

# Portfolios and Process Writing: A Practical Approach

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## Introduction

A simple search of the Internet using the key words "language portfolios" and "portfolio assessment" shows how popular these concepts are in educational circles: the former produced about 150,000 mostly European-based hits and the latter about 250,000 mostly US-based hits. Many of these articles naturally link portfolios with personal skills like reflection. Many practitioners (see for example Santos' 1997 about Japanese students) would agree about the links but bemoan the lack of training and opportunity their students have had to develop such skills. The author's own teaching experiences in Japan, New Zealand, Central Europe and the UK also suggests that such problems are not limited to Asian teaching situations. For some this means that they consider a portfolio approach to be unworkable in their teaching situation. They find a gap between what they believe could be a helpful pedagogical approach and what their students actually do. This article aims to bridge that gap by showing how the positive benefits of portfolios and reflection can be integrated into a process writing course without causing a critical overload on the instructors' time resources. This will be done by describing their place in a university-level process writing course called Text Production (TP).

## Course Background

The TP course consists of 21 contact hours which are divided into 14 blocks of 1 1/2 hours and is taught on a weekly basis. The final teaching block comprises the interviews. The students are generally in the third semesters of their studies and there can be up to 30 students in each class. As part of the course requirements the students are expected to produce a typewritten report of about eight A4 pages (excluding bibliography and notes). The final grade is based on this dossier, homework grades, participation in class work, a writing journal and a portfolio which the students themselves select and discuss with the instructor in a final interview discussion.

In common with many ESL writing courses (see for example Flowerdew 1993 or Kay and Dudley-Evans 1998), students are familiarised with insights of the genre approach and given practice in producing different academic (Swales 1990) and professional genres (Bhatia 1993). In common with much process writing instruction, the course also emphasises methods which help the students to become aware of writing as a process (see for example White and Arndt 1991, Raimes 1992). In the TP course, these include practice in and direct teaching about generating and planning techniques such as brainstorming and concept mapping. Students are also given an article (Rea 2000) and short content-based inputs about writing as a process. These theoretical inputs are linked to the tape of a think-aloud protocol of a short text being written which the students listen to and then talk about.

Text reformulation (Cohen 1983, Allwright et al 1988) is used to encourage students to look at their own writing critically. In a first stage, the students work on set texts, including introductions and conclusions of dossiers from previous years, which are read, corrected for surface level errors and then rewritten. They do this first as individuals and then discuss the results as a whole group. Following this, the students read and rewrite different sections of each other's texts, using the insights they have gained from the class discussions. After that they go on to re-formulate their own work based on the insights of their colleagues (and the instructors) rather than just correct it for grammar and spelling mistakes. Reformulation obviously helps students to become aware of external readers and this is reinforced with video and text-based input (Littlewood 1994).

Journal writing and fastwrites are also integral parts of the course. In both activities the students can prepare for the final interview without being aware that they are doing so because both activities can by their very nature be very reflective. There are two compulsory fastwrites. Both take seven minutes and are on the topic "How I write ...". One is written in the first meeting and the other in the final professional writing workshop. These very often show the development of the students' writing skills. Some students use fastwrites in their writing journals too.

The writing journal is a kind of "personal diary" (cf Raimes 1992) where the students can write about their experiences and feelings

about writing in general and this course in particular. Students are told that it has two main purposes, namely to make students feel at ease writing in English and to give them the chance to express themselves. For these reasons, it does not have the relatively tight structure recommended for example by Nunan (1988) who suggests a number of questions which students should answer about their learning. This is because the diary aims to help the students overcome "writing anxiety", as well as to help them focus on their learning processes. It does this by modelling the type of writing students can do in the way the activity is introduced and in the fast writes. They are expected to spend about five to ten minutes a day (or 30-60 minutes a week) on this writing. The journal can be written by hand or with the computer. It is evaluated for quantity rather than quality. Because of the personal nature of some of the comments, the instructor only looks at the journal if the students request this or add it to their portfolios.

## **Portfolios**

What then are the portfolios and how do they fit in? The answer is that they provide a framework for the whole course. In the schedule they get at the start, students are told that they will prepare a portfolio of their best work during the semester which they will discuss with the instructor in a personal interview at the end of the semester. It should document their progress (as measured by their subjective feelings and the amount of effort they have put into the course); their achievement (as measured by the "objective" grades they have been given during the semester); and any other information they believe is relevant. In this way the course begins and ends with a portfolio focus.

The portfolio consists of six pieces of written work including a written self-evaluation, the eight-page research dossier and three pieces of work of the students' own choice. The written self-evaluations tend to be in the form of memos or letters to the instructor. It is, however, up to the individual student to choose which genre suits him or her best. Some students even choose to write a mini-case study with a SWOT analysis, explaining their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in writing. Appendix 3 shows two typical self-evaluations. Together the portfolio and the interview account for 50% of the final grade.

The three pieces of work of their own choice may be taken from any of the work they have done during the semester. They may be work they have done in-class or as homework. They may be from any part of the course and include the introduction and/or conclusion with their reformulation versions or even their writing diary or any two of the fast-writes. It is completely up to them.

## **Teacher's Viewpoint**

The portfolio discussion interviews tend to follow a similar framework: starting with a focus on the students' view of the process of writing, then moving on to their choice of work and/or specific course features and finishing with their self assessment. The order is not always the same but all three elements tend to be present, as the idea is to allow the students to talk quiet freely and bring in their own views on what and how they have learned during the course. This is similar in effect to the "interlocutor frames" given for examinations such as the Cambridge Advanced English (see <http://www.cambridge-efl.org> for more details). Such a framework makes it easier to judge students' oral abilities, as the content variable is not given to the same extent as in subject-based oral examinations or presentations. As far as grading is concerned, the students' spoken performance in this relatively content-controlled environment can easily be benchmarked against internationally-recognised marking scales such as those from the Council of Europe (<http://culture.coe.fr/lang/eng/eedu2.4j.htm>) or the Association of Language Testers in Europe (<http://www.alte.org>), which is also used in examinations like the CAE.

The process questions focus on how they chose the pieces of work for their portfolio. More mature students tend to start with the developmental aspect as they have generally chosen texts with both good and poor grades while less reflective students will tend to put all the good grades together and focus only on the product aspect. With the former group of students it is relatively easy to have a good discussion and fruitful and honest reflection. The latter group sometimes needs to be reminded of the in-class discussions about learning before this can take place. This can also be done by asking them directly about their choice and getting them to reflect on what makes each piece of work good. Moving on to the "most useful activities from your (=the student's) point of view " can also help to move the discussion from a product to a process perspective. When this has happened it is much easier for the students to focus on reflection than negotiation and trying to play the system.

Using portfolios in this way has both strengths and weaknesses. On the negative side is of course the amount of time needed with between 15 minutes per student and a short break between each one. This can lead to a certain "portfolio fatigue" on the instructor's part, generally after the first six or seven interviews. In turn this may lead to the instructor dominating the discussion and not allowing the students to express themselves in their own way.

For some students any such interview situation can be stressful and this may affect their performance. As noted above, some students make use of the interview as an opportunity for "plea bargaining" about their grades while others may try to be sycophantic in the hope that this will improve their grades. However, such problems are common to almost all internal viva voce examinations.

On the other hand, the strengths of this approach include the real "quality time" given to each student as an individual. This is in a situation where they must talk and they have "nowhere to hide". Additionally, it means that students have to reflect on learning as a process and can help them to see their own strengths.

These discussions are also very useful for the instructors as it is possible to get a more detailed "consumer feedback" on the course than is otherwise possible. They can learn about student effort and difficulties which can lead to better preparation and more effective materials.

## Conclusion

This article has presented a way to integrate portfolio approach into a process writing course. Portfolios by their very nature require reflection on the part of those who are putting them together, be they students (Santos 1997) or teachers (Bastidas 1997). While many students in Austria have not been trained to reflect on their learning, process writing techniques, especially activities like reformulation and journal writing can encourage them to do so. The value of reflection in learning processes has long been recognised in management education (eg. Argyris and Schön 1978). The portfolio-based personal interview between students and instructors can lead to the start of consciously self-analytical deuterio-learning cycle which can then be applied in other situations as well. When this happens, the text production has done more than just help students with their English.

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## Appendix I

This sheet is handed out and discussed during the first course meeting.

## COURSE PORTFOLIO

As part of the course you will be expected to produce a portfolio of your work during the semester. You will discuss it with the

instructor in an interview of about 10 minutes on \_\_\_\_\_

The aim of the portfolio is to give you a chance to show the progress you have made during the semester. The aims of the portfolio and the interview are to show your progress during the semester.

The portfolio will consist of 5 pieces of written work. These will include:

1. A written self-evaluation
2. Your dossier (final version)
3. 3 pieces of work.

You will also have to show the instructor your writing journal during the interview. The writing journal will not be read by the instructor unless you want it to be!

## **Written self-evaluation**

The written self-evaluation should be in the form of a memo or letter to the instructor. It should cover your own view of your progress (as measured by your subjective feelings and the amount of effort you have put into the course), your achievement (as measured by the "objective" grades you have been given during the semester) and any other information you believe is relevant. You may even decide to do it in the form of a SWOT analysis, explaining your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats as far as the course is concerned. It should be handed in on \_\_\_\_\_

## **3 pieces of work.**

The 3 pieces of work of your own choice may be taken from any of the work you have done during the semester. They may be work you have done in-class or as homework. They may be from the professional writing part or from the academic writing part. You may also include the introduction and/or conclusion with their reformulations in this part or even the generating activities. You could also include your writing diary or other fast-writes if you prefer. Another alternative is to include 2 of your fast writes (=1 piece of work) to show how your writing and / or your opinions about writing have changed. The choice is completely up to you but it would be helpful to choose a broad selection of your work.

## **Appendix II**

These are some of the most common and useful questions for the final interview.

### 1 Process focus questions

- What did you think about the (process of putting portfolio together)? / Could I have a look at the documents?
- Do you think it's a good idea for the teacher to ask the students to put together the best pieces of work?
- What part of the course did you find useful?
- What did you learn? (why?) / What changes do you think you made (in the way you write)?

### 2 Product focus questions

- Which piece of work is most characteristic? (Why?)
- Which piece of work best shows their progress? (Why? / How?)
- What about (free writes) (writing journal)?

### Self evaluation

- What grade do you think you should get ? remember it's 50% of the grade
- The last thing I asked you to do was to reflect. Do you think it's a good idea for the teacher to ask the students to put together their best pieces of work?

# Appendix III

## Self-evaluation 1

Dear Mr. Rea,

As you can imagine, it is difficult to formulate a self-evaluation. Mostly, the result of such a work can be seen as a compromise between modesty and overestimation of the own abilities. However, I am convinced that I have improved my English writing abilities during this course. Although my writing style is far from being perfect, the writing of the diary has given me a lot of practice.

Besides, I appreciated this course because I have learned how to manage writing a report. Now, I know that the research of information, the organisation and other things like quotations and references are as important as the writing itself. It is astonishing but the basic knowledge acquired in this course helped me to organise the composition of my French final examination.

Despite all the progress I have made I am aware of some weaknesses as the grade of my report shows. The final grade will probably be the worst of all my English courses. However, I am not disappointed because this course has been the hardest and most difficult of all English courses till now.

Yours sincerely,

## Self-evaluation 2

Dear Sir,

First of all, I want to thank you for your helpful instructions in text production.

I remember you entering the classroom and asking us what we associate with the word "text production" and what we are expecting from the course. To be frank, I was not sure if I would be told something new in this course, but I was wrong. You drew our attention to producing texts and emphasised that writing is a process. I now know how to read a letter effectively and what the important parts of a report or a text are. Before the course I thought the body is the most relevant part in a letter, not knowing that a clear and precise introduction and an informative conclusion make a text to a good one.

Also the repeated emphasis on the structure and the links and to other methods, such as KISS (keep it short and simple) or the six questions (where and when and who and what and why and how) will influence my further written works.

Not only the works in class, but also the tasks we had to do at home I found very interesting and helpful. I liked very much to produce the writing journal and I really noticed a change in my writing style comparing the first and the last page.

The next thing we were told to do was a dossier. At the very first moment I thought this would be the chance to write about something I was interested in because the topic was up to us. Unfortunately, I decided to write about "Jeeps", inspired by the last Jeep Jamboree in Carinthia. I soon found out that this topic could not fulfil the requirements because I had not very much useful information. So I changed the topic just two weeks before we were asked to hand our dossier in. It was not much time left and so the final dossier was not the report I liked it to be.

In general, I have noticed that my strength is not the written, but the oral English. I hope I can prove on Monday that I speak English well!

I am looking forward to our meeting on Monday,

Yours sincerely

