Growing Together: Curricular and Professional Development through Collaborative Portfolio Assessment

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Abstract

We want to present two examples of a simple but radical idea: that an important way to connect curriculum, professional development, and assessment is for teachers to regularly sit down together and collaboratively assess their students' work. Our examples are from England, which along with Australia and New Zealand has been developing this idea into the basis of its national assessment system, and from Kentucky, which has been developing this idea as part of its fundamental restructuring of education. Here is how it works, first in England then in Kentucky.

Disciplines
Curriculum and Instruction | Curriculum and Social Inquiry

Comments
characterized by departmental division of the disciplines, at least for the present, teacher education programs should keep a strand of disciplinary study in preservice teacher preparation. However, if preservice teachers engage in interdisciplinary study during their university teacher training, they are less likely to have to unlearn the biases of the rigid disciplinary structure of the high school. Hopefully, the model of integrated teaching and learning exhibited by their teacher educators and classroom teachers engaged in interdisciplinary studies, as well as the experience of working with preservice colleagues with whom they break tradition and cross disciplinary boundaries, will provide preservice teachers with the confidence and courage to launch into truly integrated teaching and learning.

Works Cited

Growing Together: Curricular and Professional Development through Collaborative Portfolio Assessment

by David R. Russell, Iowa State University; Starr Lewis, Kentucky Department of Education; and Anella Riggs, Fayette County Schools, Kentucky

We want to present two examples of a simple but radical idea: that an important way to connect curriculum, professional development, and assessment is for teachers to regularly sit down together and collaboratively assess their students’ work. Our examples are from England, which along with Australia and New Zealand has been developing this idea into the basis of its national assessment system, and from Kentucky, which has been developing this idea as part of its fundamental restructuring of education. Here is how it works, first in England then in Kentucky.

Collaborative Portfolio Assessment in England

England has a radically different mass assessment system than that of the United States. It depends not on machine-scored multiple-choice tests (there are virtually none), but on the experience and professional judgment of teachers collaboratively assessing individual student performance. Students are assessed on what they have been taught in specific courses, on their performance in a curriculum, rather than on their academic ability or general knowledge, which multiple-choice tests are assumed to measure (Resnick & Resnick, 1992). In order to measure performance, assessment in England has been moving for more than two decades (amid much controversy) toward a system based on teachers collaboratively grading portfolios of student work prepared during their courses. Thus assessment is tied directly to the curriculum so that students, teachers, and parents can share identified goals and work toward them together.

Secondary school in England is divided into two, two-year sets of courses: General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) (roughly ages 15 and 16) and the “A-levels” (roughly ages 17 and 18) where the students take fewer and more specialized courses. But both GCSE and A-levels are “high-stakes” examinations that give students immediate admission into higher levels of education. During most of these two-year courses, students complete projects that go into their individual portfolios, along with one or two conventional timed essay examinations on a common task. In English language and literature, the portfolios must include several genres of writing (creative, informational, analytic, etc.) and videotapes of oral presentations. (There are portfolios in most other content areas as well, graded by teachers in those areas.)

Students typically choose their own topics for their portfolio projects, with the advice and approval of their teachers. Teachers help students select projects that will challenge them to move toward the goals of the course and meet the assessment criteria, while at the same time developing their own interests. This both allows for diversity and increases individual motivation. It has also moved pedagogy toward a small-group and individual project-oriented approach and away from lecture and textbook-dependent memorization (textbooks and lectures are comparatively rare in language and literature classes).

How then are the student portfolios assessed? How are hundreds of thousands of individual portfolios judged in such a way that students, parents, institutions of higher educa-
tion, and the society at large accept those judgments as objective assessments of the performance of individual students? The key to the English assessment system is that it is collaborative. Just as the performances of athletes and artists are assessed by several raters to avoid the subjectivity of individual judgment, so each student performance is assessed by several teachers. But unlike athletic or artistic performances, the judgments of individual teachers or groups of teachers are systematically checked at several further levels against the judgments of their peers in a process called "moderation" or "audit."

The first step is to arrive at a consensus on assessment criteria. The teachers of each two-year course in each school choose from among themselves a teacher examiner to supervise the school's assessment and communicate with a national, private, nonprofit examination board. The examination board sends the teachers sample papers and portfolios of differing quality benchmarks (or training portfolios, as they are called in Kentucky). The teachers in the school each grade the sample portfolios, then meet together to discuss their grades and arrive at a consensus school grade on each sample.

Next the teacher examiner from each school (and any other teachers who wish to) meets with a district representative of the examining board called a moderator, a teacher who has released time to coordinate the district's assessment in English. At this district-level meeting, the teachers again discuss the sample portfolios and compare their school grades with those of other schools. In this way, the assessment criteria are developed and shared among teachers. There is general agreement on what students should be able to do after finishing a course and on what it means to successfully demonstrate that they can do it. This consensus guides curriculum and teaching.

After the students have completed their portfolios, each teacher grades the portfolios from her own classes (teachers generally have the same students for two years). When all the teachers in a school who teach the course have finished grading their own students' portfolios, they meet again in a school moderation meeting. The aim of the meeting is to arrive at a consensus on all the portfolio grades from that course in that school by putting all the students' portfolios in rank order. One method is to sort all the portfolios into boxes by grades the students received from their individual teachers. Two teachers together look at one box (the Bs for instance) and rank order the portfolios. Then the two teachers discuss the borderline cases (the "splitters") with the teachers looking at the boxes of portfolios with grades just above and just below (the As and Cs). They collaboratively decide whether the top ones in each box should go up to the next grade or the lower ones should go down to the next grade. When disagreements arise, all of the teachers discuss the portfolio and arrive at consensus. The process takes from two to four days, depending on the number of portfolios and the experience of the teachers. (Substitute teachers are hired to provide the necessary time.) This general process is then repeated at the district, regional, and national levels, although only a sample of the portfolios go to the next level (usually those on the borderline). Students receive the grade that teachers collectively assign through moderation, not the individual teacher's grade.

The moderation meetings, many teachers claim, are the most valuable aspect of the assessment system, for teachers share their values and their practice with each other. They can compare assignments, teaching strategies, and grading criteria with those of their colleagues and discuss them openly and frankly. They learn in a very direct way which assignments work well and which do not. And this shared knowledge shapes teachers' curricular planning for the next year.

**Collaborative Portfolio Assessment in Kentucky**

Unlike England's long involvement with portfolio assessment, Kentucky's writing portfolio assessment is relatively new. Kentucky teachers are now in their fifth year of compiling writing portfolios with the state's fourth-, eighth-, and twelfth-grade students. Also unlike England, this new assessment represents a huge departure from standardized multiple-choice tests. The Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990, perhaps the most comprehensive state education reform of the last 75 years, required a performance-based assessment system for Kentucky students. In one year, the state moved from an assessment system that had never required any writing to an assessment that is almost totally writing based.

While England's assessment is designed primarily to measure the performance of individual students for the purpose of admission to further education, Kentucky's assessment is designed to measure the performance of schools for the purpose of raising the quality and consistency of education across schools in the state. Because all portions of the state assessment that are included in a school's accountability scores involve writing, schools are focusing on professional development to foster writing improvement as never before, and Kentucky students are writing more than they ever have in the past.

This movement to more and broader writing experiences and more attention to writing instruction for Kentucky students also represents a huge departure for the state's teachers. As in England, the teacher-centered assessment has fostered student-centered curriculum and teaching, a departure from language arts and literature classes based on textbook and lecture. In fact, one of the reasons for moving to a performance-based assessment was to move instruction away from predominantly large-group lecture classes and to broaden the learning experiences of
Kentucky students across the state. The group that designed the Kentucky writing portfolio, the Writing Advisory Committee (WAC), had this broadening of student writing experience foremost in mind when they set up the content requirements for the portfolio. This group, made up predominantly of teachers from all regions of the state, felt that the typical writing experience of Kentucky students was rather limited and focused almost entirely on writing essays, reports, or research papers. To move writing instruction toward the stated goal of writing for different audiences and purposes and in different forms, WAC included requirements for expressive-personal, aesthetic, transactive (functional documents), and reflective writing in each accountability grade portfolio. In the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades, all students produce a personal narrative, a fiction piece, and pieces targeted to persuade, to solve a problem, to explain a process, and so forth. Also important is that one of the six pieces required at each grade level is a letter to the reviewer, in which the students reflect on their growth as writers.

Another goal illustrated by the portfolio requirements is the inclusion of writing from content areas other than English/language arts. Student portfolios in grades 4 and 8 must include at least one piece of writing from another content area, while those in grade 12 must include at least two.

Besides designing the content requirements for the portfolio, WAC members also designed a scoring guide and selected benchmark papers and training portfolios for each grade level. The benchmarks for each grade level include four single papers which illustrate the four performance levels on the scoring guide: novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished (N, A, P, D). In addition to the benchmark papers, WAC has also selected training portfolios that include exemplar and high-end portfolios. The exemplar portfolios demonstrate solid performance at each performance level, and the high ends help teachers make tough calls when confronted with a "splitter."

As in England, these benchmark papers and training portfolios are used in training sessions designed by WAC. All teachers who score portfolios must attend a scoring training session. The statewide training model is a tiered structure beginning with WAC. WAC members train district-level teacher representatives called cluster leaders, who then train school-level scorers. At these training sessions, teachers work to achieve consistency in scoring, but at the same time they begin the process of sharing and collaboration that is central to faculty development.

At the school level, scoring teams have several scoring options that include a mix of independent and collaborative scoring. One option, which we will describe in more detail below, is quite similar to England’s method. It involves bringing in substitutes for several days to release scorers. Because the heart of professional development through portfolio scoring lies in teachers discussing students’ work together, schools may use professional development funds for stipends or substitutes only if scorers have the opportunity to discuss the patterns they find in student portfolios. During this discussion, scorers identify school strengths and needs as evidenced in their own students’ work. Members of the scoring teams also discuss the success or failure of particular assignments and can pass that information on to the rest of the school’s faculty.

In many cases, schools have gone beyond the scoring sessions and have held portfolio analysis sessions that include not just the scoring team for the particular grade level who worked with students to finalize their portfolios (as in England) or all English/language arts teachers regardless of grade level, but also teachers from across the curriculum (and administrators as well). Including the entire faculty can be critical, considering that the portfolio assessment is designed to measure the growth of schoolwide writing programs. Although the writing assessment takes place at grades 4, 8, and 12, the accountability scores affect the entire school. Writing improves most when the entire school makes it a priority. During these sessions, all teachers participate in a brief scoring training to help them understand the assessment criteria on the scoring guide so that they can address them during discussions and most importantly later in their instruction. The faculty members then read and discuss the patterns of strengths and needs evidenced in their own students’ writing. By looking at their students’ products, the faculty are able to see firsthand which assignments worked well and which ones were less successful. They are also able to pinpoint specific professional development needs to help them plan more effective professional development opportunities. Faculty members typically report that these sessions provide some of the most powerful professional development they have ever experienced. They also report that the sessions underscore the whole-school nature of writing, assessment, and accountability.

Kentucky is still evolving a system for systematically checking for consistency in writing portfolio scores at higher levels, what is called “moderation” in England. Kentucky’s “moderation” or “audit” system is new (at this time, only one official audit has been conducted). Schools were identi-
Assessment Means to Teachers

To see the potential for connecting curriculum and professional development through portfolio assessment, we have to look at the ways teachers connect with each other. In Fayette County, Kentucky, a large district with 33,188 students, portfolios are first scored at the school level. This process varies from school to school because, under KERA (Kentucky Education Reform Act), schools have greater authority to make decisions such as these.

Most schools have scoring teams, certain teachers who have been designated as writing portfolio scorers and who have participated in the required training session. For example, at the middle and high schools, the teams are usually composed of language arts teachers. The cluster leader organizes teachers into scoring teams, mixing experienced and new scorers at each table and designating a table leader, preferably a teacher who has a proven record of scoring consistency.

Effective scoring sessions begin with reviewing the Kentucky Writing Assessment Holistic Scoring Guide and rereading the benchmark papers and training portfolios from each accountability grade, which exemplify the qualities of each criterion on the scoring guide: novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished (N, A, P, D). The cluster leader models the training received from regional training sessions in an effort to assure scoring consistency across the state. Teachers describe this process as serious and businesslike, yet conducive to sharing ideas and raising questions.

Scorers use the double-blind scoring process. Essentially, a pile of portfolios is placed at the center of each table. Each teacher reads the pieces in a portfolio and assesses it holistically according to the language of the scoring guide, keeping in mind the benchmark papers and training portfolios. Once a teacher chooses a score for a portfolio, the score (N, A, P, D) is recorded on a sticky note, placed on the back of the portfolio, and the portfolio is passed on. Another teacher reads the same portfolio and assigns it a score, without knowing the first score. If the two scores match, the portfolio is placed in a designated spot, such as under the second scorer's chair. If the two scores do not match, the table leader facilitates a discussion between the two teachers who read the portfolio, asking them to use the language of the guide with the ultimate goal of determining an accurate score for the portfolio. In addition, a random sample of the portfolios is read by table leaders to check for consistency. Even though two raters' scores match, those two raters might be scoring portfolios much higher or lower than other pairs of raters, and there is again need for discussion.

It is this roundtable-type dialogue that many teachers cite as the source of the best professional development they have during the school year. Teachers readily admit that this method of scoring is intense and time consuming, but the benefits of discussing critical issues of instruction and assessment make it worth the effort. During the five years of portfolio assessment in Kentucky, teachers' understanding of instruction and assessment has evolved. Teachers report now that, looking back, they often did not see the potential for broadening student writing experiences to include the kinds of real-world writing the portfolio requires, as well as the traditional academic writing that they were used to assigning. The curriculum was expanded, as were the instructional possibilities.

How, then, has this shift in instruction taken place? Though the Kentucky Writing Program has trained personnel who have worked to affect writing instruction, teachers know that their paradigm shift barely started with learning the components of the scoring guide and studying the benchmarks. What has been much more meaningful for classroom teachers has been collaboratively reading, discussing, and assessing their students' writings and, therefore, discovering options for analyzing and revising their own assignments. This assessment-instruction link is strong.
Teachers report that reading a portfolio, finding a piece that really works (for example a personal narrative), and talking with colleagues about why the piece works fine-tunes their understanding of a personal narrative to their students. Also, grading student work can have a great deal of subjectivity, but by scoring portfolios collaboratively, teachers can develop greater effectiveness in instruction and fairness in assessment.

Teachers also find that by discussing papers with one another in terms of the scoring guide, the elements of effective writing become better defined in their own minds and, subsequently, better delineated in their instruction. One teacher reported that the first time she participated in a scoring session of this type was the first time she truly saw the connection between audience and voice in student writing. Voice, often termed as that intangible element that just seems to happen with some writers, is often where the language of the scoring guide is not easily conveyed to students. Yet teachers see more clearly now, after talking about why certain pieces really work, that real communication and genuine connection with the intended audience improve that element of voice in writing. When teachers read a portfolio entry that embodies a specific element on the scoring guide, such as strong awareness of audience, and talk about how that piece works, they are also better able to ask their own students the right questions in conferences that can result in more effective pieces of writing.

Interestingly enough, this scoring process reaffirms for some teachers the attitudes about writing that they have developed over the years. At the high school level, where collaboration is still somewhat of an anomaly, teachers historically have only shared ideas with the person next door or with a friend who teaches the same grade level; even rarer have been the discussions about the connection between assessment and instruction. It is easy for high school teachers to close their doors and operate in isolation. So, for many, this portfolio scoring format has reassured them of their own classroom practices. Furthermore, teachers report that they have gained momentum from scoring sessions. They have become energized once again and are excited about trying new ideas with their students and working to help their students’ writing improve, to move toward a score of proficient or even distinguished.

Another benefit that teachers find inherent in the roundtable scoring process is learning the pitfalls of scoring portfolios too high. Because teachers first score their own students’ pieces, they know how arduously some students have worked on the writing and how much they have improved since September. By working from the wider perspective of the scoring guide as interpreted collaboratively, teachers can build on the intimate connection they have with individual students to give them more objective and useful feedback on their writing development. Teachers not only achieve the objectivity necessary in this type of large-scale assessment, but ultimately they also achieve fairer and more meaningful assessment of their own students.

Growing Together: Taking the First Step

As with any change in assessment, controversy is involved. And both England and Kentucky have had their share. But an essential question should underlie all the controversy: Does the assessment system help teachers improve curriculum and instruction?

In the last decade, several other groups in the United States have been working toward performance assessment that is tied to the curriculum and assessed collaboratively by teachers: the New Standards Project, the College Board Pacesetter Project, and several state assessment projects. But these do not begin with the teachers in the individual schools sitting down and working together to share their expertise and collaboratively assess their students’ work. We think this collegial collaboration is an essential step. In the most fundamental way, it puts assessment into the hands of teachers and their professional judgment exercised in common. The experience of England and Kentucky shows that even in a decentralized mass education system, it is possible to have large-scale collaborative portfolio assessment that also encourages professional development. It requires teachers and administrators willing to assume responsibility for connecting a curriculum that teaches high-level skills to an assessment system that depends on teachers’ collective professional judgment.

Yet even without state or national organization of portfolio assessment, creative leadership in a school or district can meaningfully connect assessment to curriculum and teaching by the modest but radical step of getting teachers together twice a year to assess students’ work. A benchmarking session early in the year begins the dialogue and gets the staff thinking and talking about what is valuable in their students’ writing. A collaborative scoring session late in the year provides the most concrete way possible to think and talk about how to improve curriculum and instruction the next year. When teachers share their expertise, their values, their professional judgment, they have an unparalleled opportunity to grow together.
Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances

by Monica E. Taylor, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica

The literature is replete with reminders that many teachers all over the world (including those who teach the English language arts) believe that they are teaching classes which are too large and that this negatively affects teachers and students alike.

There appears to be international consensus that under "normal" circumstances large classes (40 and over) present four major challenges for the teacher:

1. They restrict the teacher's ability to provide individual attention and limit the participation of students.
2. They militate against efficient marking and general feedback to students.
3. They increase disciplinary problems.
4. They retard movement and creativity in seating arrangements.

This conclusion is supported by data from countries such as Indonesia, Jamaica, Nigeria, Japan, South Africa, and Mexico.

The challenges faced by students are of equal importance. While some students enjoy the larger pool with whom to socialize and study, as well as the relative anonymity afforded by the large group, many find large groups dysfunctional; noise, distractions, alienation, and loss of opportunity for participation being among the most prevalent problems. The task we face is how to best manage our human and material resources to eliminate or at least reduce the negative features of large or "too large" groups and at the same time harness the possibilities when "repackaging" (the strategy of combining groups of students to form large plenary groups which alternate with smaller work-group configurations) becomes expedient for any number of reasons common to most of us who operate with budgetary and other constraints.

I work in a national context where classes of 40 are perceived to be too large by teachers of English, but here classes of 60 are common in public (i.e., government-owned) elementary schools, high school English classes of 50 are not uncommon, and university-level "small groups" of 25 are the norm. Pursuing suggestions made by Chris Long (1987) and Bolton (1988), we attempted a repackaging experiment during the 1994-95 academic year.

Repackaging 1

In our department, I am a member of the team that teaches the university course titled Language: Exposition and Argument to 1,500 first-year students. Five full-time staff members are assisted by about 20 part-time tutors who direct small groups of approximately 25 students in weekly two-hour seminars. In preparation for these seminars, students attend one lecture each week conducted by one of the five full-time lecturers. Because no venue is large enough to accommodate all 1,500 students simultaneously and, further, to facilitate students' scheduling problems, each weekly lecture is repeated three times with some 300 students at each presentation. This first phase of repackaging has worked fairly well for several years and offers a great deal of flexibility. To enhance the efficacy of the lecture, which we know has inherent difficulties, attempts are now being made to make the sessions increasingly interactive so that opportunity to learn may be increased and student alienation reduced.

Repackaging 2

Last year the department experimented with repackaging my quota of students allocated for "small-group" work. Instead of meeting four groups of 25 students for two hours each week, they were repackaged into three groups—one of normal size, one of half the normal size, and one of about two and a half times the number in the normal group. The experience of working with these three groups has yielded some useful insights.

Organization of the Class

The large class is subdivided into groups of five, each group having a student-selected leader-recorder. Each class begins with a plenary session consisting of the tutor's instructions, clarification, and students' questions about the activities to be undertaken or other unresolved matters. Following the plenary session, students work at group level to complete the assigned tasks. Finally, groups share their activity reports.

Work Cited


Suggested Readings

