Portfolios in EFL Writing Courses: From Principles to Practice

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1. Introduction

Portfolios have become a regular feature of writing instruction in many North American educational settings, especially at the secondary and post-secondary levels. Originally proposed as an alternative form of assessment to timed essay tests, writing portfolios now have their own body of theory and research which demonstrates their usefulness across a variety of courses and programs (see, for example, Belanoff & Dickson, 1991; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Yancey & Weiser, 1997). When they are used carefully, portfolios engage "both students and teachers in continual discussion, analysis, and evaluation of their *processes* as learners and writers, as well as multiple academic products" (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998, p. 246; emphasis in original). More fundamentally, portfolios enable the principled collection and evaluation of a number of texts, thus allowing students to demonstrate more of their strengths as writers.

While empirical research on portfolios in second language (L2) writing is as yet scarce (Hamp-Lyons, 2006), specialists have recognized their applicability to courses and programs for non-native speakers (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Hyland, 2002). However, much of the discussion in the L2 literature has focused on portfolios as a program-level assessment tool, and has also been largely oriented to ESL contexts, namely North American universities (though there are exceptions; see Howrey, 2007; Mineishi, 2002; Shimo, 2003). This paper, therefore, examines the potential uses of portfolios as an instructional tool in an EFL context: university-level English writing courses in Japan. I will first outline how portfolios came to be used in writing instruction, as well as the common features of portfolio approaches. Then I will provide an example of how portfolios can be implemented in a single writing course.

2. Portfolios in Composition

A portfolio is essentially a collection of work assembled over time that

demonstrates a person's strengths and abilities, usually in a particular field. It may be put together for a specific objective, such as to apply for a job or educational program, or it may be gradually added to over the course of a career and used for a variety of purposes. Long before portfolios were introduced into composition, they were well known in certain professional and educational fields, especially those related to graphic arts and design. More recently, portfolios have been used for professional development in many different areas, primarily because they allow for a more in-depth presentation of skills and qualifications (as compared, for example, to a resume), but also because they can be used to promote reflection on one's accomplishments. For this last reason, portfolios have been particularly effective in teacher training programs (Hamp-Lyons, 2006).

Portfolios came into composition as part of a more general concern with the validity of large-scale tests used to assess students' writing abilities. According to Hyland (2002), this concern led first to the development of essay tests which gave test-takers one or more topic prompts to write about within a specified time limit, and which were scored holistically. Questions of validity remained, however, as teachers and test developers realized that a single essay, written under time constraints with little or no choice of topic on the part of the writer, did not adequately represent the way writing was commonly taught; nor did it represent the way most writers actually composed (Belanoff & Dickson, 1991; Hamp-Lyons, 1991). Consequently, portfolio-based assessments were advocated as an alternative to "one-shot" essay exams because they provided a systematic means of evaluating a more authentic writing sample: a greater number and variety of texts, some or all of which have been produced under more realistic conditions. Moreover, portfolio-based assessments do not in themselves presume any particular scoring method (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998), and can be flexibly adapted to varying program and course goals. Thus, portfolios have in some cases replaced the more traditional essay exam, and in other cases acted as a supplementary avenue whereby a writer can appeal negative exam results.

3. Principles of Portfolio-based Courses

Advocates of portfolios in writing instruction (for example, Hamp-Lyons, 2006) tend to note three underlying principles that guide their implementation in courses and programs: collection, selection, and reflection. How, and to what extent, these principles are put into practice will, of course, vary according to the educational context, student needs, course goals, and other factors. Therefore, they are perhaps best viewed as ideals towards which instructors can strive as they adapt portfolios to their own pedagogical circumstances.

3.1. Collection

A portfolio is a collection of work produced over time and assembled for a specific purpose (such as evaluation at the end of a course or program). It may simply be all

the writing produced by a student during a single course or academic year, or it may involve larger time frames, more than one course, and more selective samplings of work. Ideally, however, the portfolio is a subset of a larger collection of writing (Yancey, 1992; as cited in Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). That is, it represents only a portion of the writer's entire body of work. On a practical level, this means that writers have to save all of their written work for possible inclusion at some later date. No longer are they able to submit assignments and then forget about them once they have received a grade. Rather, with a portfolio system, writers are required to hang onto their writing and so are encouraged to feel a greater sense of ownership and accomplishment.

3.2. Selection

The contents of the portfolio are determined through a process of selection, which in turn reflects the specific purpose and pedagogical context of the portfolio. A portfolio submitted for evaluation at the end of a course will likely be structured to reflect the assignments, written genres, and other activities of the course. More importantly, portfolio contents also reflect the value that the course places on different aspects of writing. Thus, if a course places a high value on revision, this can be reflected in the portfolio by having students include rough drafts of their writing and explicitly note changes that they have made. Ideally, the writers themselves will have a degree of choice in the selection of portfolio items, although this choice will likely need to be constrained in some way. For instance, a course that includes assignments in several rhetorical modes (comparison/contrast, cause and effect, and so on) can require students to choose one essay from each mode for inclusion in a final portfolio.

3.3. Reflection

The principle of reflection involves students looking back at what they have written and thinking about what it means to their learning and development as writers. It is usually assumed that simply requiring students to save their work and assemble it into a presentable form will engender reflection, especially insofar as students are given freedom to choose the contents of the portfolio. Many proponents, however, suggest having students make their reflection more explicit through the inclusion of pieces of writing in which they evaluate their own progress and explain the contents of their portfolio. One way to do this is through ongoing reflective assignments which students complete as a course is in progress. These could be simple checklists or self-evaluation forms which students fill out by examining their writing for specific features (Howrey, 2007). More complex reflective assignments include cover sheets (Goldstein, 2005) and student-teacher memos (Sommers, 1988), in which students are asked to articulate their main ideas, goals, and intended audience, as well as those aspects of their writing that they would most like feedback on.

Besides ongoing reflection, which usually focuses on individual items within a portfolio, many proponents of portfolios further suggest having writers complete a

reflective self-evaluation of the portfolio as a whole. The specific form of this self-evaluation can vary, but it is typically short compared to the other pieces in the portfolio. White (2005) notes that many L1 writing programs which use portfolios for assessment in the United States require a one- or two-page reflective cover letter. He suggests that the cover letter helps not only to promote student reflection, but also to make the grading of portfolios more efficient. This is because cover letter assignments typically require students to describe the contents of their portfolios as a coherent whole and tie those contents to course goals and program standards. When grading portfolios, teachers should thus be able to focus mainly on the cover letter while skimming and selectively reading the other items (which have likely already been read and commented on, perhaps by the same teacher who is grading the portfolio).

3.4. Potential Benefits

Given these three principles, advocates of portfolio-based approaches note a number of potential benefits (summarized in Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998, and Hyland, 2002). First, portfolios integrate assessment more closely with classroom instruction. Evaluation of students' writing is "developmental, continuous, comprehensive and fairer…re presenting writing progress over time, genres and different conditions" (Hyland, 2002, p. 139). In this integrative context, the instrument of assessment (the portfolio itself) is more meaningful to students beyond the grade or numerical score that they receive because it is a record of their achievements and progress. Portfolios encourage teachers and students to see writing assignments as part of a coherent and interrelated whole, rather than a series of disconnected exercises, each of which is submitted for a grade and then forgotten about. Writing assignments which build on and complement one another during a course can be incorporated into the portfolio so as to provide a more complex portrait of students' development as writers.

Portfolios also help to make the goals of process-oriented writing instruction tangible. All too often, writing courses make use of process activities (drafting, feedback, revision, collaboration, and so on) while still evaluating students based on their final products. With a portfolio system, teachers can have students gather some or all of the material related to each piece of writing and present it for evaluation, including rough drafts, commentary from peers and/or the teacher, copies of outside sources used in the writing, annotated bibliographies-anything relevant to the course or program. Thus, students are held accountable for their processes as well as their products, which in turn discourages a "survivalist mentality" of just completing the minimum requirements for each writing assignment (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998, p. 247). Moreover, because grading is usually delayed until the end of the course, feedback on students' writing can be formative. Teachers are largely freed from the need to provide summative comments that explain their grades, and can focus on giving constructive feedback to help students improve their writing without worrying about

discouraging them with low marks.

Finally, portfolios are reflective and flexible. As noted earlier, the very act of putting together a portfolio usually requires a certain amount of reflection on the part of the student. However, when portfolios require explicit reflection (for example, through a cover letter), they become a powerful means of encouraging students to critically examine their own writing and progress, and thus become more responsible and independent writers. Furthermore, portfolios do not presume a certain type of writing course, proficiency level, or student. Teachers can flexibly adapt criteria for selecting and evaluating portfolio contents based on the particular goals of the course or program. More importantly, feedback and evaluation can be tailored to those aspects of writing that the teacher wishes to emphasize.

3.5. Potential Limitations

Of course, portfolios involve potential limitations as well, and these need to be carefully considered before teachers adopt a portfolio system in their own courses and programs. First, portfolios can produce a large and seemingly unmanageable amount of work for teachers at one time. For example, a course that requires students to submit all of their written work in a portfolio at the end of the term for evaluation can leave the instructor with an enormous mass of material to wade through and grade. Even when portfolios are read and assessed by a team of teachers, they are by their very nature more time-consuming than a single essay or paper. Portfolios can be conceptually unwieldy as well. They usually include different kinds of writing, and their contents may vary considerably depending on how much freedom students have in the selection of contents. Thus, it may be difficult to reliably grade a set of portfolios according to the same criteria or rubric, a problem which is especially pertinent when portfolios are used at the program-level to assess students' work in more than one course. Finally, because portfolios typically include writing produced over a period of time, authenticity becomes an issue. That is, teachers may question whether the work in the portfolio can rightfully be called the students' own work if they have had time to receive outside help with their writing.

How teachers deal with these potential drawbacks will naturally depend on the pedagogical context in which they are working. However, some general suggestions can be made. Issues of workload and scoring reliability can be addressed in several ways. First, students need to be given explicit directions for selecting the contents of their portfolios, and most (or all) of the writing samples should be papers and assignments that have already received some kind of feedback from an instructor. This is quite easy when portfolios are used in a single course, but it can also be accomplished at the program level by, for example, designating the courses from which writing samples may be chosen, and by requiring that students submit drafts that contain evidence of being read and evaluated by a teacher. Besides explicit selection criteria, teachers also need to make explicit to students their criteria for grading the

portfolio. This includes providing students with a copy of the rating scale to be used well in advance of the submission deadline for the portfolio and explaining how assessment of the portfolio is linked to course goals. Finally, teachers can have students include a piece of writing (such as the cover letter referred to by White, 2005) in which they enumerate the items in the portfolio, give reasons for any choices they have made and generally reflect on their writing progress. Besides being a powerful and theoretically sound pedagogical tool, a reflective assignment, if it is carefully implemented, should also aid teachers in reading portfolio contents selectively and efficiently without having to re-read and re-evaluate every paper.

The final potential drawback mentioned above, authenticity, is an issue that is not unique to portfolio-based classes and assessments, but one which may come up in any context in which written work is completed outside of class. Short of having students do all of their assignments in class, there is no reasonable mechanism for guaranteeing that students will do all of their own work. However, there are practical ways in which teachers can check on authenticity, such as by having students do regular in-class writing (both formal and informal), and by having students turn in all drafts of each writing assignment. These solutions as well are not unique to portfolio-based writing courses, but the portfolio provides a means of easily comparing students' work over several drafts and assignments. Thus, if a student has plagiarized or otherwise received substantial assistance with a piece of writing, it will likely be clear to the instructor merely by comparing drafts and by checking to see if the student has reasonably accounted for the apparent difference in writing quality in the reflective assignment. Perhaps more important, however, is the fact that students know that their work will be scrutinized in this manner and so are less likely to plagiarize.

4. An Example of a Portfolio-based Writing Course

I recently adapted one of the university writing courses that I regularly teach to a portfolio format. This course was the third in a sequence of four and was primarily taken by third-year students. Although there were no prerequisites for the course, many of those who enrolled had taken English composition courses previously, so the course could be classified as "high intermediate" or "low advanced" relative to the other courses in the sequence. The overall goals of the course were to

- Improve students' ability to write essays and research papers;
- Develop students' ability to use sources in their writing;
- Develop students' awareness and use of writing process, especially revision.

In order to realize these goals, I had students complete three major assignments in this order: an essay, an annotated bibliography, and a research paper. These assignments were intended to build on one another. That is, students were encouraged to write about the same topic for each assignment but were allowed to change their topic along the way if they were encountering difficulties with it (and a number of

students did find that the topic of their initial essay was not suitable for the final research paper assignment). The ultimate aim of this sequence of assignments was to get students to write a research paper in which they presented a specific thesis and supported it with information from outside sources.

In addition to the three major assignments, students also completed two timed in-class essays, one at the beginning of the course and one at midterm, based on topics adapted from those used by Sasaki (2004). The purpose of these in-class essays was to give students further practice organizing and writing essays in an exam setting (as many of them planned to eventually take standardized English tests which included a writing component), and also to provide a check on the writing that they completed outside of class. The remaining activities and assignments of the course were designed to support the completion of the writing assignments. These included exercises to introduce and refine students' understanding of principles of essay organization (thesis statement, body paragraph, and so forth), revision, and, for the research paper, citation conventions. A good deal of time was also spent on invention exercises, and self- and peer-review activities.

Using the principles of portfolio-based writing instruction described above, I adapted this course as follows.

4.1. Collection

Students were introduced to the portfolio approach of the course on the first day of class: A brief description of the final portfolio that would be due at the end of the course was included in the course syllabus, along with the following list of required contents:

1. Cover letter;
2. Essay written in class and later revised;
3. Essay written and revised as homework;
4. Annotated bibliography;
5. Research paper.

Students were also told to keep all related work as they completed each of these assignments. Logistically, this was quite easy as the course was conducted in a computer lab. Not only were students able to keep their own work in electronic form (for example, a disc or flash drive), but self- and peer-review sheets could usually be completed and saved electronically as well. Later in the course, but well in advance of the last class meeting, students were given a more detailed set of guidelines which included the evaluation rubric that I would use to grade their portfolios (see Appendix A and B).

4.2. Selection

Because the course centered around three major writing assignments, each of which was substantially different from the others, it was not practical to give students a great deal of freedom in selecting portfolio contents. That is, the three major

assignments were necessarily required for all portfolios. However, students did have some choices to make as they assembled their work, and these choices were related to the course's emphasis on revision. First, students had to choose one of the two essays written in class to revise outside of class, and then include both drafts in their portfolios (and also explain their choice and their revisions in the cover letter). Second, students also had to decide which materials (if any) to include to demonstrate their writing processes regarding the major writing assignments. For example, while students were required to include two drafts of the homework essay and research paper, they could further include any other work that they did to write and revise those pieces (outlines, extra drafts, and so forth) if they felt that that work was important in helping them to complete the final draft.

4.3. Reflection

The primary means of encouraging reflection in this course was a cover letter assignment similar to that advocated by White (2005). I had students follow a business letter format, making the cover letter similar to one that might be submitted as part of a job application. The specific purpose of the cover letter was, first, to get students to think about the writing they had done in the course and to concisely articulate both their specific processes in writing each assignment (especially the essays and the research paper) as well as their overall progress as writers. Second, the cover letter served as an organizer of the whole portfolio by enumerating the items included and listing the materials submitted in conjunction with each assignment. Because the students in the course were unfamiliar with this type of assignment, I gave them very specific guidelines for completing it, including a cover letter exemplar with language cues that students could use by plugging in details to create their own cover letters.

Besides the cover letter, I had students complete two ongoing reflective assignments in the form of cover sheets (Goldstein, 2005). After completing a first draft of the homework essay and the research paper, students wrote a cover sheet, usually one paragraph long, in which they responded to several questions about the purpose, main idea, and intended audience of their draft, as well as issues that they wanted to receive feedback about. Cover sheets were then used by me as I read drafts and made comments, and also by other students as they completed a peer review tasks.

4.4. Assessment

Perhaps the biggest change that had to be made to adapt the course to a portfolio format was in the method of assessment. Normally I would assess students' writing as assignments are completed using rubrics tailored to each assignment. However, an important principle of portfolio-based teaching which I wanted to follow was that of delaying the scoring of students' writing until the end of the course (that is, after portfolios have been submitted). Thus, in order to keep the workload manageable, I wanted to develop a scoring method that would help me to assess each portfolio as a whole without having to assign a separate score to each piece of writing. To this end,

I created an analytic scoring rubric which divided the assessment into four categories: content, organization, process, and language and mechanics (see Appendix B). The criteria for each category included assessment points that applied to all of the writing in the portfolio, as well as those which applied only to specific writing assignments. For example, the elements of essay organization (introduction, thesis statement, body paragraphs, topic sentences, and so forth) only applied to the essays and research paper, and so this is reflected in the criteria for organization.

It should be pointed out that this assessment rubric reflects both my own preference for analytic assessments as well as the particular aspects of writing that were emphasized in the course. As has been noted earlier, a portfolio-based course does not necessitate any particular assessment format, and portfolios can easily be adapted to other formats (see Hyland, 2002, p. 143 for an example). Also, my assessment rubric weights content and organization more heavily and includes a separate category for process because these were integral to the goals of the course. Naturally, different categories, weightings and criteria can be used depending on the nature of the particular course.

4.5. Practical Issues

As this was the first time to adopt a portfolio approach in this course, several practical issues arose during its implementation. First, a number of students failed to include all of the required support material (in some cases even omitting first drafts of some assignments) despite turning in otherwise complete portfolios. This indicates that not everyone completely understood the implications of the directive to "keep all work" and that this needed to be emphasized more explicitly at the beginning of the course. Second, many students did not seem to grasp the purpose of the cover letter beyond its function as a kind of table of contents for the portfolio. In fact, several students followed the exemplar a little too closely and ended up referring to contents that were not actually included in their own portfolios (but were mentioned in the exemplar as examples of what could be included). Again, the purpose of the cover letter needed to be explained more carefully, the exemplar needed to be examined in more detail during class time, and the cover letter assignment needed to be introduced earlier in the course so that students had more time to process it. Finally, grading stu dents' portfolios did require a substantial effort at the end of the term. I estimate that in most cases it took me between 45 and 60 minutes to read a portfolio, write comments, and determine a score, which was roughly twice the time that I would expect to spend reading and scoring a final writing assignment.

5. Conclusion

As I hope the above example illustrates, there are many practical questions that must be considered and addressed in order to successfully manage a portfolio-based writing course for EFL students. However, these issues, while revealing some of the

problems that may arise, also underscore the point that a portfolio is not merely a container into which writing assignments are placed at the end of a course. Rather, portfolios represent a systematic approach to teaching writing that requires careful and explicit implementation from the very beginning of the course. By keeping the theoretical principles in mind, by establishing clear goals and requirements, and by re-iterating these requirements as the course is in progress, the inevitable problems can be effectively addressed, and the portfolio can become a meaningful achievement for student writers.

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Appendix A
Portfolio Guidelines

Introduction

A portfolio is a collection of work that you make so that you can show your skills and abilities. This course uses a portfolio system, which means that you will not receive any grades or scores on your writing during the course. Instead, you will collect your writing assignments at the end of the course and put it together as a portfolio to submit for grading. This means that you will be able to revise your writing as many times as you want during the course, and you will have more opportunities to receive feedback on your writing as you revise. Also, you will be able to choose some of the writing pieces that you include in your portfolio, so you will be able to decide which pieces best show off your English writing skills.

Contents

Checklist

- ☐ Cover letter;
- ☐ An essay written in class and later revised;
- ☐ An essay written as homework;
- ☐ An annotated bibliography;
- ☐ A research paper;

Details and Supporting Materials

1. Cover letter: This is a concise introduction to your portfolio which describes the each of the contents and also tells how each piece of writing demonstrates your work and learning in the course.
2. An essay written in class and later revised: Choose one of the in-class essays that you wrote and revise it. Include the original essay and your revision in your portfolio. In your cover letter, explain why you chose the essay.
3. An essay written as homework: Revise the essay that you wrote at the beginning of the course. Include all drafts of the essay in your portfolio and at least one peer review sheet. In your cover letter, explain what you did to revise the essay and why.
4. An annotated bibliography: This should include the bibliographic information (author, title, etc.) of all the sources used in your research paper and can also include any other sources which you read that helped you. Each source should also have a brief summary.
5. A research paper: Include all drafts of your final research paper and least one peer review sheet. In your cover letter, explain what you did to revise the paper and why.

Due Date

The final class meeting is Wednesday, July 23. Your portfolio must be completed and submitted one week after this, on Wednesday, July 30, 12 pm. Late submissions will result in a lower final grade or failure to earn credit.

Format

Portfolios can be assembled and submitted electronically (on a disk or as a zip file emailed to the instructor) or as a hard copy (in a folder or binder). In either case, the portfolio must be neatly and clearly organized so that all the contents are accessible and easy to locate. Disks, folders, binders, etc., should be clearly labeled with your name and "English Writing III Portfolio" and can be placed in the box next to the instructor's office door.

Appendix B
Assessment Rubric

Category	Points	Criteria	Score
Content	30	• The portfolio contains final drafts of all of the required pieces of writing • Cover letter concisely introduces all of the contents of the portfolio and relates them to learning during the course • Essays and research paper each have a clear topic, main idea and purpose • Essays and research paper support the main idea with relevant details, examples, logical arguments, and (for the research paper) information from outside sources • Annotated bibliography has at least 3 sources, including bibliographic information and a concise summary of each source	
Organization	30	• The portfolio is clearly organized so that all contents are accessible and easy to locate • Cover letter is organized to describe each of the items in the portfolio in order • Essays and research paper are each clearly organized into an introduction, body, and conclusion; outside sources are properly cited in the text and at the end (for the research paper) • Annotated bibliography has clearly organized summaries	
Process	20	• Portfolio shows evidence of the writer's use of process, especially revision and feedback, by including all drafts of essays and research paper, and peer review sheets • Any other materials that were used to write any of the assignments (outlines, notes, etc.) can also be included	
Language and Mechanics	20	In all pieces of writing • Meaning is clear; there are few major errors • Sentences use a variety of structures and words • Spelling and punctuation are accurate • Vocabulary words are used appropriately and grammatically For the annotated bibliography and research paper • Outside sources are properly cited and bibliographic information is properly presented	
			Total