

Creating, Organizing, and Storing Portfolios

Most students are already familiar with collecting items, such as stamps, cards, coins, or music. Introducing them to a collections unit in your classroom will help them understand the connection between collecting and organizing items for fun and collecting and organizing their classroom work.

Carol Rolheiser, Barbara Bower, and Laurie Stevahn (2000), the authors of the book *The Portfolio Organizer*, suggest a five-step approach designed to help students better determine what to collect for their portfolios.

Step 1. Present Portfolios as a Collections Unit

Especially for students who are new to portfolio assessments, it's important to introduce the concept of a portfolio gradually. To make the connection with students' prior knowledge, start a discussion about collections. Here are a few suggestions:

- Talk about collections with your students. To help start the conversation, you can create a class collection, demonstrate your own collection to your students, invite a guest to present a collection to the students, or have students demonstrate their collections.
- Introduce the language associated with collecting. Ask questions such as
 - What are your favorite items in your collection?
 - What does your collection show about you?
 - Which item isn't your favorite? Why?

- Practice with students. Have students ask the presenters of collections the same questions.
- Start a booklet for the class, recording information about each collection. For example, you may want to record the number of items, the names of each item, and which items are the collectors' favorites. You may also want to encourage the students to illustrate the booklet.

Next, you can introduce “the idea of a portfolio as a collection of their school work and learning. Their experience with a collections unit helps to prepare them for making judgments about which pieces of work they will include in their portfolios,” write Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn (2000, p. 108). Here’s how these authors suggest doing so:

1. As a class, brainstorm examples of different types of collections. For example, a photo collection in an album, a hope chest, a toy chest, and an artist’s portfolio are all types of collections.
2. Ask students, “What is it about those things that made you list them?” Students often respond that they chose things that have something in common, that are meaningful to them, or represent special places that they’ve visited.
3. Ask the students to cluster, group, or categorize items based on common or similar criteria (e.g., family photos and photos of friends, inherited family items, and gifts from friends).
4. Based on the knowledge that a portfolio is a type of collection, ask students how they would define a portfolio. If your students are stumped, ask them, “What is the essence of a portfolio?” As a group, you may work toward an answer similar to “a portfolio is a collection of things gathered over time that have meaning for and reflect personal values of the owner.”

5. Discuss issues related to portfolios and collections. The following issues may arise as a result of the discussion:
 - **Evolution:** What is the period of time over which a particular collection has been developed?
 - **Voice and choice:** Whose voice and choice are being reflected in the collection?
 - **Audience:** Who will be looking at this? How will it be shared?
6. Summarize the activity by emphasizing that no single process leads to a portfolio. Each person shapes individual process, although sometimes teachers or others structure the process and help students move from one step to the next.” (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000, p. 108)

In addition, explain to the students that a portfolio consists of two elements:

1. Several entries, consisting of a student-produced product (also called a learning sample) and a reflection sheet describing each product.
2. An introductory component—an introductory letter, worksheet, or graphic organizer—that presents the portfolio to others.

Step 2. Set Portfolio Criteria with Your Students

Students must understand what is expected of them and how the portfolio will be reviewed and assessed. This is why it is so important to set criteria for the portfolio before beginning the process.

Criteria serve two purposes. First, they assist students in selecting appropriate entries. They also provide a basis for evaluating the entire collection of work contained within the portfolio.

Choosing the criteria for assessing the portfolio will depend on the following:

- The state, province, or district guidelines for portfolio content.
- The learning goals you've established for students.
- What your students value in their own learning.

For a 7th grade language arts portfolio, for example, teachers in Ontario expect students to focus on a variety of media—such as a class newspaper, a story board, or a radio documentary—and present evidence of their thinking, for example, in the form of analogies and comparisons to develop and clarify ideas. So criteria for this portfolio may include a variety of entries and evidence of understanding (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000).

When selecting criteria, consider manageability—for both you and your students, write Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn (2000). For beginner portfolio users, they recommend limiting criteria to no more than four so that the process doesn't become too complicated and overwhelming for the student and the reviewers. As you gain more experience, you can add more criteria.

Sample Portfolio Criteria

When choosing criteria, Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn (2000) suggest the following list to choose from. Keep in mind your goals for the portfolio assessment, as well as the school or district requirements and your students' needs:

- Accuracy of information
- Communication of ideas
- Creativity and originality
- Cross-curricular or community connections
- Evidence of understanding
- Depth of reflection
- Knowledge of content
- Neatness
- Organization and presentation
- Perseverance
- Problem solving
- Quality of product
- Self-assessment and goal-setting
- Variety of entries
- Visual appeal

Source: From *The Portfolio Organizer*, by C. Rolheiser, B. Bower, and L. Stevahn, 2000, Alexandria, VA: ASCD. Copyright 2000 by ASCD. Adapted with permission.

To help students feel more involved, allow them to participate in choosing criteria. For example, you may want to choose two of your own criteria and then allow students to agree on two more. By choosing criteria for assessment of their work, students will feel that they have ownership, that they are accountable, and that they clearly understand what is expected of them. This makes the process fair and meaningful for students (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000).

Step 3. Teach Students How to Select Portfolio Samples

To select samples for a portfolio, students must consider the portfolio type. Best work portfolios, for example, will include finalized samples that demonstrate the students' best efforts. Growth portfolios should contain evidence of students' development and progress, demonstrating stages of the product development, such as several revisions of a written paper or evidence of different stages of a dramatic performance.

To make the process manageable, *The Portfolio Organizer* authors recommend beginning the portfolio process by including meaningful learning samples that already exist in the program—and that reflect students' personal interests and values (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000).

Remember that the choice of learning samples must be related to the portfolio criteria. Most important, the student reflection sheet that accompanies each portfolio sample will need to explain how the sample fits the criteria.

For example, Northern Cambria School District (n.d.) suggests the following criteria for a mathematics portfolio:

- **Depth of understanding:** What did I learn from completing this assignment?
How well do I know mathematics now?

- **Evidence of problem solving:** What mathematics processes did I use to gain this new knowledge?
- **Communication:** How well did I tell others?
- **Relevance to society:** How well does this entry relate to everyday life?

These criteria help students select samples from four categories:

1. **Investigation (1 entry)**—A hands-on primary research project involving mathematics. For example, students can explore math aspects of a game; develop a hypothesis and investigate it; use math software; use logic puzzles, cryptology and symbols; or design a survey, collect and analyze data.
2. **Research (1 entry)**—Secondary research to demonstrate the ability to learn about a math topic, such as math-related on-site visits to businesses, biographies of mathematicians, or math-related interviews.
3. **Application (1 entry)**—Application of mathematical concepts in non-research situations that may be expressive/inventive in nature. Examples include navigation and global positioning, community service, flow chart design, paper folding and origami, and math patterns in music.
4. **Open choice (1 or more)**—Any piece of work that matches the portfolio criteria. For example, this could be a trip planning on a budget/investment portfolio; mathematics of starting a business video or photo essay; favorite lesson from notebooks; or a poem, song, or rap composition that involves mathematical concepts. (Northern Cambria School District, n.d.)

Step 4. Review Portfolio Examples

Students better understand how to put together a portfolio when they can actually see what's expected of them. Reviewing sample portfolios from students of different

ages, for example, will give students an idea of the similarities and differences in portfolios.

For example, a portfolio from a 2nd grade student may be similar in format to that of a 4th grade student, but the samples included may be very different. Reviewing a variety of portfolio entries will give your students a good basis for beginning the development of their own portfolios.

Step 5. Teach Students How to Organize and Store Portfolios

Especially for younger students and those beginning to use portfolios, organizing and storing portfolios may be an overwhelming and challenging task. And since portfolios are usually stored in the classroom, space may be an issue.

To find an appropriate solution for portfolio storage, *The Portfolio Organizer* authors suggest considering the following:

- the purpose of portfolio
- size and shape of the samples
- size, type, and cost of storage containers
- age of students
- available space
- ease and frequency of access (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000).

Teachers and students often get creative in finding containers that fit their needs. Pizza boxes, legal-size folders, hanging file folders, computer disks, binders, cereal and laundry detergent boxes, plastic tote boxes with lids, and other types of

containers have all been effectively used to store portfolio samples (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000).

It's also a good idea to help students organize the portfolios by creating a table of contents. This can also help students prepare the portfolio for presentation to peers, parents, and teachers.

In recent years, with the advances in technology, both students and teachers have been turning to computers, digital cameras, scanners, and other technological devices for creating and storing portfolios and portfolio samples. If your students create a variety of their samples digitally, discuss the process of keeping and organizing files with them. Just like they would use hanging folders in the classroom, for example, it's important to save their files on the computer in an organized manner. It's also important to remind students to back up their files on flash drives, CDs, and other digital storage devices, so that their creations don't get lost if a computer crashes. (Please read more about digital portfolios in Module 3.)

Remember that organizing and storing portfolio items is the first step toward your students' ownership of their portfolios. Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn (2000) write, "As students delve into those containers and become more familiar with their work and reflect on it, they shape selections into portfolio entries, setting the stage for sharing their learning with peers, parents, and other audiences" (p. 56.)

Introducing a Portfolio

The main goal of a portfolio is to facilitate the process of active learning. But just collecting samples of school work and organizing them in a folder is not enough. The true value of the portfolio assessment is that it requires students to reflect on their samples—and on the portfolio as a whole.

Each portfolio entry should include a learning sample and a reflection sheet that describes the sample and explains why it meets the portfolio criteria. In addition,

Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn (2000) suggest that students write an introductory letter to present the entire portfolio. The letter should

- Explain what the portfolio is about.
- Describe how the entries are organized (chronologically, best work first, rough drafts first) and explain the reasons for the type of the organization.
- Provide a description of the favorite entry, with an explanation.
- Describe what the student found rewarding and challenging about creating the portfolio.
- Identify whether and how students reached the learning goals they were planning to reach through the portfolio assessment.
- Set future learning goals and describe actions the student plans to take to reach the goals.

Depending on the students' level and writing ability, other types of portfolio introductions may be more appropriate. Younger students, for example, can create graphic organizers with pictures, cutouts, and drawings presenting themselves, their interests, and their portfolios.

Others may choose to fill out a worksheet, answering the following prompts:

- My portfolio is organized _____.
- My portfolio shows I am _____.
- My best piece of work is _____.
- My favorite piece of work is _____.

- The piece that shows my best effort is _____.
- I want you to notice _____.
- I think I have grown _____.
- Next year I plan to work on _____.

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