The Potential for Portfolio Assessment


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The term portfolio normally brings to mind a collection of stocks, examples of best art pieces, or a sample of wares to give tangible evidence of value, performance, and potential. The portfolio assessment technique is receiving an increasing amount of attention in the language arts and sciences as an option or as an addition to standardized tests. Portfolios offer the opportunity, when correctly used, to assess additional talents and abilities of students beyond the skills tested through multiple choice responses.

With selected samples of student work gathered over time, a map of change, hopefully a record of progress, can be seen. The exact measures of that change are in discussion, not likely to be settled by a specific formula. Most proponents of the portfolio technique emphasize its strength for assessing student performance in terms of intellectual growth and maturity, higher conversation levels, self-assessment or goal setting, and depth of understanding. Although levels of development are often identified for measurement of progress, assessment is often made against the student’s own record and not tied to any specific age or grade level.

Mapping for purpose of assessment is not a new concept to school library media specialists. Over the past several years, methods in collection mapping, curriculum mapping, and planning or policy development have appeared in the literature. More and more school library media specialists are practicing some aspect of maintaining records related to collection and curriculum in order to visualize options and make decisions. Not only is such a process healthy for media specialists because they begin to think about goals and objectives in a very concrete manner, but such mapping leads to visual products that can be used to convey to others what changes are needed. Such mapping, analysis, documentation, and presentation become key elements for those school library media specialists who want to clearly define their educational roles both for their own professional growth and for others who must place a value on the school library media center program.

New Curriculum, New Assessment

Over the coming five years, those media specialists who desire a more specific role in student performance evaluation should give serious consideration to experimenting with the portfolio as a method to document the change in student reading, writing, and information use patterns. More important, however, is the probability that the portfolios will open new conversation levels between library media specialist and students, and between library media specialist and teacher or parent.
New curriculum designs in language arts and social studies lead to school library media programs that emphasize information literacy. The following instructional approaches move us beyond the standard test format and toward the broader assessment methods:

- An integration of all aspects of language arts including reading, writing, and listening, and speaking;
- A focus on the process of constructing meaning;
- The use of literature that inspires and motivates readers;
- An emphasis on problem solving and high-order thinking skills; and
- The use of collaboration and group work as an essential component of learning

**Establishing a Record**

Portfolios, when employed to reach the highest potential for assessment, can allow for documentation of student growth in the processes of mulling over a topic; reading widely about the topic; discussing initial ideas with teachers, peers and parents; reacting to feedback on drafts; and summarizing the substantive rethinking invested in revisions. Portfolios provide teachers and students with the opportunity to examine a record of the two most demanding learning processes: reflection and revision.

We can discuss the progress toward considering options, alternatives, and new insights if demanding exercises are placed before students and if they are given access to an information-rich environment. Teachers and students should be free to explore as many information outlets and formats as possible: The products eventually placed in the portfolio record reflect how both the teacher and learner contend with the information explosion. Products should show the evolution of the learner in reading, composition, revision, and the selection of documentation or literature that supports their writings.

When students do not learn the skills required for working with source materials in the early stages of reading and writing development, they find it difficult to cope with the shift to multiple sources. If they do not have the skills to work with multiple sources from a variety of formats, the typical term paper or composition assignment becomes an unfair task. The assignment is often undertaken with no sense of positive challenge because the student, and occasionally the teacher and school library media specialist, lacks higher-level skills.

Many instructors emphasize library work. Locating sources, however, is largely a mechanical process, unlikely in itself to teach students to think or write about what they have read. If the research project (paper, debate, video, or oral presentation) is to be fully integrated into the composition requirements of any course, students must learn how to deal with sources of information. The emphasis should be on the analysis and synthesis of ideas and evidence beginning at the early stages of reading and writing. A portfolio ideally should be a deliberate compilation, gathered according to a plan, for use by an identified reader or readers for specific needs or purposes.

A portfolio gathered for the teacher in a writing course may help with the teacher’s instruction of a student. If submitted at the end of the course, the portfolio may help in the theca’s final student
evaluation. A portfolio of writings gathered over a student’s academic career may be examined by faculty for evidence of changes in the way the student thinks, reacts to problems, assesses data, and gives value to the information. Students may include their own reflections on their writings, as well as what has been, read, viewed, observed, or heard. These reflections should give insight as to what the student thinks these pieces show about his or her strengths and weaknesses.

**Allowing for Comparisons**

Portfolios are most effective when students can compare earlier work in terms of progress in the level of sources used, selection of specific evidence and comparison of data, and growth in the depth of arguments presented. Written or recorded descriptive pieces (poetry, short stories, plays) can over time, become more personal and more detailed. The student author through the records placed in the portfolio can identify Readings, discussions, and viewings that have influenced this maturation process.

The following list of abilities might serve as a beginning framework to identify some of the assessment areas toward which the teacher and library media specialist would strive in both their own teaching methods as well as in actual student performance. Students and educators should, through reading, writing, and conversation, demonstrate the ability to

- pose worthwhile questions;
- evaluate the adequacy of an argument;
- recognize facts, inferences, and opinions and use each appropriately deal with quandaries and ill-formed problems that have no pat or unique solutions;
- give and receive criticism profitably;
- agree or disagree in degrees;
- extend a line of thought beyond the range of first impressions; and
- articulate a complex position without adding to its complexity.

These tasks are very demanding, and we would obviously see different levels of achievement based on experience, intelligence, guided practice, and extent of access to resources. To place some of these abilities within a more common framework, consider the following general progressive steps for the demonstration of elementary skills in reading and writing.

**Foundations in Reading and Writing**

A portfolio that documents the progress of an elementary student’s *emergent reading* abilities would contain items that reflect the following stages:

1. Listens to story but is not looking at pages.
2. Watches pictures as adult reads story.
3. Makes up words for picture.
4. Pretends to read.
5. Talks about each picture.
6. Participates in reading by supplying rhyming words.
7. Memorizes text and can pretend to read.
8. Recognizes words in a new context.
9. Reads word for word.
11. Reads unfamiliar stories haltingly with little assistance.
12. Uses context clues, sentence structure, and phonetic analysis to read new passages.
13. Voluntarily shares information with other children.
15. Reads fluently from books and other materials.

Common stages that help to suggest documentation of an elementary student’s growth in response to literature (or other media) would probably be similar to the following.

1. Does not voluntarily respond to literature.
2. Asks you to read it again.
3. Tells whether likes the book.
4. Explains why likes or does not like a book.
5. Relates the book to own experiences or other books.
7. Generalizes about the book with comments about the theme, type of book, author’s purpose.
8. Develops criteria to evaluate the book.
9. The stages in elementary writing development are shown by the student’s ability to move up the following levels:
10. Attempts to write in scribbles or draws patterns.
11. Pretends to write.
12. Writes mock letters.
13. Writes alphabet or mock letters around page.
14. Writes in a line across page.
15. Copies words seen around the room.
17. Has message concept and tells what the message is.
18. Writes familiar words.
19. Writes a message.
20. Separates words with a space.
21. Writes lists.
22. Connects letters with sounds.
23. Labels drawings.
25. Invents spelling.
26. Writes several short sentences.
27. Uses both phonics and sight to spell words.
28. Writes the start of a story.
29. Begins to use punctuation.
30. Uses revisions to add to the story.
31. Writes for several different purposes: narrative, expository, persuasive.
32. Writes a short story with beginning, middle, end.
33. Willingly revises.
34. Spells more conventionally.
35. Retells familiar story; follows pattern of known story.
36. Uses details, dialogue, expresses emotion.
37. Uses commas, quotation marks, apostrophes.
38. Writes clearly; message makes sense to wider audience.
39. Writes original poetry.
40. Writes creatively and imaginatively.
41. Willingly revises and edits.
42. Uses writing techniques to create suspense or humor.
43. Employs a wide variety of strategies for revision and editing.

Several of these abilities are more easily documented than others, but the challenge is to create learning situations in which students can demonstrate their abilities, practice, and provide evidence of progress. Use of video and audio recorders may be the only means of documenting some of the stages, but written products will be the most common.

**A Portfolio of Information Skills**

Carol Kuhlthau offered an extensive grade-by-grade activities list in 1981 that could serve as a beginning point for determining specific library use skills or abilities to be documented. Her checklists include both location and interpretation skill levels through the early secondary school years. From such an extensive list as well as from many others available in the literature and through state curricular guides, we have yet to determine the key items that should be included in a portfolio of student information skills performance. Recent library skill guides are giving greater attention to student use of on-line and multimedia information systems. With each advancement in technology, a new set of abilities or skills seems to result.

This growing list of search skills can be a part of the portfolio content, especially if it allows library media specialists the opportunity to show teachers, parents, and principals examples of student mastery of computerized information technologies. The basic questions related to information use, application or interpretation probably do not change over time. Kuhlthau’s more recent works that attempt to define the “library research process” for the average student take us closer to the experiences that can be best documented and traced through a portfolio.

Within the framework of the following questions, evidence of progressive writing experiences and information search experiences should be gathered by the library media specialist in order to document student performance. Michael Marland published this list of questions for the information curriculum in 1981. Additional comments follow each question in order to provide suggestions as to skills that might be documented in information literacy portfolios.

1. *What do I need to do?* Ability to analyze the information task; analyze the audience’s information need or demand; describe a plan of operation; select important and useful
questions and narrow or define focus of assignment; describe possible issues to be investigated.

2. *Where could I go?* Ability to determine best initial leads for relevant information; determine possible immediate access to background information) gaining the “larger picture”); consider information sources within and beyond the library.

3. *How do I get the information?* Ability to determine best modes of wider information access; what is possible and reasonable within the time limitations and expectations of the assignment or information need; identify options and alternatives including various information formats and delivery services.

4. *Which resources shall I use?* Ability to identify relevant materials; sense relationships between information items; determine which resources are most likely to be authoritative and reliable’ consider and state the advantages and disadvantages of bias present in resources; consider stated and personal opinions and search for counter opinions; determine extent of need for historical perspective.

5. *How shall I use the resources?* Determine if information is pertinent to the topic; estimate the adequacy of the information; test validity of the information; focus on specific issues within the boundaries of information obtained; group data in categories according to appropriate criteria; determine the advantages and disadvantages of different information formats and intellectual levels.

6. *Of what should I make record?* Extract significant ideas and summarize supporting, illustrative details; define a systematic method to gather, sort and retrieve data; combine critical concepts into a statement of conclusions; restate major ideas of a complex topic in concise form; separate a topic into major components according to appropriate criteria; sequence information and data in order to emphasize specific arguments or issues.

7. *Have I got the information that I need?* Recognize instances in which more than one interpretation of material is valid and necessary; demonstrate that the information obtained is relevant to the issues of importance; if necessary, state a hypothesis or theme and match evidence to the focused goal of the paper or project; reflect, edit revise, and determine if previous information search and analysis steps should be repeated.

8. *How should I present it?* Place data in tabular form using charts, graphs, or illustrations; match illustrations and verbal descriptions for best impact; note relationships between or among data, opinions, or other forms of information; propose a new plan, crate a new system, interpret historical events, and predict likely future happenings; analyze the background and potential for reception of ideas and arguments of the intended audience; communicate orally and in writing to teachers and among peers.

9. *What have I achieved?* Accept and give constructive criticism; reflect and revise again; describe most valuable sources of information; estimate the adequacy of the information acquired and the need for additional resources; state future questions or themes for investigation; seek feedback from a variety of audiences.

This is a very challenging menu of possible areas for measurement of student ability and action. We don’t know which of these areas are best documented through a portfolio, nor have we experienced the conversations that will probably bring many additional abilities to our attention. The list given for student abilities in information literacy provides a beginning framework for establishing assignments that will result in student products for the portfolio.
Student Reflection

Finally, and most important, students will need to reflect through written statements and interviews following completion of the product in order to express those information literacy abilities they feel they have practiced and at what level they feel they are operating. Teachers and library media specialists will add their insights to the level of the student’s performance.

In order for educators to establish meaningful information literacy exercises that challenge the student, assessment is best undertaken by means of a progressive portfolio of the student’s work. Both the teacher and the library media specialist must think in terms of assignments that establish a broad range of sources the student will need to investigate and that are developed in recognition of the equally broad range of responses the student might produce.

Of major importance are the techniques of modeling information literacy skills developed by the teacher and the library media specialist and the establishment of inquiry environments in which students work together in order to explore and share the challenges of information search and selection. The potential for development of student information literacy portfolios may not be fully reached until educators move more deeply into electronic record-keeping practices. The time is ripe to go beyond the simple tests of the past in our explorations of what can be observed, what can be discussed.

Information Literacy and Portfolio Resources


