

Assessing Portfolios

"When making decisions about evaluating and grading portfolios, realize that your philosophy regarding general questions of evaluation and grading affects the approach you take with portfolios."

Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn, 2002, p. 85

Over the years, different teachers, schools, and school districts have taken various approaches to portfolio assessment. In the early 1990s, for example, Vermont implemented a statewide portfolio assessment program, requiring all students in grades 4–8 to keep portfolios in math and writing. What became clear through the program is that portfolios have a definite advantage in helping students talk about their performance in terms of criteria and standards—and helping parents understand learning standards better.

Moreover, implementing portfolio assessment has been shown to increase the rigor of classroom instruction. At one school, teachers enhanced their focus on problem-solving strategies in mathematics specifically because the math portfolios were assessed based on students' problem-solving ability (O'Neil, 1993). If we assess for complex and rigorous thinking, we are more apt to teach for complex and rigorous thinking.

However, portfolios cannot serve all of our assessment needs. In cases where portfolios have been used to gather data for informing policy decisions, program planning, and evaluation, it has been shown that portfolio assessments have low reliability ratings. In other words, the way different reviewers ranked student work varied significantly, making aggregation of data challenging (O'Neil, 1993).

To this day, whether and how portfolios should be evaluated is a matter of debate. Individual teachers' philosophies, experiences with portfolios, students' ages and experiences with portfolios, and the school's approaches to portfolios all tie into the larger assessment strategy. Some educators believe that because portfolios include previously graded and evaluated work—and because their main purpose is to encourage student reflection—grading them isn't necessary or wise. Others like to grade portfolios to provide students with an additional evaluation point at the end of the portfolio project.

What's clear is that, regardless of a teacher's approach, portfolios do need to be evaluated in some way. The decision on how to evaluate a portfolio is related to the understanding of three terms:

- **Assessment** is generally defined as gathering data about a student's learning.
- **Evaluation** is a form of judging the merit of a student's performance in a class or on a particular task.
- **Grading** is the assignment of a symbol (such as an A, B, or C) to report the value assigned to a student's performance in a class or on a particular task.

In terms of gathering data, a portfolio by definition is an assessment process—a collection of data representing a student as a learner. Portfolio evaluation is achieved through a variety of means, including through student reflection and self-evaluation and through peer, parent, and teacher feedback. Grading is just another step in the portfolio assessment process.

Rubrics as Form of Grading

For those educators who choose to assign grades to portfolios, one effective tool is a rubric, which is “a set of scoring guidelines for evaluating student work” (Rolheiser,

Bower, & Stevahn, 2000, p. 91). Rubrics, however, can be used with portfolios for purposes other than grading.

For students, they can help clarify expectations for the portfolio by spelling out standards of quality that they will be evaluated on. For teachers, rubrics can help focus on connecting instructional strategies with assessments. In addition, rubrics can guide students and reviewers through self-evaluation and peer review (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000).

Characteristics of Effective Rubrics

The authors of *The Portfolio Organizer* (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000) suggest that, to create effective rubrics, educators should be guided by the following principles:

- Clearly spell out the differences between different levels of performance.
- Smoothly transition from one level to the next.
- Pay special attention to “the top point (describing genuine excellence) and the cut point (describing the difference between passing and failing” (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000, p. 91).
- Decide what reflects real evidence of understanding—as opposed to “accurate recall, thoughtless use of knowledge, or quantity of information.”

Creating Rubrics Online

A variety of online rubric development tools can guide you through the process of creating rubrics. One such free tool is <http://rubistar.4teachers.org>, where you can create your own rubrics and view rubrics created by others.

The site contains a tutorial to help teachers create a printable rubric, edit a saved rubric, or analyze a saved rubric.

- Make rubrics as task-specific as possible. “The more task-specific the rubric, the more valid the result” (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000, p. 91).
- Write rubrics in a language easily understandable by the students and reviewers.

The rubric should have three or four levels of assessment categories. These categories can then be given a letter grade if desired. The authors of *The Portfolio Organizer* (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000) recommend three types of rubrics:

1. **Four-Level Rubric with Letter Grades**—A rubric that provides four levels of performance for each criteria (superior performance, proficient performance, adequate performance, and limited performance) could translate into the following grading system:

A+ = superior performance

B = proficient performance

C = adequate performance

D = limited performance

2. **Four-level rubric**—A rubric that provides four levels of performance could assign points as follows:

Superior = 4

Proficient = 3

Adequate = 2

Limited = 1

For each criterion, a score of 0–4 is assigned. These numbers are totaled and converted to an overall percentage.

3. Percentage Values—A rubric that assigns each level of performance a range of percentage values:

Superior = 90–100

Proficient = 70–89

Adequate = 50–69

Limited = 0–49

Involving Students and Reviewers in Assessment

Just as a teacher may choose to involve students in selecting criteria for choosing portfolio entries, students can share in the process of developing portfolio rubrics, suggest Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn (2000). This increases students' involvement in the assessment process and helps them take ownership of their learning.

To engage students in coauthoring a rubric, teachers can have students brainstorm the rubric criteria in small groups and present the results for a class vote. The teacher can then narrow down the list of the winners, develop the rubric, and present it to the class for review (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000).

When choosing to implement rubrics for portfolio assessment, it's important to remind all portfolio reviewers—students, peers, teachers, and parents—to use the rubric during the evaluation, whether they are asked to grade the portfolio or not. According to Rolheiser, Bower, and Stevahn (2000), determining whether or not to grade student portfolios is one of the most difficult decisions for a teacher to make—so this decision needs to be periodically revisited as the teacher becomes more proficient with the use of portfolios.