integrated appropriately.
HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS’ ATTITUDES
TOWARD THE STUDENT PORTFOLIO AS A TOOL FOR WRITING
ASSESSMENT

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of English Master of Arts

by
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Montclair, NJ
2014
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High School Teachers' Attitudes

Toward the Student Portfolio as a Tool for Writing Assessment

1. Prologue

My mother was a teacher for 35 years and for the entirety of my life, phrases like "teaching to the test" and "the scores," that were part of her customary lexicon, crept into many of my memories about what I thought her function as a teacher was. For the duration of her career, these seemingly innocuous phrases dominated discussions as they blended into what I supposed were the more crucial issues of the educational conversation.

Upon achievement of my dream of becoming a secondary educator, I whimsically supposed that I would be able to escape "the tests" and "the scores" for I believed that I would devise and implement a writing plan that would satisfy the expectations of the tests and allow my students leeway to explore their identities and acquire their literary voices as writers.

Yet, in becoming entrenched in the classroom, it became quite difficult to find methods to focus on effectively teaching writing when teaching to the test and the scores came to the forefront. In the 2012-2013 school year, my colleagues and I realized the severity of the "teaching to the test" motif that was no longer a topic of discussion round my dinner table but a means by which we would be partially graded as "effective" teachers. Now, the already very difficult task of teaching writing became overlaid by the burdening problem of how we would instruct our students within the constraints of standardized writing prompts.
II. Introduction

During the last few decades of the 20th century, much work on the theory of writing practice has been established. New theoretical writing models have arisen pertaining to the cognitive processes of writers suggesting that writing is a "difficult and demanding task" (García-Sánchez and Fidalgo-Redondo 181) that is best employed through process-based recursive practices (181). Skilled writing requires the development of self-assessment practices, which become increasingly difficult for teachers to evaluate in struggling student writers.

Many problems surface when teachers attempt to instruct students about good writing practice when that requires "high levels of self-regulation"—"the self-planned, self-initiated, and the self-sustained activity" (García-Sánchez and Fidalgo-Redondo 181) that are all part of the writing process. As there is not a sole method to teaching writing, teachers instruct students on individualistic notions of what they believe to be best practices, which do not yield students who all have the same writing ability. In turn, students' skills may not be accurately evaluated. These problems suggest that the need for a definition of best practice be established so that writing ability could be effectively examined.

In combination with defining the best practice of teaching writing and successfully assessing students' writing skills, teachers are also faced with the dilemma of teaching writing for standardized testing prompts. Standardized writing prompts become limiting, restrictive forms of assessment because of their adherence to the five-paragraph essay format, means of insufficiently assessing students' writing skills, and the way that they shift accountability from the student to teacher. When students are
instructed to write formulaically, most commonly through the five-paragraph essay style, their writing tendencies do not progress because they write the same type of essays in the same means which then does not allow them to understand that writing styles change from genre to genre. Whereas standardized tests award students for this type of writing, it is not a genuine assessment of students' writing skills and writing form does not improve.

Moreover, due to constraining, standard-based rubrics, students may in fact be deemed as capable writers, but their skills may not be up to par with any other standards but that of the state's. As per theory, students' skills are not effectively assessed on account of the non-process based, on demand writing assessments that afford no opportunities for reflection, recursiveness, or ownership on the student's behalf. Accordingly, accountability from the student shifts to the teachers because standardized test scores are essentially supposed to indicate the amount of learning occurring in the classroom. But, even if students are passing the tests, this still does not mean that they are acquiring the necessary skills for higher learning.

Research suggests that standardized writing assessments do not form individual assessments of student writing ability but generalized assumptions of mass writing skill sets. Correspondingly, student writing ability has been kept at something of a standstill because as the teaching to the test trend is perpetuated and reinforced by the media and state standards, more indicative performance-based forms of assessment are put to the back burner because they take longer to score. Test scores are gathered state wide; but, student writing skills, are not taken into consideration for further classroom instruction.

Some schools have turned to the alternate form of assessment, the student-writing portfolio, as to accurately assess and improve student writing ability. Because of their
tendencies to incorporate process-based practices like prewriting, drafting, feedback, and recursive revision, portfolios afford teachers the opportunity to understand student writing habits and students the ability to gain accountability for their writing. As a result, teachers and students could comprehend writing skill sets and could constructively scaffold and improve writing capabilities.

With all of the ambiguities and difficulties surrounding the realm of writing instruction, it is imperative for teachers and administrators to comprehend one another’s assumptions about these various circumstances if student writing ability is to progress. Correlatively, I interviewed administrators and teachers at one local high school in order to understand their conceptions of the extent to which standardized testing prompts inaccurately assess and limit student writing ability and how the student writing portfolio could better evaluate and perpetuate writing skills. I analyzed the interviewees’ perspectives to understand the degree to which they believe the portfolio could solve the problems associated with teaching writing in light of the teaching to the test concerns. Further, although writing portfolios are widely supported in the scholarship on best practices for both teaching and assessing writing, implementing portfolios becomes difficult as administrators’ and teachers’ perceptions may differ as to how they could be used for teaching and assessing student writing.
III. Literature Review

Accountability: Teachers as Scapegoats

Numerous articles from the *New York Times* and elsewhere have directly referenced the focus of teaching to the test, suggesting that what initially was an expedition to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind law became a targeted assault on the effectiveness on teachers. One such article reads,

New York City education officials are developing more than a dozen new standardized tests, but in a sign of the times, their main purpose will be to grade teachers, not the students who take them... Under a law passed last year that helped the state win $700 million in a federal grant competition, known as Race to the Top, each school district must find a way to evaluate teachers on a scale from “ineffective” to “highly effective,” with teachers facing potential firing if they are rated ineffective for two years in a row. ("Tests for the Pupils")

The fact that teachers are [becoming] the objectified scapegoats of the new surge of educational testing strife becomes a great problem as it shifts the focus from teaching students to write to preserving jobs through formulaic, test-based teaching writing practices. This contributes to the fact that students are not being effectively measured in the classroom because practice is focused on writing for the test, not writing for writing improvement’s sake.

---

1 As per the National Education Association: “The Elementary and Secondary Education Act is the main federal education law, describing federal requirements for the nation's public schools, most of which receive some form of aid under the statute, PL 107-110. ESEA was first enacted in 1965, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. It is revised every five to seven years. The latest revision, passed by Congress in 2001 and signed into law by the Bush administration in 2002, is known as the “No Child Left Behind” Act of 2001. Key programs include Title I, the flagship teaching and learning program that reaches 12.5 million students in high-poverty schools. Other ESEA programs provide funds to improve teacher training, student literacy, school technology, and school safety. Under NCLB, all students in grades 3-8 and in one grade in high school must be tested once a year in reading and mathematics. Students are expected to score at the “proficient” level or above on state-administered tests by 2014 and to make “Adequate Yearly Progress” toward that goal until then.”
The strain for teachers to get passing scores contributes to their adherence to teach writing to the formulaic, five-paragraph essay style, the format desired for standardized writing prompts. This design highly limits the student and puts the accountability on the teacher to get students to write in this fashion so that they are competent on state exams — yet, also raises red flags. When students progress into higher level classrooms, writing skills are not present and students show little improvement in writing development; but there is a disconnect to standardized writing “skills” that deem students competent as per writing assessment rubrics.

Limitations of the Standardized Testing Rubric

Passing scores on standardized writing prompts possess distinct elements that are found within the strict, regulated, formulaic patterns of the five-paragraph essay, patterns reinforced by the different categories of standardized testing rubrics. Due to the fact that these rubrics generalize criterion into three components — content and organization, usage, and mechanics — and ambiguously delineate writing competencies as per vague language, student writing skills are packaged into boxes of “writing skills” that are not necessarily indicative of how competent they are in each area of writing.

In “Closed Systems and Standardized Writing Tests,” Chris Anson argues that large-scale writing assessment is difficult to assess because instead of allowing extra time for students to demonstrate their true skills, they limit the test-takers to monitored, undesirable conditions that could be altered but due to mass-testing conditions, is not (119). Instead, a “relatively closed discursive system,” one that has no purpose other than to test, possesses no real audience than the scorer, requires a narrow structure, and yields no feedback becomes the “completely artificial and unnatural piece of writing that is
standard on these tests (119) and births the thrust toward the reversion back to old methods that "work" – the reversion to the writing formula of the five-paragraph essay (121).

In referencing the HSPA holistic testing scoring rubric for expository and persuasive writing prompts, it can be noted that students’ skills are confined to simplistic and ambiguous categories used for scoring purposes:

NEW JERSEY REGISTERED HOLISTIC SCORING RUBRIC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In scoring, consider the grid of written language</th>
<th>Inadequate Command</th>
<th>Limited Command</th>
<th>Partial Command</th>
<th>Adequate Command</th>
<th>Strong Command</th>
<th>Superior Command</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Score</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content and Organization</td>
<td>• May lack opening and/or closing</td>
<td>• May lack opening and/or closing</td>
<td>• May lack opening and/or closing</td>
<td>• Generally has opening and/or closing</td>
<td>• Opening and closing</td>
<td>• Opening and closing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usage</td>
<td>• No apparent control</td>
<td>• Severe / numerous errors</td>
<td>• Errors / patterns of errors may be evident</td>
<td>• Some errors that do not interfere with meaning</td>
<td>• Few errors</td>
<td>• Very few, if any, errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Construction</td>
<td>• Assortment of incomplete and/or incorrect sentences</td>
<td>• Excessive monotony / same structure</td>
<td>• Little variety in syntax</td>
<td>• Some variety</td>
<td>• Generally correct</td>
<td>• Few errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics</td>
<td>• Errors so severe they detract from meaning</td>
<td>• Numerous serious errors</td>
<td>• Patterns of errors evident</td>
<td>• No consistent pattern of errors</td>
<td>• Few errors</td>
<td>• Very few, if any, errors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All unscorable responses (NSRs), with the exception of NR, must be coded by the Scoring Director.

Content/Organization
- Communicates intended message to intended audience
- Relates to topic
- Opening and closing
- Focused
- Logical progression of ideas
- Transitions
- Appropriate details and information

Usage
- Tense formation
- Subject-verb agreement
- Pronouns
- Usage agreement
- Word choice
- Meaning
- Proper Modifiers

Sentence Construction
- Variety of type, structure, and length
- Correct construction

Mechanics
- Spelling
- Capitalization
- Punctuation

NON-SCORABLE RESPONSES
NR = No Response
OT = Off Topic
OE = Not English
WF = Wrong Format

Student wrote too little to allow a reliable judgment of his/her writing.
Student did not write on the assigned topic / task, or the student attempted to copy the prompt.
Student wrote in a language other than English.
Student did not respond in the format (or mode) designated in the prompt.

© New Jersey Department of Education
This standardized test’s rubric ultimately demonstrates why and how students are stifled due to formulaic writing requirements. According to this rubric the student is limited to a formula where he or she must employ systematic organization with an introduction and conclusion, transitional words, and an even dispersing of explanation with detail throughout the essay in order to pass the writing prompt. With these very basic “skills,” or adherence to formulaic writing patterns, this rubric does not effectively help the student improve his or her writing ability, but classifies him or her into a pass/fail item.

Furthermore, this rubric does not delineate the line between different writing genres or types of writing structures, which, when evaluating writing, The Testing Trap’s George Hillocks Jr.’s main issue is that writing becomes “homogenized” (110) since “the message is clear that, to obtain the highest scores, teachers ought to teach students to write the explicit opening paragraph that outlines what is to come for exposition, persuasion, and narrative” (111). Due to the criterion of the rubric of writing assessments, writing becomes a task that fits into a said category. This becomes a misrepresentation not only of how much of a certain writing skill a student possesses, but also, how effective a student is at creating different types of ideas and arguments as per varying realms of writing. In line with this reasoning, Hillocks emphasizes

The support required for an argument is quite different from that required in a narrative. In a persuasive piece, support will include details to support a claim or a proposition (evidence), warrants (statements that explain how or why evidence supports the claim), qualifications, and counterarguments.

But the rubric makes no mention of such particulars. (111)

The misappropriation with deciding what “particulars” to include on the rubric makes all
writing meld together and students become writers that do not know or understand the
difference between writing styles.

This homogenization of writing then yields for formulaic teaching procedures that
limit both the teacher and the student: the narrative writing prompt becomes thrown into a
five-paragraph formula; the persuasive and expository writing forms become
formulaically deduced to the usage of similarly constructed topic sentences and the same
transitional words and "power levels" (Hillock 119). Yet Hillocks optimistically states
that "one might hope that this stilted writing would not do well on the state writing test,
that its mechanical, shallow nature would be detected and scored as unsuccessful" (119).
The truth of the matter is that these formulas do work for state testing criterion. But, a
problem emerges when it becomes the model for teachers to teach writing, creating
writers who lack the power to break out of the formulaic writing patterns.

Limitations of the Five-Paragraph Essay

Many teachers feel bound to teaching to test requirements when accountability
shifts from student to teacher as far as standardized scoring purposes are concerned.
When teachers adhere to teaching the five-paragraph essay format, research states that
higher order thinking skills suffer, inspiration from writing is removed, and thinking
patterns are solidified (Hillocks 123-5). Moreover, although the formula may be
"foundational," (Brannon et al. 16-7) writing creativity is expunged. George Hillocks Jr.
and Lil Brannon et al. speak to the limitations that the five-paragraph essay enables,
suggesting that writing cannot improve when the writing patterns are formulaic.

When teachers base their teaching of writing on limited, formulaic writing
assessments that model the five-paragraph essay, the writing process becomes not so
much a “process”, but a mixing and matching of different elements that are not utilized in a consistent way. The writing process becomes confusing to students and instead of perpetuating higher order thinking skills, students are reverted back to patterns of the formulaic five-paragraph essay (Hillocks 129). These patterns become second nature, and they cannot improve their skills because repetition of the same type of writing occurs, limiting creativity and expression.

Similarly, Lil Brannon et al. discuss how although the five-paragraph essay could help students, it does not allow them to progress in writing ability. In “The Five-Paragraph Essay and the Deficit Model of Education,” Lil Brannon et al. reference Kerri Smith and Byung-In Seo’s ideas regarding the benefits of the five-paragraph model as seen in their piece, “Defending the Five-Paragraph Essay.” Smith and Seo make the argument that the model is “foundational” and “basic,” demonstrating that it could be used to help remedial (basic) writers organize their logic into a prefabricated format (16-7). What they do not take into consideration is that they are making an argument that disallows students to see beyond the extension of the five-paragraph format, paralyzing them from exceeding the expectations of the formula. So, though the five-paragraph formula could be a building block as far as format is concerned, it is also limiting. Students might not be able to understand how the formula could be expanded (16).

Lil Brannon et al. counter Smith and Seo’s arguments, illustrating the nonsensicality of the teaching of writing to this format and suggesting that writing must be expanded to social settings in order for writing to improve. They cite Albert Kitzhaber’s 1953 claim, that “[discourse structures] represent an unrealistic view of the writing process, a view that assumes writing is done by formula and in a social vacuum.
They turn the attention of both teacher and student toward an academic exercise instead of toward a meaningful act of communication in a social context” (16). This shows that writing must escape the bounds of containment because of its propensity to engage the writer in unformulated conversation – a process that does not occur on standardized writing prompts. It is important to note how Kitzhaber remarks that the five-paragraph structure models an “academic exercise” as he illustrates how educators are reducing the teaching of writing to an act simpler than the complexity that it holds.

Hillocks and Brannon et al. speak to the notion that when students lose their ability to situate writing within a larger conversation, their writing falls prey to predictability and transferability. They are no longer able to think in different ways and writing is not an innovation, but a rubber-stamped formula. Thus, if teachers adhere to the teaching to the test’s formulaic writing requirements, students cannot possibly expand their writing abilities.

**Lack of Revision in the Five-Paragraph Essay Formula**

Nancy Sommers, in “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers,” notes the lack of revision within struggling writers, due to their adherence to linear writing process models, (323) models that are replicated when constructing five-paragraph essays for standardized writing prompts. These factors are relatively related to Smith and Seo’s model of the five-paragraph essay in that they do not implement revision within the writing process.

Sommers compares and contrasts the differences between basic and experienced writers, finding that experienced writers seek to discover and create meaning with their writing in revision, while basic writers think that revision simply deals with word choice
and are unable to see revision as a process (327). Experienced writers see the writing process as non-linear, recursive, holistic, and “disturbing,” (331) none of the attributes associated with linear composing processes.

Conformity to five-paragraph (or similar) models destroys the ability for basic writers to see revision as a process of its own. The entire writing process then gets affected as, since revision is normally viewed as recursive, writing follows its lead. When revision is taken out of the mix, writing becomes segmented. The basic writer could never graduate to the level of the experienced writer because of this lack of ability to remove himself from the adherence to a model that disapproves of recursiveness. And, since the standardized test does not require revision, the student becomes locked into what it means to “revise.” Writing becomes a product not a process and writing does not develop.

Cognitivists, expressionists, and other ‘realmed’ theorists maintain similar assertions about the benefits of revision within writing. Expert writers may disassemble and reassemble their papers in ways that are rethought, redesigned, and rewritten, (Murray 5) novice writers are likely to produce little change from draft-to-draft. Concerning novice writers, some may argue that their adherence to the process-model may hinder their desire to retouch their “finished” papers. With expert writers, some contend that the revision process that expert writers utilize can be attributed to recursiveness. Feedback presents itself as the catalyst for more acute changes, which is how these writers will ultimately choose how they will revise.
Lack of Feedback in the Five-Paragraph Essay Formula

As a result of the affinity to use standardized testing as The Means of Assessment, it is glaringly evident that when students enter post-secondary establishments like college, their skills in reading and writing are limited. Writer J.M. Anderson, author of "No Wonder Johnny (Still) Can't Write", comments that if college professors are asked about their biggest problem with students, it is the gripe that falls within the fact that their students "don't read and they can't write." Anderson quotes author William Strunk’s of *The Elements of Style*, "'Once past the essentials students profit most by individual instruction based on the problems of their own work.'" He follows this by stating that, "Giving them that attention is time-consuming and often frustrating, but essential if they are going to improve" (Anderson).

Students understand that their writing is a problem and they believe that if they were given more opportunity to write and revise, that they believed that they would have become better writers, as per Anderson’s research. He writes,

Modern studies back Strunk up. Summing up the data, Derek Bok writes in *Our Underachieving Colleges* that progress in writing depends mostly on "how much writing students did, how much specific feedback they received, whether they wrote about something they knew a lot about, and whether their subject let them bring their own intellectual interests into their composition.

(Anderson)

Anderson brings his argument to a close by stating that more attention must be paid to writing in order for overall comprehension to improve. Anderson’s claim is valid as if teachers are teaching to the test, these one-time writing assessments are limiting students'
abilities to reflect and understand the strengths and weaknesses in their writing. This perpetuates the student writing problem for, if they do not interact with the issues within their writing, then how can they correct their blunders?

J.M. Anderson brings up an excellent issue in the disjunction of the relationship between standardized testing and ideas about what types of writing instruction effectively support students' needs, specifically in regard to feedback. Research suggests that there is a high correlation between speaking and writing and without the feedback and collaborative interaction that must take place during the revision process, students improve their writing skills little. Dealing with writing in general, Sommers also discusses the current models of the writing process and how they strikingly "model themselves on speech" (378). Since phonological processes take most of the precedence in the writing process models that are taught within college settings, students become fixed in the notion that revision is a superficial process instead of one that requires much thought, reflection, and interaction.

Teacher response, as a specific form of feedback, plays an integral role in the reshaping of student papers, allowing revision processes to either add or detract to or from students' initial writing goals. This is where the novice and expert writer will show their differences: while expert writers will potentially use teacher feedback to their advantage, their ability to dually utilize recursiveness and revise with the feedback in mind, will allow their papers to encompass a new structure and considerable successful change. Due to the minimal ways that basic writers employ revision, their papers become fragmented segments of what their ideas would/could/should have been.
Unfortunately, since standardized tests do not require these main stepping stones of writing growth, teachers who are teaching to the test do not employ these methods within their classrooms, adhering to instructional strategies that purport testing assessment standards. These teachers base their benchmark assessments on writing prompts that model the test, where the “prompt sets out the kind of task to be performed and suggests some of the boundaries on what counts [as a certain type of writing]” (Hillocks 57) – hence, a certain type of proficiency is maintained in the classroom which might not indicate what good writing consists of outside of the task. Students’ notions about revision become more so cemented into one-time non-process based products because of the means by which they are being graded by standardized tests and rewarded with being able to graduate or move to the next level, when clearly the indication of what writing is becomes lost in the score attributed to how much a student knows about his or her writing ability.

IV. The Portfolio as the “Process of Change”

Introduction

Some schools have turned to a different type of assessment in attempts to evaluate students in ways that, as Koretz, states, “draw broader conclusions about how much a student is learning” (Otterman) and promote uniformity for teaching, grading, and understanding student writing. This form of assessment is the portfolio. The portfolio assessment is a term that is multifaceted. As per State University, this term is defined as follows:

A portfolio is a collection of student work that can exhibit a student's efforts, progress, and achievements in various areas of the curriculum. A portfolio
assessment can be an examination of student-selected samples of work experiences and documents related to outcomes being assessed, and it can address and support progress toward achieving academic goals, including student efficacy. Portfolio assessments have been used for large-scale assessment and accountability purposes (e.g., the Vermont and Kentucky statewide assessment systems), for purposes of school-to-work transitions, and for purposes of certification.

("State University")

In order to determine the quality of student writing ability and progress and create performance tasks that can be contrasted and evaluated, many schools are attempting to use their own working understanding of this portfolio assessment technique to improve student goals (Brooks). This opens up the conversation with this question: to what extent could portfolio assessment improve student writing and alleviate the concerns of test-driven practice to create an entirely different educational discussion about what it means to measure progress?

Drawing on Mantz Yorke and Jerome Bruner’s idea of learning, and the potential benefits of formative assessment, in “Portfolios, Power, and Ethics” Brian Lynch and Peter Shaw argue that formative assessments, such as portfolios, are to be viewed as an alternative assessment that allow for a “palette of choice” (264) in the means that they “represent a different paradigm or culture that requires an approach to validity evidence” (263). As per Lynch and Shaw’s research, they generally assert that portfolios need to measure different factors including validity and statistical evidence as to the extent to which the portfolio is “capturing what it claims to be assessing” (264). The challenges
that surround this notion exist by the means that when it comes to quantifiable portfolio assessments, rubrics might not potentially yield reliable results if scorers placed more weight on different categories. As a response to this challenge, the authors echo Yorke's integral component of what makes portfolio assessment successful: students playing a key role in establishing the parameters of what is included in the portfolio and self-evaluating their progress as they potentially improve their writing skills (that is, what is being "captured" by the portfolio assessment).

Combining Yorke, Lynch, and Shaw's ideologies about assessment, two factors remain consistent in the potentiality of the success of portfolios: validity of the assessment and evidence of the development of skill. As far as validity is concerned, the feedback and ownership that portfolios allow for create opportunities for student work to serve a purpose for an audience, demonstrating a level of reliability amongst peers, colleagues, and teachers. Pertaining to the development of skill, the fact that the portfolio utilizes recursive revision and self-assessment could potentially demonstrate the progression of writing ability from draft to draft. In applying the tenets of these ideologies, the theoretical means by which the portfolio could enhance student writing ability as an alternative means of assessment to standardized testing will be analyzed.

**Validity of Assessment through Portfolios**

Portfolios are valid forms of assessment because they incorporate feedback and take context into perspective, which allow students to take ownership over their own work. Research shows that because of these factors, the portfolio process is valid in the sense that it becomes more of a reflection and inquiry process where students could set their own goals and stay "actively engaged" (Yancey 477) instead of passively involved.
According to various theorists, this process serves to authenticate and improve student writing ability.

**Feedback**

Feedback serves two general purposes when employed by the portfolio: 1) it offers students the opportunity to correct mistakes and errors in thinking (Shute 156-7) and 2) it provides a social atmosphere that allows a conversation to occur amongst various parties with different writing levels (Tierney et al. 476). Together, these functions increase student performance to create a valid alternative assessment that serves to aid in the improvement of writing ability.

Feedback is “an important facilitator of learning and performance” (Shute 156) that is a response to a learner’s action (153). Its main intention is to “increase student knowledge, skills, and understanding in some content area of general skill area…” (156) so that “inappropriate task strategies, procedural errors, or misconceptions” (157) could be corrected. When teachers and peers employ feedback, the writer can understand how well or poorly he or she is performing and correct mistakes in writing patterns. Furthermore, “[feedback] could signal a gap between a current level of performance and some desired level of performance or goal” (157) which decreases levels of uncertainty regarding the performance task and motivates the student to progress in writing skills. This makes the portfolio a valid assessment tool as it promotes student advocacy and the ability to “engage in more advanced thinking and problem solving than they could without such help” (162) which both improve writing ability.

Due to the nature of portfolios’ capacities to serve as collaborative social assignments in the form of feedback, the collaboration “reconfigur[es] assessment to
entail a variety of moments shared between learners and those concerned with their success and development” (Tierney et al. 476). This changes the nature of what it means to be a writer as well as the environment of the classroom. The new roles that teachers, peers, and even parents take on might all contribute to the validity of the assessment for the active participation by all people involved change the dynamic of the student’s writing piece. Tierney and Clark et al. offer Yancey’s concept of the portfolio pedagogy in which “assessment is seen as a process in which all the parties are bona fide participants, and in which the person who is being assessed is more than an object of someone else's perusal” (qtd. in Yancey 18). This creates a more well-rounded evaluation of a student’s writing ability because feedback becomes more “objective, focused, and clear” (Shute 182) due to the fact that it is offered by many participants. Hence, because portfolios use feedback in a social setting, they offer a more on-target understanding of a student’s strengths and weaknesses as a writer.

**Context and Ownership**

Portfolios are valid forms of assessment because of the employment of “context” a term that Brian Huot (“Toward a New Theory of Writing Assessment”) discusses is “a critical component in the ability of people to transact meaning with written language” (559). When students have purposeful contexts to compose in, this creates a new means of evaluation that offers “assessment procedures based on recognizable characteristics of language use” (559). Huot’s idea of context lends to the validity of portfolio assessment because it demonstrates that students must be offered possibilities to understand that their writing could serve purpose in discourse communities outside of the classroom. Once a teacher establishes context, a student could deem his or her writing applicable to a larger
conversation, which in turn, creates a more cognizant, mature writer. Student writing ability increases because students see the value in writing and it becomes a more authentic measurement of their true writing ability.

Student Interest and Ownership

After a teacher establishes context and students potentially see the significance in the assignment, they prospectively become more interested in the task at hand. When students are actively engaged in their intellectual experiences, learning outcomes better benefit them and valid assessment of true ability could occur. The portfolio becomes a valid form of assessment because when students turn from passive to active writers, they become owners of their writing and writing ability is boosted.

In Bonita L. Wilcox’s “Writing Portfolios: Active vs. Passive,” Wilcox discusses the differences between how the portfolio has transformed from an aesthetic writing showcase to an active, learning tool that can transform student writing. When referring to the passive portfolio, as Wilcox dubs it, she states that “these portfolios are of little long-term benefit to individual learners even when they have selected and defended their best pieces” (34). She goes on to state that without alterations and development, improvements in ability are not readily seen for learning and performance are not stimulated. Yet, when the contents of the portfolio become questioned and grappled with, then “the contents could illustrate a developmental story of a student’s writing over time” (35). In other words, students must become part of the writing they are composing and interact with their writing or little benefit is yielded.

Wilcox outlines the difference between active and passive portfolios, stating that when both teachers and students alike become engaged in the process of emulating
published authors’ writing styles, the interest in writing increases. This potentially creates teachers who are more involved in teaching certain writing techniques and students who are more interested as writers. Wilcox writes, “When students [make] decisions and judgments about particular pieces of writing, they [gain] a sense of ownership in their writing. When students were asked to share their writing, they became more responsible writers” (35).

Wilcox elucidates that “ownership” and “responsibility” do not necessarily come with students simply choosing their best writing pieces; but more so, that it is the relationship that the student acquires with the writing process that catalyzes the change in behavior: “The most significant change, however, [comes] from the initiation of prewriting strategies and thought-provoking journal prompts” (35) – which, in turn becomes part of a larger context when shared, discussed, and analyzed with teachers and peers. Due to the fact that students see more meaning attached to the portfolio assignments – as in, the utilization of audience, the use of revisionary practices, and “constant and continual assessing, interacting, reflecting, and sharing,” (37) students are able to take accountability for their own learning.

Peggy A. Raines, in “Writing Portfolios: Turning the House into a Home” echoes Wilcox’s ideas about the significance of the active portfolio versus the passive portfolio also suggesting that students must actively engage in the portfolio process to become interested in improving their writing ability. Raines voices that she used to “house” the end products of “portfolios” in her classroom, essentially employing the passive portfolio approach to assessment. Raines writes that “my students learned little about how to become better writers, critical editors, or thoughtful revisers” (41). She states that as a
teacher, though she would model good writing practices, since the students were not engaged collaboratively, they were not able to show the variety of skills (revision, reflection, etc.) that portfolios are supposed to promote. Moreover, she stated she saw little interest from students as they were “not able to build on their past work” (41) and as a teacher, she was unable to “make thoughtful decisions about future assignments” (41).

When Raines decided to make the portfolios more of a “home” for students, she states that she changed very important features of what she believes makes portfolios helpful to writing development: she spent more time on the task; she promoted active collaboration amongst peers and the teacher; she allowed active topic choice by students; she encouraged peer response; she emphasized the importance of process; and she made the students engage in reflection/self-evaluation (42-4). Post changes, she espouses that the improvement in her students’ attitudes and her own behavior demonstrated that when the portfolio was employed “properly,” they could serve both parties efficiently. Raines demonstrates that “proper” employment of portfolios allowed students accountability to play the role of the leader and teachers to play the role of the mediator. This relationship shows that once teacher and student were interested in the roles they attained, they gained ownership over writing practices.

Wilcox and Raines demonstrate that teachers must have their “eye toward creativity” if they wish to employ the portfolio method so that students could understand themselves as writers in different contexts and become interested in the tasks assigned. Once this occurs, the portfolio could serve as a valid form of measuring writing ability as when students demonstrate the responsibility to act as free thinkers and free writers who
could push themselves within something of a laissez-faire setting, their writing could be measured as per their best efforts – true indications of their writing capabilities.

Development of Skill through Portfolios

Portfolios demonstrate the development of students’ writing skills due to their use of process-based writing activities and self-assessment practices. Students shift from understanding writing as a product to a process when they practice generating plans, organizing thoughts, setting goals, and recursively revising through portfolio-based assignments (Warnock 14). Likewise, they become accustomed to self-assessing regulatory procedures, which allow them to understand target strategies, maintain and generalize strategy use, and regulate their writing (Harris, Graham, and Mason 297). Both exercises create students who develop and improve their skills as writers with repeated exposure to portfolio assignments.

Development of Skill: Process-Based Writing in Portfolios

According to Piaget, “Progressive change [takes] place in a necessary order...in stages” (Warnock 17) which is a notion encapsulated by the varying stages of the writing process. Since portfolio assessments utilize assignments at different parts of the writing process and require students to recursively revise as per these stages, skill levels could be assessed correlative to each stage and addressed by the teacher and student accordingly. Thus, students could learn how to employ the writing process and develop procedures that exhibit enhancement in their writing skill.

In John Warnock’s “The Writing Process,” Warnock discusses that when students employ process-based writing, they “aid in the cognitive development of language” (18) and because the writing process is a practice that builds on different stages, “...the
process is important; the process allows the author to rework particular products and to
reflect extensively on the learning involved” (Lynch and Shaw 272). If students
repeatedly practice this model, then they could develop their lower level skills into higher
level skills that allow for the reworking and reflection necessary in writing (Warnock 20).
With recursiveness, Warnock comments that lower level skills, that are automatic
tendencies to basic writers, could eventually yield to the demands of higher-level skills so
that students could write with “capacity” (20). When students could demonstrate that they
are “capable of what they have been commonly thought to be incapable, like planning or
revising” (20-1) the transformation in skill could be readily noted.

**Development of Skill: Self-Assessment in Portfolios**

Portfolio assessments are conducive to self-assessment practices that students
learn as they travel through the writing process. In “Improving the Writing, Knowledge,
and Motivation of Struggling Young Writers: Effects of Self-Regulated Strategy
Development with and without Peer Support,” Harris, Graham, and Mason suggest that
when students become acquainted with the knowledge and “self-regulatory procedures
(e.g. goal setting, self-monitoring, and self-assessment) needed to carry out target
strategies” (297) they understand tasks better and their writing improves. The use of
portfolio-based tasks allow “multiple aspects of development” (297) to occur which
allows for a focus on the behavioral, cognitive, metacognitive, and affective factors to all
play into the student understanding target strategies for writing improvement. Students
become familiar with self-regulatory practices in two major ways: self-direction and
scaffolded individualized practice which both strengthen process-based writing practice.
Self-Direction

Kim Brian Lovejoy, in “Self-Directed Writing,” believes that due to the fact that students have the expressive freedom to choose topics that they feel passionately about paired with the creation of community by sharing writing about topics, that they value these practices highly and perform more effectively. When they select a piece, they are actually offering a piece of themselves to their peers and Lovejoy writes, “this is a time for students to share aspects about their lives and interests...I may ask them to read aloud one piece to others in their groups followed by oral peer responses identifying something they liked and something that was less clear” (83). Lovejoy believes that this allows students to explore their identities as well as their language in environments that are comfortable and natural. Students become more apt to self-regulate because writing becomes a projection of who they are as writers while also understanding their strengths and weaknesses as writers.

Lovejoy’s sentiments about the power of self-directed writing assignments are evident as she discusses how important this is as a part of writing of a student’s writing; but, Lovejoy also believes that this is a springboard that gets students involved in the writing process. She writes,

Self-directed writing utilizes all aspects of the writing process, from idea generation to polishing, editing, proofreading, and publishing. Some of the pieces students write are shared with their peers; some are not. I may ask them to read aloud one piece of their writing in a small group for oral feedback. Some pieces are graded; some are not. They decide the pieces they want to share, and they choose the pieces they want to submit for a grade. But anything they submit for a
grade is a finished piece, a piece they have shared with peers and with me for feedback, and a piece they’ve revisited, edited, and carefully proofread. (84)

Lovejoy’s connection between self-directed writing and the writing process possesses a special link in allowing students to understand their identities as writers, for their expressive writing matures into more formal writing in undergoing the various elements of editing, proofreading, and the multiple revisits to their work. Moreover, the expressive to formal writing transformation naturally teaches students about tone, voice, audience, and purpose, “extending students’ views of language and literacy (and what constitutes “good” writing)” (85).

Thus, process-based writing skills and self-assessment skills are developed through portfolios as students learn how to: understand how they could implement different writing styles; travel through the different stages of the writing process with care and concern; and realize that there is more than just a grade attached to their assignments – there is a community of other writers waiting to respond to their piece – which creates more conscientious, proficient, able writers.

Practice

Harris, Graham, and Mason’s belief is that once students become more skilled in their writing endeavors, they prospectively learn how to utilize writing strategies “correctly and efficiently with different types of writing prompts for the target genres,” (299) and that they could then begin practicing their strategies in their writing, eventually self-monitoring and evaluating themselves as writers. Once students could “maintain and generalize strategy use, and [discuss] when, where, and how to use the learned strategies” (Harris et al. 299) portfolios become demonstrative of skill enhancement. Practice
becomes a key element in students developing their writing skills and in *Writing Without Teachers*, Peter Elbow outlines some process-based writing activities of portfolios that aid in practice and demonstrate skill development. Elbow redefines the writing process to two main stages: freewriting and “writing into practice” (11-2) which offer students the opportunity to practice target strategies while also self-regulating their writing.

When students utilize Elbow’s understanding of “writing into practice,” he believes that it is “the most effective way to improve writing” (3) because freewriting becomes an outlet for students to play with words, expressions, and different writing styles. They find themselves in the process. Freewriting is also the way that many portfolio-based assignments are started. So, together, in Elbow’s vision, freewriting could lead struggling writers in the direction of their writing’s fruition – all with a simple first step: free-writing. This allows the student to “maintain and generalize strategy use” (Harris et al. 299) while also improving their individual writing assignments. Hence, overall writing skills readily improve and the development could be noted throughout monitoring the progression of freewriting activities.
V. Snapshot of a School: Analysis of Teacher and Administrator Attitudes

I interviewed tenured teachers of English and former English teachers-become administrators in an attempt to assess their views on the need for portfolios as an alternate means of writing assessment given the issues relating to teaching to the test concerns, standardized test assessments, and their impact on student writing abilities.

Five participants were selected out of fifteen current and former English department members in hopes of offering a spectrum of understanding about the usage of portfolios within their classrooms (either literally or hypothetically as per their pedagogic designations). The extent to which portfolios could alleviate standardized testing concerns and enhance student writing ability was evaluated in regard to the specific climates of the teachers' classrooms; likewise, the administrators' former expertise as English teachers and their understanding of the climates of their teachers' classrooms were used to answer the same questions. Together, this qualitative research was used to gain insight into teacher and administrator attitudes toward portfolios and their perceptions about whether or not 1) portfolio use could cause less concern about standardized testing for both teachers and administrators and 2) portfolio use could improve student writing through teachers' personal assumptions and expectations.

Of the five participants, the two administrators are referred to as Administrator A and Administrator B. The other teachers, as per their specialty, are named Teacher High Level (HL), Teacher Elective (E), and Teacher for Remedial Testing (RT). All administrators and teachers have been in the district for over eight years. Administrators A and B were both English teachers which is a main reason that they were selected for
Definition of a Portfolio

It is very crucial that instructors follow the same understanding about what a portfolio should encompass so that validity remains consistent in terms of similar skill assessment for each student (Lynch and Shaw 264). In this section, the range of responses offered by teachers and administrators exhibit many discrepancies in the understanding of the portfolio’s use. Teacher and administrators’ assumptions about what a portfolio should exist as show that their suppositions are indicative of what they consider to be best practices of teaching writing – notions that have been established and perpetuated in their classrooms over many years. The varying ideologies affect the validity of the use of portfolios in this school due to the inconsistent ideas of what the portfolio is.

When the teachers and administrators were generally questioned on what they defined a student writing portfolio to be, Teacher HL, one of the instructors who teaches at the highest level in the high school, outlined the portfolio most succinctly but the most effectively, as per included research as to how the portfolio operates best. Teacher HL stated:

I see it as a collection of students’ work that can be passed on and used throughout the year...even passed on from year to year so that each successive teacher could see what that student is capable of or has been capable of. But I see it as an idealistic tool that hasn’t been used well in the past.

The idea of the portfolio being passed on yearly is a very important factor of how it could serve as the most useful form of alternative assessment – far superseding the standardized
testing assessment – for the idea that Huot’s claim of “context” becomes a key indicator of validity. Huot’s assertion, that there must be a “sufficient level of agreement between raters” (555) should theoretically be upheld if the portfolio is to be a reliable form of assessment for students. When students progress in their education, they should be carrying with them learned skills from years passed. Correlatively, in line with Huot’s reasoning, if teachers are using portfolios that are assessing different skills, unrelated skills, “levels of agreement” become insufficient and the portfolio assessment is not helpful in terms of validity or the enhancement of writing ability.

Brian Lynch and Peter Shaw further this idea stating “one principle is that a test must be reliable before it can claim to produce valid inferences or conclusions” (268) citing another theorist, Moss, who looks toward a hermeneutic approach in which the “importance of the context of the assessment begins to formulate validity as a consensus reached through dialogue” (268). The authors go on to state that “when reliability is defined as consistency among independent measures intended as interchangeable,” (269) the portfolio becomes a more valid assessment. Therefore, if the context of classrooms from year to year remain constant, then portfolios could highly enhance writing skills due to the fact that teachers would be able to scaffold their writing lessons more effectively and students would be able to skill build accordingly.

Regarding the other teacher and administrator definitions of portfolios, there were disparate views as to what the portfolio should exist as. Whereas Teacher CW believed that the portfolio should be a compilation of a student’s “best work”, Teacher RT simply defined it as a “a compilation of writing work from a certain period up to another period that showed the progression of skills in the writing.” When the definition of a portfolio
becomes so broad, it is difficult for the portfolio to be as valid or reliable as far as the assessment of skill is concerned. As per these teachers’ viewpoints, if the student portfolio were implemented into this school, the dialogue of “what it means to be a good writer” would then vary from year to year. Applying this line of reasoning, standardized testing would actually suffice as a form of assessment since the “the principle in traditional testing and assessment [is generalizability]” (Lynch and Shaw 268). But, since the portfolio is supposed to be – as agreed by all participants in my study – a compilation of students’ work – what would be the point of saving the data if it could not be analyzed validly with specificity?

Administrator A and B’s definitions of the portfolio varied from the teachers’ responses; but, Administrator A’s definition was most comprehensive in terms of what types of assignments a portfolio should actually encompass. Administrator A stated that the portfolio is:

A collection of work, of projects, materials – [it could be] a portfolio for assessment, or [it could be] all-inclusive… it could be a portfolio for a college placement… but a portfolio should be diversified in terms of types of assignments and types of skills and types of cognitive and learning modalities: visual things, kinesthetic – videos of a student doing something… it’s a collection of work.

Administrator A’s inclusion of a “diversification of assignments” is important in that this reflects Harris, Graham, and Mason’s notion of how struggling writers become more skilled through exposure to different writing genres; if they have more contact to varied prompts, then their writing ability could flourish because they would recognize learning
strategies to apply to their own writing. Hence, they would possibly be able to initiate self-assessment techniques which would aid in writing enhancement (297).

All in all, Administrator A and Teacher HL’s views paired together would offer the high school the best opportunity for effective employment of portfolios. The diversity of assignments coupled with the validity of the enduring context of an ongoing portfolio would allow for a better understanding of what it means for a student to improve as a writer. Taking a cue from Peter Elbow, this could change a student’s views of writing from a product to a process, over time. Yet, due to the fact that the teachers and administrators in this school possess varying definitions of the portfolio, better communication would need to exist for the validity of these portfolios to endure.

Pros and Cons of Portfolio Assessment

Pros

As far as the pros of portfolio assessment were concerned, administrators and teachers alike commented that the portfolios were a means by which to assess the student’s strengths and weaknesses. The portfolio’s affinity for process-based writing was a key to students’ writing development. It was interesting to note the different parts of the writing process that each teacher and administrator felt were crucial in helping the students improve as writers, for the foci varied. The use of self-assessment, feedback, revision, practice, and other process elements were all factors addressed as pros of the portfolio.

Teacher E believed that because the student was able to see worth and purpose in the assignment, he/she was more likely to put more effort into the task due to the fact that there was dialogue regarding revision. Teacher E espoused
The pro would be that once they turn in an assignment they do not see it as the last time that they will ever see this assignment. They get a chance to come back to it and make it better. So they do not see it as an ending point but as more of a process. I think getting feedback helps them become better writers.

On the contrary, Teacher RT focused more so on the self-assessment aspect of portfolios: [Portfolios] allow them to do self-assessment themselves which then gives them ownership and power over their writing. Especially when the assignments are staggered and they could look back at them and they don’t feel a really huge time constraint – they are able to really look at their writing; I have them write about it and that seems to really help.

Teachers E and RT centrally focused on feedback and revision to promote self-assessment, factors that these teachers believe truly help students most in writing development. As per included research, the element of feedback is highly effective in creating students who have a relationship with their writing because students’ needs become supported and best practices for instruction could then occur within the classroom (Anderson). Regarding revision, the idea that writing does not have an “ending point” maintains the conversation of writing and the possibilities for students’ writing to improve become endless because the conversation is continuous. According to Teachers E and RT, the fact that portfolios promote these practices creates an open discursive system, which makes students more aware of and accountable for their writing.

When an open discursive system is present students understand that there is an audience and purpose present. The “completely artificial and unnatural piece of writing that is standard on tests” (Anson 119) becomes, instead, a continuum where students
begin to understand themselves as writers instead of test-takers. Both teachers’ sentiments about feedback, revision, and self-assessment through reflection are crucial elements of the writing process that make students more responsible as student writers and more apt to revise their papers when they are doing it for a function and not an isolated situation.

Teacher E, when asked a follow-up question about how the process element makes students more accountable for their writing, stated that the students saw the portfolio as more than just a grade because it was a process and not just a one-time assignment. This extends the notion that portfolios create stronger writers because of there is more value instilled into these long-term, high-stake assignments because they have low-stake elements worked into them. It is easier for students to interact with their writing and they feel more comfortable returning to it as well.

Administrator A and Teacher HL’s sentiments about the pros of portfolios dealt more with the idea that when the writing process is used through each and every phrase, strengths and weaknesses are readily “identifiable” and mistakes become more correctable. Administrator A found that that strength of the portfolio’s process based work resided in the how the student “builds his writing piece” and Teacher HL thought that a “pattern of problems” could be recognized within the writing. Adjoined with Teacher E and RT’s comments, together, all interviewees believe that the writing process assists students in developing their writing because with the process, writing consists of steps where there are opportunities for correction, scaffolding, and improvement to occur hence creating stronger, more reflective writers.
In “Effects of Two Types of Self-Regulatory Instruction Programs on Students with Learning Disabilities in Writing Products, Processes, and Self-Efficacy” authors Jesús-Nicasio García-Sánchez and Raquel Fidalgo-Redondo reinforce the ideas of Administrator A and Teacher HL in their explanation of how difficult it is to assess writing problems with struggling writers due to the nature of how students compose. They write,

The majority of [writing] models describe writing as a difficult and demanding task. The process of writing a text comprises components that are employed recursively. Coordinating these processes in a way that results in a text that meets the demands of the writing task requires extensive attention control and self-regulation.  

The authors’ sentiments about the inherent difficulties of the writing process are reflected in administrators’/teachers’ attitudes about how tough it is to teach students how to effectively write – especially when teachers do not know where to start. “Extensive attention” (181) could be given to students only when their identifiable errors could be easily spotted and carefully addressed. When dealing with standardized writing prompts, these issues may be ‘caught’ with a rubric, then scored – but the problems are not handled within the classroom after the one-time assessment has been completed. Students’ problems become disregarded with these one-time assessments, and since it is so difficult for teachers to even identify problems with standard classroom assessments, trying to understand where the student generally ‘fits’ as a writer is somewhat meaningless when using a standardized writing rubric.
García-Sánchez and Fidalgo-Redondo’s mention of self-regulation also becomes key in that once teachers enlighten students to their mistakes, they could begin to readjust their writing habits and begin self-assessment practices, which Administrator B echoes in the comment that “[portfolios] indeed show a progression of a student’s abilities and an increase in skill level.” Students’ skill levels increase when they practice routines that are part of feedback and revisionary practices. But an increase in skill level does not necessarily occur when utilizing standardized writing assessments, because the assessment is precipitously scored and never evaluated again.

All interviewees’ comments reflect the general notion that this is why portfolios are so pivotal in writing development and standardized writing assessments are not: they employ the recursive element so that instruction could be differentiated as per students’ writing abilities.

**Cons**

Teachers and administrators also believed that the portfolio assessment possesses cons. In assessing the cons of portfolio, mostly all of the teachers and administrators agreed that portfolios are not viable if students are superficial in their work ethic as revisionists, and also, if teachers do not have enough time allowed for practice with students. Dealing with the former, a large problem with portfolios lies within the concept of what students believe “revision” is as evidenced in the words of Teacher E:

The revisions that they’ll make and their reflections are just superficial. Like I’ll meet with them individually and ask “What would you do differently with this poem?” or “What would you do differently with this piece?” and they just could
never really get to the core of it. I’ll suggest something to them and then I look at their portfolio and they just missed the point of it. It’s just all very superficial. 

Teacher E’s beliefs about her students’ reflections and revisions are not off target in the fact that as referenced prior, Donald Murray states that there is little change between drafts if students are not told how to revise ‘properly’ (5). Yet, according to theorists, the issue arises even earlier than the revisionary stage. When novice writers revise, they seemingly ‘miss the mark’ by doing too little but the problem is rooted even before these writers start revising. Writing without being fully informed, basic writers’ leap into their writing prompts lacking strong knowledge and supporting details, contributing to a deficiency of informational content within their papers (Fitzgerald 489). Jill Fitzgerald, author of “Research on Revision in Writing,” comments:

One breakdown [in revision] may occur if a writer does not clearly establish intentions for text...Intentions may be for content or for form or presentation so writers may have difficulty establishing intentions because of lack of knowledge about what to say and /or because of lack of knowledge about how to say it. (489)

This lack of information severely affects revision and when feedback is applied, the student has little place to move in reworking of text; only presentation-related features could be maneuvered. In one of Fitzgerald’s case studies, this problem is investigated regarding college students’ revision tactics on brief persuasive documents. She states, “college freshman contending with more presentation-related facets of text tend to make fewer content-related revisions from first to last drafts” (389). Fitzgerald illustrates the fact that little could be done when content is not fully developed.
The problem of too little information in writing then manifests itself into a more complex revision problem, as discussed by Lester Faigley and Stephen Witte in their piece, “Analyzing Revision.” Faigley and Witte describe “surface” and “text-base” changes, citing these revision tactics as being impacting parts of the revision process. The authors define surface changes as those that are less dependent on changing the meaning of the paper and text-base changes as those that serve micro/macrostructured changes; the latter revisions change the meaning of the paper (403). Using Fitzgerald’s conception as a springboard, if the information is not there, little could be done to the text. Yet, when using the portfolio, since the information builds upon different parts of the process, this issue could potentially be remedied.

This misunderstanding of revision by students connects to another problem that could arise with portfolios: the concept of there being too little time to use the portfolios to the student’s advantage. Teacher HL remarks that

Any attempts I have seen to use [portfolios] have started off strong and then [have] simply [been] forgotten because of the overwhelming amount of students that we have and the overwhelming amount of work that each student has to produce. It just becomes a matter of time. We just don’t have enough time to work individually with each student over the course of the year -- and over the course of the four years that we have them. So I think that’s the biggest con: we just don’t have enough time to work on the portfolios as they are meant to be worked on.

Coupled with Teacher HL’s response with the problems surrounding student revision, if teachers do not have enough time to work one-on-one with students, it is improbable that
they could accurately assess each individual student's 'identifiable' issues within the writing process. Therefore, to be able to then teach each one of these students how to revise his or her papers 'properly' becomes a task that seems utterly impossible because the feedback from the teacher becomes as superficial as the students' surface revisions.

Administrators A and B and Teacher RT agreed that there were few negatives to the portfolio if it was set up "correctly." They also attested that for the portfolio to be meaningful, it would have to be indicative of the student's true skill. In comparing these responses to the other participants' issues with portfolios, these declarations seem too idealistic and general due to contradictions in how teachers and administrators defined portfolios. Further: how is a portfolio set up "correctly"? And how exactly is a student's "true skill" "indicated"?

**Teaching to the Test Concerns**

It is evident that the teachers and administrators in this high school believe that portfolios afford many positives opportunities for students to progress in their writing abilities if they are employed properly. Yet, the "proper employment" of portfolios remains vague. To adequately assess whether or not this high school would benefit in using portfolios to alleviate teaching to the test concerns, is a matter that lies within the teacher and administrator opinions on the extent to which they believe the issues actually exist.

Beginning from the perspective of the administrators, Administrators A and B held very different beliefs as to whether or not teaching to the test is a current problem in their school. Whereas Administrator A believed that "teaching to the test" is an inaccurate phrase designed for those teachers who wish to rename what it is they actually
do on a daily basis – that is, teach to the New Jersey Core Content Curriculum Standard skills, Administrator B maintained that standardized testing severely limits teachers’ creativity and students’ capabilities. Administrator A commented that

I don’t think it’s a problem at all because the test is measuring the common core standards, which is what the curriculum is. Teaching to the test is only a problem if the test is invalid. But if we’re saying “Test X” develops a set of skills that are driven by the common core, which is the curriculum, then the curriculum is what we’re testing. AP is a perfect example of that. You have to submit and get approved to the College Board an advanced placement curriculum that meets their criteria. They base their test on their criteria. The curriculum is the test. I think it’s a cop out. You give a test at the end of Great Gatsby or some kind of assessment — whether it be an essay or a project. Most people are designing their curriculum backwards whether they know it or not. You know what you’re assessing when you’re planning your units on Great Gatsby. You’re teaching to the test. Why is that a problem? So, it’s a cop out. People [teachers] want to say “well, my kids aren’t doing well on the test because I’m refusing to teach the test.” No, you’re not teaching the skills! It’s testing the skills.

Administrator A does not believe that teaching to the test is a problem because teachers structure and conduct their lessons to different skills that students learn in connection to the state standards. Essentially, this administrator maintains that if a teacher is instructing his/her students with effective teaching practices, then the learned skills will be taught, the students will practice them, and regardless of what the task is requiring the students to do, the students should be able to perform them.
Administrator A’s comments about teaching to the test are substantiated by the claims of Tina Seidel and Richard J. Shavelson in “Teaching Effectiveness Research in the Past Decade: The Role of Theory and Research Design in Disentangling Meta-Analysis Results” that state that when classroom environments have activities that sustain strong instructional practices, the process of teaching and positively affect student learning. This, in turn, allows the students to acquire the skills that the teacher finds necessary to be taught (455). Since “certain teaching acts and conditions affect student outcomes” (455) direct teaching, reinforcement, and time spent on the task directly influence students’ attitudes and achievement (458). Seidel and Shavelson define “students’ learning as multidimensional” (458) and if there is an organized setting in the classroom the “development of meaning and in-depth understanding of learning context” (459) ensues.

Conversely, Administrator B’s attitude toward teaching to the test reflected what all of the teachers stated in their responses: standardized tests restrict student ability.

Administrator B declared

Teaching to the test could be a problem because you are not giving the student a well-rounded class or education, in a sense -- because you are just targeting the areas of the test. So if the test has open-ended questions and it has reading comprehension questions and maybe a persuasive piece, if we just teach to that, then we are forgetting all our other pieces you know-- analytical, expository, research -- we are not putting enough time into that which they need when they go to college. That’s what happens when you teach to the test. You can’t spend
enough time on other things that they do need. Creativity of the teacher becomes limited. Students become limited. I think it is a problem.

Administrator B’s attitude toward teaching to the test is very reminiscent of Lil Brannon et al.’s assertions about the constraining tendencies of the five-paragraph model on student writing ability (16). If teaching practices become centered around “how to write for an open-ended question” or “how to respond to a persuasive writing piece,” the mechanical measures applied to writing makes the experience become introverted, eliminating the social experience, which detrimentally affects the student’s writing improvement, confining the student and the teacher alike (16).

Teacher E had similar feelings about the limitations of teaching to the test in the classroom, with a focus on literary freedom and expression:

I think it takes a lot of freedom out of discussions. Like sometimes, I have a certain objective in mind but I know that “theme” needs to be covered on a test. Sometimes, the best discussions sometimes stray off course and if you’re teaching to the test and not allowing for those tangents, that’s a detriment to some kids who are free thinkers. Then if you become too regimented in how they are going to do on the test, then you are really stifling their expression.

Teacher E’s beliefs furthermore emphasize the dangers that the confinements of the five-paragraph essay and the other formulaic tendencies that teaching the test make the teacher subscribe to; yet, Teacher E’s concerns parallel the importance stressed by Peter Elbow in his ideas of how writing could potentially improve: through the utilization of the speaking and writing correlation (284) and free-writing activities (9-11). The concern for teaching to the test becomes a greater apprehension when scrutinizing it from a
theoretical perspective—when teachers teach to the test, they are limiting their students’ thinking skills which will ultimately affect their future writing experiences.

Teacher HL had a relatively similar outlook on the issues emphasized by Administrator B and Teacher E:

I think for mainstream classrooms, regular classrooms, we tend to lose sight of the skills that we are supposed to be teaching them. When you teach them how to teach the HSPA or how to pass the SAT it becomes a matter of teaching them tricks. But if we focus on the skills that the test is meant to prove then it’s up to the teacher to make it a worth while endeavor or not. As an AP teacher, that’s all I do is teach to the test. I think that [teaching to the AP test is good] because of getting AP credit; but I think that it is destructive because it teaches them to write in a very set, stylized way that isn’t acceptable in college. So I think that the problem falls with the College Board dictating what the test is like. But unfortunately I have to teach to the test; it is a necessary evil.

Teacher HL’s comments are reminiscent of Administrator A’s sentiments regarding the “teaching to the test concern” in that fact that this teacher also believes that if the skills are being taught, then teaching to the test is not necessarily a problem. Yet, when teachers begin teaching “tricks,” students become one-trick test ponies because they could only perform for certain target genres. When students write similarly for each genre without changing their writing style, this not only limits students but it also leads them to believe that they are better writers than they actually are—especially when they are “rewarded” with competent test scores reinforced by generalized rubrics.
While acknowledging that there is a “necessity” for standardized testing, Teacher HL still noted the harmfulness of the formulaic nature that is forced upon students all for the purposes of passing a test. As one of the most qualified teachers, Teacher HL recognizes that the standardized writing forms learned for the tests cannot be employed in college; and, if that is the case, then teachers are preparing their students for mediocrity as supported by national statistics that deem an indiscriminate understanding of writing competency.

**Implementation of Writing Portfolios into the Curriculum**

In analyzing teacher and administrator attitudes toward the extent to which portfolios aid in the teaching to the test issue and the degree that portfolios aid in student writing performance, all participants concurred that portfolios would successfully create students that possessed enhanced writing abilities, but that success would vary as determined by factors of classroom setting and student and teacher accountability.

According to the teachers in the interview, even though Teachers RT, HL, and E believed that students would improve in writing ability, they also agreed that the success of the portfolio would depend on the type (setting) of classroom that the portfolio was utilized within due to the presence of student skill level of student, teacher control, and student interest.

Teacher RT stated that when using writing portfolios in class, students generally were able to self-assess after using portfolios in class; but also admitted that this did not always occur in all of the different sections of classes being taught. Teacher RT responded that

...in seeing their own mistakes and figuring out or speaking to other students or
me in peer editing, and figuring out how to [fix their mistakes], that mistake
generally doesn't happen again. In HSPA [class], I point [their mistakes] out but
in college writing [class], they typically find their own. [Then, they self-correct.]
For example, if I have a student make a mistake in parallelism I'll point it out or
he'll realize that it doesn't make sense and it generally won't happen again.

Teacher RT’s mention of the difference of self-assessment as per class section did not
necessarily demonstrate how or why the students improve in their writing other than
"seeing their mistakes" through repetition and practice. When asked a follow-up question
as to why Teacher RT believed that certain students in different classes were able to see
their mistakes, RT attributed different skill levels to be the basis of why they could or
could not learn to self-evaluate their writing.

Teacher HL discussed a different sentiment, stating that

I’ve had the opportunity in my AP class where [portfolios have] been used --
where I could trust those students to work independently on something for like 4
or 5 days in a row and just meet individually with each one of them for a good 5-
10 minutes and I do that in the beginning of the year and that works great. But in
a regular English classroom I can’t imagine the students being able to work
independently while I could quietly work with the students in the front of the
classroom. So perhaps in a higher level class it could work or maybe in the lower
grades where they are still sort of controllable.

Teacher HL’s attitude about different classroom settings and the success rate of portfolios
did not deal with technique, as Teacher RT discussed, but about control. Hillocks writes
that “if states really want student writing to improve, they need to insure that teachers
have adequate time to teach writing well. Effective teaching means planning for instruction and responding to student writing” (205) which reinforces Teacher HL’s sentiments. Even if teachers have the time to effectively plan a unit that incorporates enough time for adequate feedback and individual teacher-student conferences, this does not necessarily mean that students will improve their writing ability just because the portfolio is implemented in the classroom. Students must also employ the learned strategies of portfolio assessment if they are to potentially create writers who could be accountable for their writing; yet, according to Teacher HL, this only occurs in certain types of upper level or higher lower classes.

Teacher E’s sentiments espoused a similar feeling to Teacher HL in that it was believed that

[In dealing with elective classes,] I think that because the kids are electing that class they’re expressing that they’re interested in writing and they actually want to be better since they are taking the initiative to be there. I feel that in an English class, I would like to do [portfolios] but I feel like I would need to inspire them or encourage them because I feel like the whole process takes a long time if they’re creating a portfolio. I feel like maybe breaking it up into chunks could make it more possible.

Teacher E’s ideas about the success rate of portfolios in elective classes echoes a main point demonstrated in Teacher HL’s comments: interest must be present in order for students to garner the benefits of the writing portfolio. Although Raines suggests that with freedom of choice and adequate time spent on the task, students begin to develop an affinity toward their own accountability as writers (41), Teacher E and HL’s experiences
with writing portfolios in different settings suggest that this theoretical claim might be too idealistic for all writers.

Teachers RT, HL, and E’s responses regarding success rates in different sections/levels of classes demonstrate that if not every classroom is clear in establishing parameters across a variety of mediums, just how effective students will be in becoming better writers is uncertain. This puts a lot of the onus on teachers to establish goals that can be attained; but in analyzing the differences in the teachers’ responses, it also shows that teachers must all be in communication with one another for portfolio assessment to work.

Administrator A and B’s perspectives reinforce the idea that a portfolio will only be as strong as the classroom it exists in, stating that it takes a lot of work on the teacher’s part to ensure that successful implementation of portfolios occur. Administrator A discussed that

When I was an English supervisor here we started writing folders and I am not sure if we maintain them anymore but they started in grade 6 and would be passed on with the student. Every year, you’d pick up that folder. And I always found it a valuable tool to see, since now we are back with student growth objectives, that portfolio – if I am teaching writing – if I have a portfolio that goes with a student, I’m well on my way to developing a growth objective because I know where they are starting at writing. And it’s not just one assignment given in September – where I could get a kid on a good day or a bad day – I’m looking at a body of work. I think it has a great deal of benefit for the student and the teacher. Like anything else, it only works if you set it up right.
Administrator A’s firm beliefs about the portfolio’s success are grounded in the notion that it will only work if the foundation is strong; so it must follow the student for it to beneficially support student growth, which becomes an issue of teacher accountability. Administrator B’s response emphasizes this idea, that “it just takes a little work on the part of the teacher to keep good records and to make sure that the student work doesn’t get lost or goes home instead of staying in the portfolio.” Which begs the question, to whom does the success rate of the portfolio become attributed to: the student or the teacher?

VI. Limitations of the Study

In analyzing the results of this study, location is likely integral and shifting locations would likely produce different results. Both existing research and the qualitative data collection here indicate that the portfolio has pros and cons but if implemented correctly it could theoretically alleviate teaching to the test concerns and potentially improve student writing ability, at least as indicated by teacher and administrator assumptions. In identifying the problem of student writing ability and the root causes attributed to on-demand standardized writing prompts, it is not the limitations of the student writing portfolio that potentially affect the possibility of implementation of this form of writing assessment into this school; it is teacher perception of the effectiveness of the portfolio that contributes to its premature demise.

Due to the fact that the teachers and administrators interviewed have their own understanding of what it means to teach writing, their idea of what the portfolio should be differs accordingly. In their minds, unless the “perfect climate” for portfolios exist, the portfolio cannot be implemented.
Due to their differing perceptions, while portfolios have the potentiality of success in this school, the success rate is hindered by the lack of communication amongst these colleagues as well as their inability to change the way that they view the teaching of writing.

VII. Conclusions

Summary

In looking back over the course of this study, current research in the field supports the view that student writing suffers on account of the limitations of standardized testing assessments because these assessments limit student creativity and writing enhancement because of non-process-based tendencies. Standardized testing assessments were limited by standardized rubrics, inadequate validity, and an inaccurate evaluation of student skills, which affected student writing improvement.

Teacher and administrator attitudes regarding teaching to the test concerns were taken into consideration and many widely held sentiments about the limitations of standardized testing were reinforced while others varied from the norm, suggesting that if the skills were taught, there was no teaching to the test concern.

Teachers and administrators both believed that if the portfolio were to be implemented “effectively” by the teacher, that students would be able to benefit greatly from the process-based work that portfolio writing provides. The idea of the usefulness of collaboration through peer review, teacher-student conversations, self-assessment, revision, and feedback played a major part in what the teachers and administrators believed would assist in student writing abilities.
Outlook

My review of existing research indicates that portfolios could solve the problems of teaching writing and alleviate standardized testing concerns. The successful implementation of portfolios could occur. Portfolios serve as a viable strategy to consider for the teaching and assessing of student writing ability, even given the limitations that I have uncovered in surveying the particular teachers and administrators involved.

Although a connection between the push for standardized testing assessments, the teaching of limiting writing practices in the classroom, and the existence of the student writing problem was confirmed in this study, the portfolio needed to be viewed as a part of teaching and not just an assessment. This hinders the likelihood that portfolios could be implemented within this school. Teacher perceptions about the teaching of writing would need to be altered for the portfolio to successfully flourish.

All in all, it was not the scholarly wall that was the problem with the implementation of portfolios – but the difficulty of changing administrator and teacher perceptions about ingrained writing practices that affected the ideas surrounding the portfolio’s success rate. In looking to the future, with more communication about the problems with student writing and the validity of the portfolio as a means of alternate assessment, this school would potentially be able to integrate portfolios into the classroom -- but they would need departmental uniformity about what it means to teach writing.
VII. Bibliography


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