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Using Portfolio Assessment in EL Civics Classes in California

Portfolio assessment is an ongoing process involving learners and their instructors in selecting samples of student work for inclusion in a collection, the main purpose of which is to show the progress of learners. Perhaps the greatest overall benefit of using portfolio assessment in EL Civics projects is that the learners are taught by example to become independent thinkers, and their ability to take control of their own learning is facilitated.

The definition of a portfolio varies, but there seems to be a consensus that a portfolio is a purposeful collection of a learner's work that tells the story of that learner's experiences, achievement, or growth. A portfolio is not a folder of all the work a learner does, but a collection of work samples selected by the instructor and the learner which each feels best demonstrates student learning. It is a systematic collection that relates to priority instructional goals. *For example, logs kept by students of their interactions with community organizations and agencies prompt them to reflect on the degree to which they are building positive attitudes toward community involvement and the skills needed to do so.*^[1] In a classroom that promotes portfolio assessment that flows from classroom and/or community interactions and activities, the following positive outcomes are in evidence:

- Collaboration is common.
- Learners revisit and revise their selections.
- Learners and instructors reflect on the work of individuals and the class as a whole.
- Learners understand and use agreed upon standards for judging the quality of their own and the work of others.
- Learners take pride in their work, polishing it for performance, publication, and exhibition.^[2]

Using this definition, portfolio systems can be designed to promote student self-assessment and control of learning; support student-led conferences; select students into special programs; certify student competence; grant credit; demonstrate certain skills and

abilities to employers or potential employers; build student self-confidence; and evaluate curriculum and instruction.

Assessment portfolios can be designed to measure virtually any observable skill or process or content area knowledge needed for assessment purposes. A wide range of student products can be included in assessment portfolios as long as predetermined scoring criteria are in place. Effective portfolios are inclusive of all students and provide an authentic description of what the learners can do.^[3]

Instructors should keep in mind that there are two basic reasons for using a portfolio process — assessment or instruction. Assessment uses relate to keeping track of what students know and can do. Instructional uses relate to promoting learning — students can learn a variety of language and literacy skills just from participating in the process of assembling the portfolio. Accountability documents the results of student involvement in these processes and demonstrates to stakeholders the impact of students' learning.

Because there is no single correct way to “do” portfolios, and because they appear to be used for so many things, developing an effective portfolio system can be confusing and stressful, primarily coming from not realizing that portfolios are a means to an end and not an end in themselves. More specifically, confusion occurs to the extent there is lack of clarity on (a) the purpose to be served by the portfolio, and (b) the specific skills and knowledge to be developed or assessed by the portfolio.

► What Goes into Portfolios

It is important to remember that portfolios are much more than folders of learners' work, especially when they are being used to document the extent of learning in EL Civics classes. A wide variety of types of portfolios exist: working portfolio, performance portfolio, assessment portfolio, group portfolio, application portfolio, and so forth. Depending on the purpose of the portfolio, any of the following types of items may be included: samples of creative work, tests, quizzes, homework, documentation of involvement in

[1] Eduplace. Internet Research: www.eduplace.com/rdg/res/literacy/assess6.html

[2] San Diego County Office of Education: Notes from Research www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/notes/5/portfolio.html

[3] Gomez ED388890

community projects and field assignments, audiotapes of oral work, student diary entries, logs of work on and completion of particular tasks or assignments, self-assessments, comments from peers, and comments from instructors. Once the purpose of the portfolio is clear, questions about what goes in and when, who decides, identification and use of criteria, and how self-reflection is used are more logical and much easier to resolve.

Use of the portfolio process is increasing in the language field, particularly with respect to the assessment of writing skills. It makes sense to involve students in decisions about which pieces of their work best document their learning, and to assure that feedback is provided.

► Common Points of View

There appear to be several points on which most educators agree:

Portfolios are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. The learner must have a clear vision of what the “end” is. The purpose of the portfolio should influence all other design and use decisions. Portfolio systems that have assessment as their primary purpose tend to be more structured. There is more uniformity as to the types of items placed in the portfolio and the times at which they are entered. Portfolios that are used for instruction tend to belong more to the student, be less structured, develop performance criteria for use by students for self-reflection, and treat student self-reflection as essential for learning. The use of portfolios in EL Civics classes will probably fall somewhere in between these two purposes.

Both teachers and students must have a clear vision of the intended learning outcomes. Instructors should consider these important questions: What is my vision of success for my students? What are the learners’ visions of success? What are the criteria for documenting success? If they can answer these questions very clearly, they will find the process of creating portfolios much easier.

The value of portfolios in “motivating and involving students in their own learning has recently increased their visibility and use. What is really important is not the portfolio itself so much as what students learn by creating it.”

Adult learners should be directly involved in all stages of the portfolio process. Student involvement includes selecting portfolio content, developing criteria for success, and self-reflection. Even those portfolios closest to the “assessment” end of the continuum recognize the benefit of involving students in the process. When teachers put portfolios together for students, not only is it a time-consuming burden for them, but their students learn very little from the process.

One research finding maintains that portfolio assessments are highly valid because of their effect on students. Findings show that not only do portfolio assessments measure student growth but they also contribute to it. An example of this principle would be the students who successfully navigate a complicated health care system to get needed information or services. The students’ successes are outcomes in themselves. More significant outcomes, however, are the instances of self-awareness that come to the students as they reflect on the experience and identify steps in the process that they followed. [4]

Establishing clear and complete performance criteria is essential. These criteria will include, at a minimum, scoring guides, rubrics, rating scales, and checklists. For assessment purposes, performance criteria are the basis for generating scores or ratings to document what students know and can do. However, the major value of establishing performance criteria is that they assist the instructor to articulate a clear vision of goals and objectives and a vocabulary for communicating with students about these targets. Students should be partners in the development of these criteria.

► Assisting EL Civics Learners

The call for increased use of meaningful assessments that involve English language learners in selecting and reflecting on their learning means that language teachers have a wider range of evidence on which to judge whether students are becoming competent, purposeful language users. It also means that language programs are more likely to become more responsive to the differing learning styles of students and value this diversity. Finally, language programs that focus on multiple forms of assessment are likely to instill in students lifelong skills related to critical thinking that build a basis for future learning, and enable them to evaluate what they learn both inside and outside of the classroom. [5]

► Developing and Implementing a Standardized Portfolio Assessment System

1. Decide what assessment information is needed to document learner attainment of the objective and how that information can be obtained.
2. Involve stakeholders, including the learners, in determining the desired outcomes.
3. Decide on the range of selections for inclusion in the portfolios. Develop a plan and timeline for placing selections into portfolios, scoring individual entries, and evaluating the portfolios as a whole. Determine the type(s) of learner reflections (written or oral or both) to be included and when and how they will be added.

[5] Hancock ED376695

4. Develop scoring criteria and standards of performance. Decide on common goals for student learning and performance and how they will be assessed, develop scoring rubrics and checklists, and agree on standards of performance to be attained.
5. Align assessment tasks with the identified EL Civics objective and proposed learner outcomes.
6. Provide professional development related to the purpose, implementation, and anticipated results of using portfolio assessment to all staff who will be involved in the process.
7. Implement the portfolio process. Once all steps above have been completed, implement the portfolio process in designated classes.
8. Provide training in scoring student entries using the identified scoring criteria and rubrics. Training should include discussion of the need for inter-rater reliability as well as learners' levels of English language proficiency and their impact on scoring decisions.
9. Score the portfolios. Team members score the portfolios based upon predetermined criteria and rubrics.
10. Report results. All stakeholders receive feedback about the results of the portfolio assessment in a timely fashion in ways that make the results meaningful to everyone, including teachers, students, and community members.
11. Evaluate the process. Develop a plan and timelines for evaluating the effectiveness of the portfolio process. Consider the impact on students, instructors, and other stakeholders, what made a difference and why, and recommendations for future use.

Conclusions

Strong portfolio assessment systems are characterized by a clear vision of the identified goals and objectives, student involvement in selecting what goes into the portfolio, use of agreed-upon criteria to define the levels of performance and provide a basis for communication, and self-reflection through which students share what they think and feel about their work, their learning environment, and themselves.

Stakeholders within the system should have a common vision about what students should know and be able to do, how goals and

objectives will be assessed, and what criteria will be used to make that determination. Improved teaching and learning are natural outcomes of a well-designed, well-implemented portfolio system.

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The above summary is based on excerpts from the following ERIC Digests:

[Alternative Assessment and Second Language Study: What and Why?](#) (1994) *Hancock, Charles R.* ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Washington D.C.

[Assessment Portfolios: Including English Language Learners in Large-Scale Assessments.](#) (2000) *Gomez, Emily.* ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Washington D.C.

[Portfolios for Assessment and Instruction.](#) (1995) *Arter, Judith A., And Others.* ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Washington D.C.

Further Findings Related to Effective Use of Portfolios

Portfolios must be focused and structured, emphasizing reflection and self-assessment.

Portfolios are:

- Collections of evidence with a focused purpose.
- Collections of evidence of learning that has taken place over time.

Portfolios may:

- Offer additional opportunities for ongoing assessment by both teachers and learners.
- Show best examples of what has been learned or how it was learned.
- Provide chronological evidence of learning and evidence of work accomplished toward completion of a specific task or objective.

Portfolios may document:

- Current status related to attainment of a goal and information on how the learner plans to get from here to there.
- What has been accomplished and what needs to be completed.
- Understanding of the learning process and progress for teachers, other audiences and most importantly, the learners themselves — thereby, according to research, improving achievement.

Additionally, portfolios provide students an opportunity to practice the crucial skills of reflection, self-assessment, planning and organization, self-advocacy, and taking responsibility for their own learning.

The most valuable components of portfolios are often the reflective pieces that learners add — either written or oral — that require them to go back and take a second look at a previously submitted piece. The type of reflection depends upon the goals and objectives of the class and the identified needs and goals of the learners.

► Reflections of learners may:

- Document concepts such as why a specific entry is the best, hardest, most surprising, confusing, favorite, exciting.
- Be prefaced by comments such as, “Please notice”; “Before I could or couldn’t, but now I””; “I found that””; and other similar comments.

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